Lunar Synthesis

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by Eiiri

Summary

Hogwarts is open for the first school year since the end of the Second Wizarding War.
After a summer of growth and unexpected friendships, Hermione and Draco are headed back to school to finish their education, and Remus is taking back his post teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts now that the jinx on the post is broken.
With many students not back to school for one reason or another, those who are returning have little choice but to grow closer than they ever have been before. Meanwhile, the faculty face the trials of getting to know new teachers, caring for a traumatized student body, and dealing with parents who may not quite be ready to let their children out of their sight again.
With the full moon the first week of term, the year is off to a great start.

Notes

As this is part three, I highly suggest going back to read parts one and two if you haven't already. You'll be missing a lot of background if you don't.
Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy!
Chapter 1

Remus caught a carriage from Hogsmeade up to the castle. It was a quiet ride, he was the only person in the carriage, no driver, and the thestrals pulling it were non-vocal as ever. Legs across the seat, leaning against the door, he took a deep breath. Those thestrals were bound to get a lot more attention than they were used to this year, and he didn't really want to think about that.

Coming through the front doors of the castle, trunk floating along behind him, felt strange—it was the same as it as always been, when he'd taught before, back when he was a student, but also different, the stones maybe not in the same order or turned a different way around since being put back together. Something had changed in a way he could feel but couldn't quite place. Maybe it was something about the magic woven through the building.

Madam Hooch came out of the Great Hall, a mug of coffee cuddled to her chest with one hand, the morning paper in the other. She saluted him with her mug. “Good morning, Remus.”

“Morning, Rolanda,” Remus replied. “Did you just get here?”

“Been here since yesterday.” She sighed and tucked the paper under her arm. “I took a much needed holiday, went home just long enough to do laundry, then came right here. How's your summer been?”

“Busy.” Remus let his trunk settle on the masonry next to him. “Which is probably for the best.”

“Oh, definitely,” Madam Hooch agreed. “Keep your mind off things.”

“Yeah.” Remus sighed. “Well, I'd best get my things to my room—unless it's moved.”

“Ought to be right where you left it,” Madam Hooch smirked. “See you this afternoon then.”

Remus allowed himself a bit of a chuckle before he waved his wand at his trunk for it to resume following him and made his way toward his office. Along the way, down a side hall, he saw a pair of upsettingly young looking ghosts. Remus passed by quickly for fear of recognizing them.

The office was indeed right where he'd left it, up the stairs from his classroom and empty but for the desk and a couple chairs. The bedroom past the office was just as bare—bed and dresser and nightstand. Remus let his trunk drop with a thunk. With a few flicks of his wand he opened all the drawers and sorted his things from his trunk into them. Then he flopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling for a minute. This was going to be a very long year.

Remus decided he really didn't want to sit down for lunch so he grabbed himself a sandwich from the Great Hall and went for a walk. He didn't think he liked the school without the students there—it was too quiet. There were only two people in the hall when he got his sandwich, the librarian and a young witch he didn't recognize bent over a book open on the table between them. He passed Professor Sprout as he went out to the grounds. The bridge had been rebuilt, the breezeway repaired, all the stonework and roofing on the castle set right. Up on the hill across the bridge, though, the quidditch pitch was conspicuously absent. He sat on the bridge to eat, legs dangling. He pulled a tomato out of his sandwich, dropped it down to the water below, and watched a couple water fowl squabble over it.

Once he finished his lunch, he brushed the crumbs off his hands and trousers, checked his watch,
and walked back to the castle.

Remus settled into a chair at the table in the staff room and waited for the rest of the faculty to arrive. McGonagall was already seated at the head of the table, consulting notes she had spread out in front of her. Remus nodded to Flitwick and Madam Hooch as they each came in. He steadfastly ignored Filch, who extended him the same curtesy. Hagrid gave him a clap on the shoulder that nearly knocked him out of his chair.

The last person to show up was Professor Binns, who drifted in through the wall almost twenty minutes after the meeting was supposed to start.

“How kind of you to join us, Cuthbert,” McGonagall said with exaggerated patience.

Binns blinked at her and said, “I was reading.”

“Of course you were.” McGonagall’s nostrils flared and she neatened her notes. “Now that we're all here, let's get started, shall we? This year is going to be a bit odd. We're a smaller school this year than we're used to being—between not bringing in any new first years and what students are taking a year off to recuperate from everything that's happened or who are tragically no longer with us, the student body will be about half what it has been the past decade or so. Because of that, combined with the fact that we're a bit understaffed, some electives are not being offered until further notice and for this year, and possibly the next, some classes won't be divided by house. You'll see that reflected in your class schedules, which I'll be giving each of you after this meeting.”

She took a breath. “On the subject of our staffing situation, we have a few new faculty. This is Elizabeth Lee,” McGonagall gestured to the young witch Remus had seen in the Great Hall at lunch. “She'll be teaching Muggle Studies. Elizabeth, do you have anything to share?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Just, glad to be able to say I'm the first muggle-born Muggle Studies teacher at this school. I'd dare say it's about time,” she said, her accent sounding a little off. “Oh! And Irma and I have greatly expanded and updated the Muggle Studies section in the library. Hope that's helpful for everyone.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” McGonagall said. “Angelica Stebbins is taking over my former post teaching transfiguration.”

Remus sat up straighter in his chair and looked at the blond witch down the table from him as she gave a little wave. He hadn't recognized his former classmate—or, more accurately, he hadn't paid enough attention to notice her.

“I'll try my best to fill your shoes,” Angelica said brightly. “Tall order that it is.”

“No need to flatter,” McGonagall chided with a bit of a smirk. “Aleksandr Ramsey is our new potions master and head of Slytherin House.”

“Wish me luck,” Ramsey said wryly.

“Good luck,” Remus said.

McGonagall turned her gaze on him. “And, of course, Remus Lupin returning to his Defense Against the Dark Arts post now that the position is no longer cursed. He's also my replacement as head of Gryffindor House.”

Remus almost choked. “I'm what?”
“You're head of house,” McGonagall said plainly.

“That's news to me,” Remus said, voice going to the high end of his speaking range.

“I was sure I'd told you, Remus,” McGonagall said, clearly taken aback.

“Must've slipped your mind.” Remus looked around. “I cannot possibly be the only Gryffindor on staff.”

“I mean, I was in Gryffindor,” Madam Hooch said, “but I can't be head of house. I have to referee, it would be a conflict of interest.”

“Poppy,” Remus began, “weren't you—?”

“I'm not a teacher,” Madam Pomfrey said. “I'm not eligible.”

Remus sighed and settled back in his chair. “Well, I guess I'm head of house.”

“It's good to have you back, Remus,” Madam Hooch snickered. Across from her, Elizabeth hid her face and her giggles in her hands. Professor Sprout bit her lip. And then the entire rest of the table started laughing, even Professor McGonagall.

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“Remus, Poppy, Aleksandr, I need a word with the three of you,” McGonagall said as the meeting dispersed. The three of them hung back. McGonagall folded her hands. “Aleksandr, I trust you remember my mentioning that you're going to have a standing chore this year.”

“I do.” Ramsey folded his arms. “I assume I'm about to find out what that is.”

“Making wolfsbane potion,” Remus concluded.

McGonagall nodded. Ramsey's eyebrow ticked up and he glanced at Remus, then at Madam Pomfrey, then at McGonagall. “Wolfsbane potion?”

“I'm sure you're more than capable,” McGonagall said, eyeing Ramsey.

“I am.” Ramsey nodded. “I just—what's this about? Is there a student who's…?”

Madam Pomfrey nodded soberly. “There is.”

“And a faculty member,” Remus added.

“Oh...kay.” Ramsey rubbed his hands together and glanced at Remus. “Is it you?”

“It's me.”

“Right. Who's the kid?” Ramsey asked. “Or do I not get to know that?”

“Draco Malfoy,” Madam Pomfrey said quietly.

“Malfoy? Damn.” Ramsey let out a breath. “Hang on, what day of the month is it? Moon wise. Do I need to—?”
“I don't have to start taking until next week and I already have a supply for this coming moon.” Remus ran a hand through his hair. “The full moon isn’t until after the start of term but I'm sure Draco already has his supply as well.”

“Okay.” Ramsey nodded. “So next month. On which note,” he added enthusiastically, “would you object to a wee bit of experimentation? I think I've figured out how to make that shit not taste like shit—it's the sort of thing I do in my spare time—but I don't know any werewolves so I don't know what impact it may have on efficacy.”

“Not a chance,” Remus said sharply. “Not unless I have someone who can safely babysit me, which means an animagus bigger than a tabby. No offense, Minirva.”

“None taken.” McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey both looked like they were trying not to smile.

“Fair enough,” Ramsey agreed. “Fair enough.”
“We've got a letter from Remus!” Sirius announced loudly, his words cutting through the breakfast chit chat. Everyone turned to look at him as he scanned the parchment.

“Well, what's it say?” Ginny asked.

“Give me a chance to read, girl.” Sirius turned it over to finish reading what had spilled over to the back of the sheet. Harry reached for the letter and Sirius held it out of his reach. “Nope, there's a reason this was addressed to me. He says the castle's been repaired good as new but the quidditch pitch is still under construction. Other than him, there are three new teachers. Oh, damn, he's head of Gryffindor House.”

“Good for him,” Ron said through a full mouth.

“Yeah,” Sirius agreed. “He's looking forward to seeing Hermione, Ginny, and Draco on Thursday, and warns the three of you that this school year won't be like what you're used to, but it ought to be more normal than last year.”

“'More normal than last year' isn't exactly difficult,” Draco muttered.

“There's gonna be quidditch, though, right?” Ginny asked.

“I'd presume so,” Hermione said. “Otherwise, why would they be rebuilding the pitch?”

“I hope you're right,” Ginny sighed.

“If she's wrong I bought you a broom for no damn good reason.” Draco sipped his coffee. Ginny kicked him hard enough under the table that he spat it out.

“And,” Sirius interjected, “he asks that you refrain from telling anyone about the nature of his relationship with me, since his lycanthropy is an open secret at this point if a secret at all and he'd prefer to only have to field one scandal at a time.”

Draco gave a thumbs up while he cleaned up his coffee spill. Hermione nodded. Ginny sucked in a breath. “Oh, jeeze, I hadn't even thought about that.”

“Anyone asks,” Sirius folded the letter and tucked it into his waistcoat, “we're friends. Best friends. Just like always.”

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Thursday morning, Hermione stood in front of her open trunk and ran her fingers through her hair—at least until they got stuck in a snarl of curls. “I think that's everything....”

“Ready to go, dear?” Molly asked, popping her head in.

“Yeah.” Hermione shut her trunk. “I'm ready.”

“Ginny and Draco are already downstairs.” Molly flicked her wand at the trunk to send it ahead of
them. “Let’s get the three of you to the train.”

Platform 9 ¾ wasn’t exactly empty, but the usual press of bodies was distinctly sparse. Draco hung back and looked around the platform while Ginny and Hermione were passed from Weasley to Weasley to Potter to Black to Weasley for hugs. It was hot and humid from a recently passed rainstorm that had left puddles on the platform and droplets of water clinging to the train and had Draco almost regretting his long sleeved black shirt. He rubbed his left arm absently as he watched a father detach his sobbing wife from their daughter to let her get on the train. Then he very nearly jumped out of his skin upon being swept into an extremely unexpected hug.

Mrs. Weasley rubbed his back. “You take care of yourself, alright?” She stepped back to hold him at arm’s length, hands on his shoulders, and looked him in the face with a warm smile. “If you need anything, you’re welcome to write. I’ll keep an eye out for Euphrates, give him some bacon if he comes around.”

Draco nodded minutely. “Alright.”

She let go of him to dig in her purse, pulled out a waxpaper package, and handed it to him. “Sandwiches for the trip. Sweets from the cart aren't much of a meal.”

Holding the sandwiches to his chest, Draco nodded again. Mrs. Weasley pulled him in for one more quick hug as the whistle on the train blew a warning. She let him go, Hermione and Ginny each kissed their boyfriends, and the three returning students climbed aboard.

They left Ginny holed up in a compartment with their trunks, Crookshanks, and Euphrates while Draco and Hermione changed into their uniforms and went up to the front for the prefects' meeting.

Of the twenty-four prefects there should have been—thirty-two, if the returning eighth years were taken into account—there were eleven. There were no Head Boy and Girl. The eleven prefects looked at each other in uncomfortable quiet. “So,” Ernie Macmillan said slowly, “what exactly are we supposed to be doing? Ordinarily we’d be trying to keep the first years from losing their minds, but there aren’t any first years, so…?”

“We try and keep everyone else from having mental breakdowns,” Padma said quietly. She was curled up sideways in a bench seat, her back to the wall. “Last time most of us were at school….”

“We were watching our friends die,” finished Orla Quirke, the one new Ravenclaw prefect.

Everyone looked away from each other.

“At least,” Jimmy Peakes, the one new Gryffindor prefect, said, “I mean, there's less students right now, right? So that oughta lighten the load, right?”

“Except there's less than half of how many of us there should be,” Hannah pointed out. “Hufflepuff has the most complete set of prefects right now, and we're still missing four people.”

Other than Hannah and Ernie, Hufflepuff had Eleanor Branstone and Owen Cauldwell, both fifth years. Gryffindor had Hermione, Jimmy, and Ramilda Vane, who had apparently somehow been made prefect in the midst of the previous year's Death Eater takeover. Ravenclaw had Padma, Orla, and a fifth year boy named Derek.

“Am I the only person in this car wearing a green tie?” Draco asked suddenly. Everyone looked around and started to nod slowly. “I cannot be the only Slytherin prefect,” Draco said with building
“I think you're the only the Slytherin prefect,” Ramilda said way too chipperly.

Draco dropped his face into one hand and massaged his temple. “I'd ask what I did to deserve this but you lot would actually answer.”

Hermione gave his shoulder a sympathetic squeeze that earned odd looks from all the other prefects. “Good luck.”

The eleven of them sat there for a long moment. Padma sighed. Then Jimmy clapped his hands on his legs, got up, and walked to the door of the car. Then the rest of them started to disperse.

“Ramilda,” Hermione said, catching her underclassman sharply by the shoulder, “before we do our rounds, I have to ask, how the hell did you get made prefect?”

“Why shouldn't I have been?” Ramilda countered, yanking away from Hermione's grasp as she turned to face her.

Hermione made an incredulous sound that was almost a laugh. “You drugged my boyfriend.”

“I never did any such thing!” Ramilda crossed her arms under her ample bosom.

“Oh, yes, you did.” Hermione crossed her arms too. “You tried to slip Harry a love potion but Ron ate your tainted candies instead.”

Ramilda frowned. “Wait, really?”

“Yes.”

“Why don't I know about this?”

“Because Harry is a good friend,” Hermione said sternly, “and he took Ron to Slughorn to be set right and saved him from public humiliation by making sure no one saw him mooning all over you. Oh, but then, Ron got into some poisoned mead that he wouldn't have been around if it weren't for your stupid chocolates. So you almost got him killed!”

“That's ridiculous,” Ramilda scoffed.

Draco took a deep breath and pressed past the quarreling girls. Then he ducked into the lavatory to steal a moment to himself before starting his duties as the only Slytherin prefect.

After he finished his rounds, Draco returned to the compartment where they'd left Ginny and dropped into the seat across from Hermione, who'd finished before him. “The train is so empty,” he breathed. “It's creepy. It's too quiet, it feels like when Dementors stopped the train.”

Hermione cringed. “You're not wrong.”

Ginny turned the page in her trashy romance novel—muggle, permanently borrowed from Hermione's mother. “At least it's good for reading?”

“I'm sure I'd appreciate that more if I weren't so acutely aware of why it's quiet,” Hermione said softly. She petted Crookshanks in her lap. He yowled softly and stretched up, paws on her chest, to rub his face against her cheek, she kissed his nose, then he hopped across the compartment to crawl
into Draco's lap.

“No.” Draco lifted the cat awkwardly and dropped it back in Hermione's lap. “I do not want hair all over me.”

Ginny closed her book around her thumb. “You realize you have fur on most of your clothes anyway, right?”

“I do not,” Draco snapped.

“It's mostly yours.” Ginny shrugged. “Unless there's a white cat running around Grimmauld place I don't know about.”

With a huff, Draco stood to get his sandwiches down from the luggage rack.
Chapter 3

Hagrid wasn't waiting at Hogsmeade station. It made sense—no first years to ferry across the lake, no Hagrid—but his absence was a nine-foot hole in the students' morale. Madam Pomfrey was there instead, waiting with a high-backed, spindly-wheeled chair upholstered in black satin. Draco swept past to the carriages before he had to see who the chair was for. Hermione and Ginny trailed after him, more interested in chatting with Longbottom and Thomas than in keeping up.

Hermione paused mid-sentence, distracted. Neville nudged her gently. “What is it?”

“Those third years,” she murmured and nodded to a group of young Hufflepuffs anxiously eyeing the thestrals hitched to the carriage they were getting into. “They've never seen them before.”

“We knew it would be like this,” Dean muttered.

“Even so,” Neville sighed.

“Yeah.” Ginny took a deep breath. “Come on, let's go.”

The four of them got into the carriage with Draco. They kept talking during the ride up to the castle. Draco didn't say a word, just stared out the window, fiddled with his badge.

The house ghosts were in the entrance hall, greeting the students and asking they move all the way down their house tables to the front of the hall. Draco frowned at the instruction, passed through into the Great Hall, and resisted the urge to be sick. He'd come in on one of the last carriages so he was one of the last into the hall. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Dean join the not-quite half-full Gryffindor table. The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were slightly better populated than the Gryffindor. The Slytherin table might as well have been empty. It was a long walk to the end of the table. Long enough for him to get a good look at the shiny wood they hadn't bothered to set out plates on, the conspicuously empty space on the floor where the Sorting Hat and its stool should have been, the gaps at either end of the staff table left by the missing chairs there, the dirty looks he was getting from every table including his own, and Daphne Greengrass in that blasted chair, parked next to her little sister at the end of the table.

Draco sat—farther from whichever of the Carrows that was than was reasonable—and ducked his head.

The students quieted quickly when McGonagall stood. “Welcome, everyone. I realize we have all been through difficult times, that coming to school this year is not what it once was,” she said somberly. “We have all lost friends and family, and many of you have lost your innocence.” She spread her hands on the podium in front of her and looked down at them before looking up again. “It hurts my heart to see this hall so empty. But I am so glad for each and every one of you who is here that you are here, and I want you to know that I am proud of all of you. We need to heal, each of us as individuals, and we as a school, as a family in our own way, we the wizarding community. To that end, we are here.” She smiled faintly but triumphantly. “We are joined this year by Professor Aleksandr Ramsey, our new potions master and head of Slytherin House.”

The maybe two dozen students at the Slytherin table applauded politely but unenthusiastically.

“Professor Remus Lupin, returning to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts and the new head of Gryffindor house.”

The Gryffindor table erupted into cheers, apparently trying to make up for their diminished
numbers with excessive intensity.

McGonagall smirked indulgently and held out a hand to settle them. “Professor Elizabeth Lee, our new Muggle Studies professor, and Professor Angelica Stebbins, taking my former position teaching transfiguration. I trust you will welcome them, and be patient with all of us—this year is just as strange for us as for you. I hope that, together, we can move into a new era, unblemished by the hatred and fear that has scarred us all. Now, I think, a good first step toward that new era is to indulge our selves with a little too much to eat.”

She waved a hand and food appeared just like it always did, albeit in smaller than usual quantities.

Draco stared at his food as he ate and didn't taste it. Blaise Zabini moved down the table to sit across from him. “Malfoy?”

Draco glanced up from cutting his steak. He felt like he was scowling.

“Why didn't you sit with us on the train?” Zabini asked accusatorially.

“I had rounds,” Draco said shortly.

“Not the entire time.” Zabini stabbed a sausage with his fork. “So why didn't you sit with us?”

“Yeah, how many of 'us' are even left?” Draco snapped. He gestured down the table. “You, the Carrows?”

The twin girls looked up at the sound of their name.

“And Daphne,” Zabini noted. “You know, your friends.”

Draco shook his head. “None of you actually want me around. Don't pretend. And don't patronize me.”

“Why are you being such a dick?”

“Because I always am,” Draco said flatly. “And you already knew that.”

Zabini glared at Draco for a long moment and Draco stared back, expressionless, until Zabini looked away and slid back down the table to whisper with the Carrows. Draco ignored them and finished his dinner without speaking another word to anyone.

When the meal was over, the lack of first years to show to the dormitories left Draco free to trot to catch the unfamiliar, sandy-haired man who was now his head of house. “Professor Ramsey!”

Ramsey stopped walking and turned, expression open. “Hm?”

“Professor, I'm Draco Malfoy. Can I have a word?” Draco asked.

“Of course.” Ramsey lowered his voice. “Is this about next Monday night?”

“What? No,” Draco said quickly. “I'm not—that is me, but it's handled. I already have,” he stumbled through his words, “what I need. No. I wanted to ask, do you realize I'm the only Slytherin prefect? That can't possibly be right.”

“Do you realize,” Ramsey countered, “that you only have eighteen fellow Slytherins to keep an eye
When Draco didn't say anything, Ramsey continued, “The other houses have about one prefect to every fifty students right now. You might alone, but you're not responsible for as much.” With a firm hand on Draco's shoulder, Ramsey steered him on toward the dungeons. “We're less than five percent of the school now, the sense of community that comes from being a part of a house is in danger, and I'm new—your classmates don't know me, they don't trust me. I can't be the one to hold us together, not yet. Daunting as it may be to go into this solo, they need you.”

Draco took a careful breath as they descended the steps into the relative cool of the dungeons. “I am probably the worse possible candidate for that.”

“The fact that you think that will probably make you better at it.” Ramsey clapped his shoulder at a fork in the corridor, one brach snaking away toward the potions master's office, the other dropping down a flight of stairs toward the Slytherin common room. “Have a good night, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Good night,” Draco mumbled automatically, “Professor.” He exhaled, turned down the empty staircase, and let himself into the common room.

The entirety of Slytherin house was assembled in the common room around the empty hearth beneath the elaborately carved mantle with its details thrown into odd-angled contrast by the green-glass lamps and lack of firelight. The room was too big for the nineteen of them, a good dozen of the black leather sofas and chairs were empty, what sofas were occupied only had one or two people on them each, and all the green velvet floor cushions were still stacked neatly in the corner, unneeded. Familiar as the place was, it felt oppressive in its grandeur and cold. Just like home.

Everyone turned to look at Draco as he came in and what little conversation there was stopped. The only movement was Astoria Greengrass braiding her sister's dark, pin-straight hair.

“What held you up?” Emmet Exavior asked, frowning slightly. Exavior had been one of Draco's roommates his entire career at Hogwarts but he was pretty sure this was only the second or third time the boy had directly addressed him.

“Had a word with our new head of house,” Draco said simply. He seated himself in an empty chair at the edge of the group. No one, including him, seemed to want to go to bed yet, despite it already being dark, the low, thick glass windows at one end of the room almost opaque, tinged slightly green rather than black only by the light of the almost-full moon filtering through the lake. It shouldn't have been that dark yet on the first night, it was only eight by the silver carriage clock on the mantle, but it was October, they should have been there for a month already.

Astoria finished braiding Daphne's hair and started on her own. The only two third years started murmuring to each other about what electives they were taking. Harper—Andrew Harper? André Harper?—asked something about quidditch and received a round of shrugs. One of the Carrow sisters leaned her head on the other's shoulder. There must have been a way to tell them apart but Draco had never figured it out. To be honest, he'd never particularly tried—but he had learnt to tell the Weasley twins apart this summer, though the various missing body parts did help with that. A second year girl whose name Draco was sure he'd never known started to fall asleep in her chair and very nearly fell out of her chair in the process. She only didn't because Mafalda whipped out her wand fast enough to catch her from across the soft Persian rug that graced the floor in front of the fireplace. Embarrassed, the younger girl got up and hurried to the girls' dormitory hallway, the glass beaded curtain at the mouth of the hall shimmering as she passed through rather than fusing together into a very solid wall as it did if a boy tried to go down that hall, which Draco knew from painful personal experience.
After that, they all drifted off to their rooms. Draco’s trunk was sitting at the foot of the bed second from the door, Exavior’s at the foot of the bed farthest. Neither of them bothered to turn the lights on, instead changing into night clothes in the green-tinged dark.

Draco got a bottle from his trunk, choked down its contents as quietly as he could, then pulled the curtains closed around his four-poster and stared up at the transparent vaults of the ceiling. The water of the lake was fairly clear, just deep, so even now he could see through to the sky well enough to make out the wavering spot of absinthe-green amid the midnight-verdigré that was the moon. The sounds of the lake were soothing, a kind of rippling pulsing thrum just at the edge of human hearing, but they did little to assuage the sick feeling that had settled at the bottom of his ribcage. The bed to his right had been Crabbe's, the one to his left Goyle's, the one past that had been Theodore Nott's. Crabbe, of course, was dead. Goyle and Nott were both in Azkaban. Draco didn't know much about Exavior but he knew the only thing that had kept him out of prison was a technicality. Now he was supposed to be some kind of role model. That sounded like the worst idea implemented at this school since Lockheart had been hired. Not only did no one like him, he was a shit prefect to begin with and he knew it.

He huffed, rolled over, and smushed his face into his pillow. He would have stayed that way all night if the need to breathe hadn't compelled him to at least turn his head.

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Hermione and Ginny bid Dean and Neville goodnight at the bottom of the stairs, then Hermione gave Ginny a hug at the door to Ginny's dorm room and continued up the stairs to her own. The rest of her roommates were already there, getting ready for bed.

“Hey,” she said softly as she passed Fay and Kellah and they returned the greeting. Pavarti came out of the bathroom in a nightgown and sat on the edge of her bed next to Hermione's. Hermione hung up her robe, twisted one arm up behind her to unhook her bra then pulled it out from under her shirt. As she turned to drop it in the bottom of her dresser like she always did with her laundry, her eyes fell on the empty bed across from hers, her breath caught in her chest, and she turned back quickly, looking anywhere else.

“I know,” Pavarti murmured, knees pulled up to her chest. Fay glanced over at them, glanced at the empty bed, then went back to arranging her socks with more attentiveness than she'd ever shown them.

“Why'd they have to leave it here?” Kellah asked suddenly. Her bed was next to the empty one. “There's gotta be storage space somewhere in this castle. Does McGonagall think we need reminding our friend is dead?”

Hermione sighed. “I think, with everything,” she said carefully, “none of the staff have thought through it that we're….” She took a breath and looked over at what had always been and was still in all their minds Lavender's bed. “That we're coming home to empty beds like that and—I don't know.” She shook her head. “I just don't know.” She swiped a thumb under her eye, flicked open her trunk, grabbed her brush, and started brushing her hair with the same intensity Fay was giving her socks. Without a word, Pavarti got up and hugged her. Hermione hugged her back. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't you dare apologize,” Pavarti scolded gently. She lowered her voice. “I was crying in the bathroom for ages while everyone was still downstairs talking. You can ask Fay, she found me.
We're all having a rough time of it right now.”

“Yeah,” Hermione breathed.

The room was quiet for a moment then, mostly to her socks, Fay said, “We're witches, we can use magic, we could vanish it or shrink it or something.”

The other girls looked around at the bed. Kellah shook her head. “No. I—I hate looking at it but that just seems disrespectful.”

Pavarti let go of Hermione, squared her shoulders, and strode over to close the hangings on Lavender's bed. Hermione pretended not to see the rough, patchy scaring on the back of Pavarti's arm when the sleeve of her nightgown rode up. “There,” Pavarti said stepping back. “That'll do for now, I think. It's time for bed anyway.”
Draco woke up a full two hours before he needed to, lay there unmoving for a while, rolled over, and flashed a rude gesture at the pair of young voyeuristic merfolk nestled in an exterior crook of the ceiling, watching him. They darted off with a flurry of bubbles Draco took for giggles, he ran a hand over his face, got up, got dressed, and went up to breakfast through the still empty corridors.

This early in the morning the Great Hall was chilly, the light from outside dim and pale. There were a few people already at breakfast, not many, maybe a dozen total, and no one at the Slytherin table. Two girls at the Hufflepuff table were dressed in what Draco was pretty sure were muggle athletic clothes. Some Ravenclaws were sitting in a clump with a young looking ghost, the living ones, Luna Lovegood among them, all laughing through their tears. A second year Gryffindor boy was sitting apart from the other few at his table, staring into a mug of coffee like he was seriously contemplating either diving into it or trying to drown himself in it. At the staff table, Madam Hooch and Madam Pomfrey sat with their chairs pulled close together, talking in hushed tones as they ate.

Draco sat at the very end of the Slytherin table, at the edge of the bench, down toward the staff table. He yawned, grabbed some toast, and poured himself some coffee. He watched cream swirl languidly in his drink and he had to admit, drowning in coffee didn't sound like the worst way to go. He could think of at least five ways he had almost died that he'd prefer it to. He shook his head and took a sip. Starting the morning on such a positive note had to bode well for the rest of the day.

As more people started to trickle into the hall, Draco got up, taking his coffee with him, and went to wander the halls under the guise of prefect duties, schoolbag on his shoulder. He left his mug on a windowsill, trusting a house elf would pick it up. On that thought, he paused, pulled a slip of parchment from his bag, folded it into a bird, and left it with the cup. He slipped his watch out of his pocket to check the time, sighed, and headed to class.

Sitting in History of Magic with his five fellow Slytherins and the seventh and eighth year Ravenclaws, listening to Professor Binns launch into pretty much the exact same lesson plan as he'd had the year before, Draco wished he'd had more coffee. History of Magic at eight o'clock in the morning was absolutely cruel. He doubted even Hermione would be able to keep alert. If this class weren't a rehash, he'd have been worried for his grade.

When the bell rang, Draco shook himself out of his stupor, swept his things into his bag, and brushed out of the room past Zabini, Exavior, Harper, Morag, and Greengrass in her godawful chair—they'd be in his next class but just for the walk he didn't want the pressure to talk to any of them. The Gryffindors were already in the Defense Against the Dark Arts room when Draco got there, Hermione and Ginny sitting together near the front of the room. Lupin broke off chatting with a Gryffindor boy who must've been in Ginny's year to greet, “Good morning, Draco.”

All seventeen Gryffindors turned to look at him.

“Morning, Professor.” Draco heeded Hermione waving him over and sat to the other side of her from Ginny.

“How're you doing?” Hermione asked pleasantly.

“It's the first day of term and it's already been a long year,” Draco muttered, getting his things out of his bag.
She frowned. “It’s only nine in the morning.”

“Exactly.” Draco set his inkwell on his desk. “I just had History of Magic.”

Hermione, Ginny, and Lupin all pulled faces. The rest of the Slytherins arrived and Blaise strolled forward to drop his bag on the desk across the aisle from Draco. “Malfoy!”

“What do you want, Zabini?” Draco looked around at him impatiently.

“Why are you sitting with Granger?” Blaise sneered. “Aren’t you going to sit with us?”

“You realize I’ve never had class with you before, right?” Draco turned away. “I’m not sitting with you.”

“Malfoy—!”

“Leave him alone, Blaise,” Daphne said softly.

“I don’t need your help, Greengrass,” Draco snapped.

Lupin cleared his throat. “I know it’s been a while so let me just remind you all, I don’t assign seats in my classes,” he said pointedly. “Mr. Malfoy can sit with you some other time, if he so chooses, Mr. Zabini. Mr. Malfoy, I would advise you to check your attitude.” Draco snorted and Lupin continued. “In the meantime, I think we have some more pressing start of term matters to discuss than seating arrangements. Let’s see here, do I have you Tuesday or Wednesday…?” He leaned back on his desk and turned a page in a planner that lay open there. “Yes, Tuesday. Alright. You will still have class, but I won’t be there. I’m not sure yet who will be covering.”

A seventh year Gryffindor boy raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Trent?” Lupin prompted.

Trent put his hand down. “Why won’t you be there?”

“Because he’s a werewolf,” Harper sneered. “Didn’t you know?”

“No, I mean—” Trent glanced at Lupin. “I knew you’re a werewolf, sir, I just—” He broke off.

“I am a werewolf,” Lupin said patiently, “and as Mr. Harper seems to be aware, this coming Monday and Tuesday nights are the full moon. I’ll have to commend you to Professor Sinistra, Mr. Harper.” He gave Harper an uncomfortably pleasant smile, focusing on him long enough that Harper looked down at the blank parchment on his desk and made quite a show of writing the date. Apparently satisfied, Lupin pushed off from his desk and wandered across the front of the room. “The odds of me getting much, if any, sleep those nights aren’t very good so, for the sake of you getting coherent instruction from a teacher who is not sleep deprived and grouchy, you’ll have a substitute.”

“Cool.” Dean held up a thumbs up.

“Thank you, Dean.” The corner of Lupin’s mouth twitched up. “Now, then!” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “I figure, you’ve all been here six or seven years already, you know a thing or two, and you’ve all actually had me as a teacher before—so let’s jump right in, shall we? This year we’ll discussing some of the more complicated forms of dark magic and how to combat them, when possible. Off the top of your head, examples?”
Naturally, Hermione's hand shot up.

“Miss Granger?” Lupin flicked his wand at a fresh bit of chalk sitting on the edge of the blackboard.

“Horcruxes.”

The chalk quickly scrawled HORCRUXES at the top of the board.

“That is about as dark and as complicated as you can get, yes,” Lupin said. “Also, technically banned from the curriculum but given recent events we're going to ignore that. What else? Miss Morag?”

“The Dark Mark, the actual tattoos.”

“Not inherently dark magic, but worth talking about.” The chalk scrawled DARK MARK. “And?”

Behind him, Draco heard Neville whisper to Dean, “What did Harry say those zombie things were called?”

“Inferi?” Dean guessed.

“Yeah, sounds right.” Neville raised his hand and was called on. “Inferi.”


Draco raised his hand.

“Mr. Malfoy?”

“Wasn't there a curse on your teaching post?”

“Yes, there was.” HOGWARTS D.A.D.A. POST JINX was added to the list. “Jinxing something intangible, very tricky. Miss Weasley?”

“The tracking spell that got put on Voldemort's name.”

Most of the room flinched instinctively as the chalk added TABOO CURSE. “Another spell tied to something intangible. Mr. Malfoy, you've got another one?”

“The Unbreakable Vow.”

“Yes. Anyone else?” Lupin asked. The students glanced around at each other and no one raised their hands. “No? Well, six is plenty to start with. These are all complex spells to cast and, more importantly for our purposes, they're difficult or even impossible to undo.” The chalk drew boxes around HORCRUXES and DARK MARK. “The magic that creates these cannot be undone by anyone under any circumstances. Horcruxes, of course, can be destroyed—would someone other than Miss Granger like to tell the class how a horcrux can be destroyed?”

Exavior raised his hand cautiously.

“Yes, Mr. Exavior?”

“Fiendfyre and basilisk venom. I think that's it, isn't it?” Exavior asked.
“Also goblin-wrought silver that's been impregnated with basilisk venom,” Hermione added.

“Right,” Lupin said. “What if the horcrux is a living thing?”

“What if it's what?” a blond Gryffindor seventh year asked, sounding like she hoped she'd misheard.

“Living beings can also be horcruxes,” Lupin explained. “I know you all know Harry Potter, he halfway was one—”

“How can you halfway be a horcrux?” Harper asked incredulously.

“Voldemort—oh, quit cringing, he's dead, very dead, we were all there,” Ginny huffed. “Anyway, Voldemort never meant for Harry to be a horcrux, he just kind of accidentally halfway did what it takes to make a horcrux when he tried to kill Harry as a baby, but he didn't finish the process, so, Harry was halfway a horcrux.”

“Thank you, Miss Weasley. For the record, before anyone asks,” Lupin sighed, “no, we absolutely will not be going over the process of creating a horcrux. But yes, Harry was halfway a horcrux, and Voldemort's snake was a proper one—how do you destroy a living horcrux?”

“Well, I cut Nagini's head off with a sword,” Neville said almost bashfully.

“With the Sword of Gryffindor,” Dean corrected.

“Which is goblin-wrought silver impregnated with basilisk venom,” Hermione added.

“In short, he killed the damn snake,” Draco summarized. He muttered, “I hated that snake….” He noticed Zabini giving him an odd look. “What? My house was the Dark Lord's base of operations for the better part of two years—even when he wasn't there, the bloody snake usually was and it would watch me, I swear.”

Everyone in the room other than Lupin looked away from Draco.

“You killed the snake,” Lupin said, gaze sliding over to Neville, “with the Sword of Gryffindor, and that destroyed the horcrux. Yes, to destroy a living horcrux, you must kill it.”

“Then how's Potter still alive?” Daphne asked genuinely.

Lupin held his arms out in a shrug. “Because he's freakishly lucky and killing curses tend to bounce right off of him like rubber balls on tile.”

That earned a chuckle from the class.

Lupin allowed himself a grin before continuing. “As far as I know, fiendfyre and basilisk venom would both also destroy Dark Marks, but they'd also kill the person bearing the mark. The better removal technique is to cut out the Marked flesh, or to cut off the arm entirely, both of which I know have been attempted in Azkaban. The obvious problem with cutting off the arm is, well, now you're missing an arm, not to mention the risk of bleeding out or going into shock without proper medical attention. The same risks apply to cutting out the Mark, and anecdotal evidence from Azkaban suggests that the effects of the Mark are not constrained to the visible tattoo and failure to cut deep enough or with enough margin around the tattoo can leave parts of the spell behind, resulting in nasty magical burns, reappearance of the Mark, or death.

“Now, you all look a little sick. You should. This is unpleasant crap and we're about to start talking
about necromancy so it's not going to get any better.”

By the time the bell rang, releasing Draco to three hours of free period and lunch, he really didn’t feel like eating. No one else looked like they felt like eating either, but the majority of the class turned their steps toward the Great Hall anyway. Draco started off in the other direction but something tugged at his bag. He turned to see Daphne looking up at him intensely. “Are you alright?”

He jerked his bag out of her grasp. “No, I'm fine, we've just been talking about animate rotting flesh for the better part of an hour, why would I be anything other than fine.”

“No one's heard from you all summer and you've been acting odd ever since we got back,” she said gently. “Everyone's noticed.”

“I said I'm fine,” Draco huffed and strode off. He walked outside, pulled himself up to sit in an alcove between two pillars, and pulled out his history of magic textbook. While he read, he absently rubbed at his arm. He could feel the thickened ridges of skin even through two layers of sleeve. He dug his fingernails in.

A soft meow from beneath his perch gave him about half a second's warning before a mass of ginger fluff leapt into his lap and knocked the air out of him.

“Stupid cat,” he grumbled, trying unsuccessfully to prevent Crookshanks from stretching up to rub against his face. “No—get off!” He dropped the cat on the ground and glared at it. Crookshanks stared right back at him and meowed. “What do you want?”

Crookshanks meowed again.

“What?”

The cat jumped up again and proceeded to wedge itself into the alcove behind Draco, mostly shoving him out of his seat in the process. Draco stumbled onto the grass. Crookshanks curled up in the warm spot he left behind.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

The cat started to purr. Draco flashed a rude gesture at the ginger tabby and begrudgingly went back inside and made his way to the Great Hall.
Draco took one step toward the Slytherin table, caught Ginny's red hair in the corner of his eye, spotted Hermione sitting next to her, and stopped. He looked back and forth between his table and theirs a few times then went to join the Gryffindors. Everyone around him stopped talking. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. He grabbed a pasty from the tray in the middle of the table. “Your cat is stalking me.”

“Because he likes you,” Hermione said.

“Well, I don't like him.” Draco took a bite of pasty and looked around at the other Gryffindors still staring at him. “What are you looking at? All but maybe three of you saw me at Grimmauld Place, do we have to go through this again?”

“No,” Neville said slowly. “I just don't think I've seen anyone but Luna sit at not their house's table before.”

“They saw you where?” a black eighth year girl—Kelly? Kellis? Something like that—asked sharply.

“Grimmauld Place,” Ginny explained. “Sirius Black's house.”

“We lived there this summer,” Hermione added, gesturing across herself, Ginny, and Draco. Before anyone could ask why, Draco said, “Black is my cousin, my parents are in prison, and my house is a crime scene.” He turned to Hermione. “How many times am I going to have to go over this.”

“Until the entire school's heard it twice,” Dean answered.

Hermione nodded. “At least twice.”

Draco was glad they'd had Slughorn, albeit briefly. It made it seem slightly less wrong to be in potions being taught by his head of house and have that person not be Snape. The memorial plaque on the wall, however, he'd probably never be able to look straight at. Professor Ramsey had them taking a pretest, which MacMillan, sitting across from Draco, was taking far too seriously. His nose was almost touching the parchment. Draco rolled his eyes and dipped his quill in his inkwell. It wasn't as though the questions were hard—they were mostly just terms to be defined. Terms they'd already learned years before.

Draco finished, rolled up his parchment, and went to drop it on Ramsey's desk.

“First one done,” Ramsey said, mildly impressed. “Let's hope this bodes well. I could use a word with you.” He herded Draco out into the corridor, stood such that he could still see into his classroom, and spoke softly. “You already have your potion for this month, I gather.”

“Yes,” Draco said shortly. “I've been taking it since Monday.”

“Alright, good. Do you need anything el—”

“No,” Draco cut Ramsey off. They both waited while a Hufflepuff girl saw herself out after
finishing her pretest, then once she turned the corner up the stairs Draco continued, quiet and sharp, “I don't need anything from you, I don't want any kind of special treatment. I have a routine. I know what I'm doing. This may be new for you but it's not for me. I'll need you to make potion for me other months, but that's it. I don't need to be coddled.”

“I'm trying to do my job and I'm trying to help you,” Ramsey said, exceedingly evenly. “Watch your tone, Mr. Malfoy, I'm on your side here.”

Draco looked away and crossed his arms.

“I'm sure you're stressed,” Ramsey said generously. “Maybe we should try talking later next week when you've had some time to recover.”

“Maybe so.”

Draco went for another walk before going to his next class, so even though he left potions early, he got to his Muggle Studies class the same time as everyone else. Professor Lee was standing by the doorway, greeting students as they came in. She looked young, Bill Weasley's age or so, and she was dressed in muggle clothes. Draco nodded in response to her greeting and took a seat at the very back of the classroom.

Across the blackboard it said *Wands Away, Quills Away, Parchment Away*.

With a curious frown, Draco leaned back in his chair and didn't get anything out of his bag.

A Ravenclaw third year darted in, followed by Astoria Greengrass who slid into the seat next to Draco and flashed him a quick smile just as the bell rang.

“All righty then!” Professor Lee pulled the door closed and moved to the front of the room.

“Welcome, everyone, to Muggle Studies. I'm Professor Elizabeth Lee. You're welcome to call me Elizabeth or Ms. Lee. I hope you'll excuse my accent, I was born in the United States and moved back across the pond in '92; I've only been back in the U.K. a couple months. This being a class centered around the non-magical community, the no wands rule probably makes sense,” she said gesturing to the board. “The no quills or parchment probably seems a little weird, though, huh?”

The class nodded and murmured its agreement.

Professor Lee grinned, went behind her desk, and retrieved a stack of spiral bound notebooks and boxes of blue-capped pens like Draco had occasionally seen Hermione use. “This is a cultural immersion class, now,” Professor Lee explained as she began passing out the notebooks and pens. “These are what muggle students use, so you'll be using them too.”

Draco turned the notebook Astoria handed him over in his hands, opened it, then skeptically uncapped his pen and scribbled at the top of the page. Around him, most of the class was doing pretty much the same thing.

“So.” Professor Lee clapped her hands together. “Let's just start with what you all think you already know about muggles. Tell me.”

Students glanced at each other. Jimmy Peakes, one of the Gryffindor prefects, cautiously said, “They can't use magic.”

“There we go!” Professor Lee beamed. “I know it feels silly to say since it's so obvious but, yes,
muggles can't use magic. Many would say that's their defining characteristic, and it does impact every aspect of their lives and culture. What else?”

“They can't see pixies or dementors,” a Ravenclaw girl said.

“That's right,” Professor Lee encouraged. “Tell me more.”

“They have fabric money, don't they?” Astoria asked.

“No,” Draco said. “It's paper. Some of it. They also have coins.”

“Very good.” For a long moment the room was quiet. Professor Lee crossed her arms. “I didn't tell you to stop. Actually, okay.” She picked up an eraser and cleared the board by hand. “Everybody grab a piece of chalk, come up here and write something you think you know about muggles or something you've heard about muggles, then we'll go through them playing true or false. Well, c'mon, grab some chalk.”

And the end of the exercise, the board was covered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muggles have lots of metal things</th>
<th>Muggles are stupid and violent</th>
<th>Muggles don't keep owls but they do keeps cats and dogs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-True</td>
<td>-Some individuals may be, just like wizards</td>
<td>-Almost always true</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muggles can’t heal themselves when they get hurt</th>
<th>Muggles are unobservant</th>
<th>Muggle photos don't move</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Technically True, they can't heal things instantly but they have ways to help the body heal itself</td>
<td>-False, they just can't perceive some magical things</td>
<td>-True, but muggles have videos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muggles can’t travel very far</th>
<th>Muggles have lots of kids</th>
<th>Muggles spend all day washing dishes and doing laundry by hand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-False, they have many kinds of vehicles for long distances</td>
<td>-Some do some don't, just like wizards</td>
<td>-Not anymore! There are machines for that now</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muggles think everything tastes like chicken</th>
<th>Muggles have self driving carriages</th>
<th>Muggles are loud</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Mostly False, some individuals might but “it tastes just like chicken” is a joke</td>
<td>-False, cars are self propelled (using fuel) but they need a driver</td>
<td>-Some individuals may be, just like wizards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Muggles can talk to each other from far away using radio things
-True, telephones or “phones” are used for long distance communication

Muggles have something called ayoelle?
-A.O.L.

Muggles are really good at killing each other and bad at killing witches and wizards but they try
-True, though they haven't tried much recently

Muggles have arcades with coin operated games
-True, the games are electronic

Muggles are dangerous
-Some individuals may be, just like wizards

Muggles can’t make potions
-Mostly True, they can try but the potion won't work

“So, a lot of you have grown up with stereotypes about muggles and have heard things about muggles that aren't true,” Professor Lee conclude after they'd finished going through the list, “but there is a lot you do know that is true. Of course there's still a lot you don't know—that's why you're in this class. This weekend I invite you to reach out to any muggle-borns or muggles you may know. Talk to your friends, write your grandma if you're half-blood, it doesn't matter. Just reach out to them and listen to whatever they feel like telling you about muggle culture. I think that's all for today and I will see you all on Monday.”

Just as she finished speaking, the bell rang. She grinned and cheerfully waved farewell to her students. Astoria fell into step with Draco as they left the classroom, or she tried to. Between being several inches shorter than him and wearing heeled shoes, she had to do a little skip every few steps to keep up. She fixed her bag on her shoulder. “Why are you taking Muggle Studies?”

“Why are you?” he shot back.

She shrugged. “With everything that's happened, feels like the world is changing and there's things I need to know.”

“Yeah.”

She shook out her long, brown hair. “Why don't you sit with me and Daphne at dinner?”

“I don't—”

“You never really hung out with us before so you can't hold 'fake friend' status against us like you are Zabini.”

“I'm not—”

“Just sit with us, okay?” She elbowed his arm then ran the rest of the way down the hall to where the Carrows were waving to her.
Chapter 6

Remus found himself seated between Madam Hooch and Professor Ramsey at dinner, which meant that's who he was talking to while they all kept an easy eye on the students. At the Gryffindor table Remus could see Hermione talking to Dean—lecturing, from the look of it—and Remus wasn't sure if he should be glad Draco was actually talking to his own housemates or concerned that he looked to be arguing with his housemates. He was leaning towards the former.

“The pitch ought to be usable within the next couple weeks,” Rolanda said, answering a question from Remus. “At least that's what Minerva told me and I'm not inclined to doubt her. So, if the houses can get their teams together we can have the Quidditch cup like always. A month isn't long to prepare for the first game but I think the kids can do it and I expect it would be good for them.”

Remus nodded while he cut his food. “I'm sure it will. The whole school enjoys a good game of Quidditch.”

“Did you ever play?” Ramsey asked.

“Me?” Remus laughed. “Oh, no. Not on the school team. I got dragged into a few casual games with friends but I've never been terribly athletic.”

“You tried out a couple times,” Rolanda said.

“Only because my friends goaded me into it. I was rubbish!”

Rolanda leaned around him to tell Ramsey, “He wasn't as bad as he says. I was there for those tryouts. And from what I heard, Remus, you almost made the team your fifth year.”

“I would have gotten in on nepotism because the captain was my best friend until I pointed out that two games that year were on the full moon.” Remus picked up his wine and turned to Ramsey. “Did you play?”

“Beater my sixth and seventh years,” Ramsey confirmed. “So, uh, your friends knew then? About your condition?”

A loud crack sounded and every head in the room whipped around to see a plume of purple smoke erupt from the Gryffindor table to raucous laughter from the surrounding students. Remus shook his head and made a mental note to congratulate the twins, then cuff all three of their collective ears. “My closest friends knew. I think most of the staff knew.”

“By the time you took your N.E.W.T.s we all knew,” Rolanda said into her goblet.

Remus rolled his eyes and took a bite of what was left of his food. “It's a surprisingly difficult secret to keep and I've since stopped trying, consequences be damned.”

“I find that commendable,” Ramsey said. “Brave.”

“No,” Remus said firmly. “It's not brave. I'll give myself credit, I've done plenty of brave things in the last year alone. But this—which is me being jaded, reckless, and lazy. I give it until Halloween before there's at least one angry parent calling for my removal.” Remus ate the last bit of potato on his plate and wiped his mouth. “Excuse me.” He got up from his chair and made his way out of the hall.
Out of the corner of his eye he saw a platinum blond head get up from the Slytherin table and follow him out. Draco caught up to him in the entrance hall. “Hey.”

“Good evening, Draco.”

“I was wondering if I could join you for, uh, coffee,” Draco said rather awkwardly.

It took Remus’s brain a second to register what Draco meant, then he snorted and muttered, “Hell, I wish it tasted like coffee. Sure. Do you need to run by your dormitory, or…”

Draco shook his head.

“Alright then.”

They got to Remus's office, he pulled out one of the bottles Hermione had sent with him and poured himself a goblet while Draco drew a flask from his robes. Remus raised his goblet, Draco clinked his flask against it, and they each choked down their portions. Remus made a face and set his goblet on his desk. He tapped a finger against its base and looked at Draco. “Did you want to talk to me about something?”

Draco shook his head. He fiddle with the cap of his flask, screwing it back on. “This is just,” he shrugged, “habit.”

Remus nodded, pulled chairs out for them with a wave of his wand, and sat. “How was your first day?”

“Fine.” Draco sat stiffly.

“You seem to be having some...difficulty with your housemates,” Remus observed

“I don't want to go back to pretending like we're friends and everything is fine, like we all did before. There's no point now.”

“Has it occurred to you,” Remus said slowly, “that they weren't pretending?”

Draco frowned at him.

“They may—and I believe, do—genuinely think of you as a friend. They have no way to know that to you it was an act.”

Draco opened his mouth and snapped it shut again. His frown deepened. “I hadn't thought of that.”

“Give them a chance,” Remus said. “It's not too late to be their friend for real.”

~*~

Draco let himself sleep in on Saturday. Exavior was already gone by the time he got up, which was just as well. Even with just the two of them sharing a room, they hardly spoke. As he dressed, Draco threw a shoe at a grindylow clinging to the other side of the window to scare it off. The underwater view lost its charm once it became apparent a few months in to first year that every single thing that lived in the lake had taken to using the Slytherin dormitories as a peep show.
After trotting up the stairs to the entry, Draco went into the great hall—it was tempting to sit alone but Daphne had already poured him coffee and was holding the mug out for him.

“Deined to rejoin the waking world, did you, Mr. Prefect?” she teased as he fixed his coffee.

“Who's to say I was sleeping?”

“Emmet.” Astoria smirked as she buttered a piece of toast. “He says you were snoring.”

“He's a filthy lier.” Draco sipped his coffee.

“No, can't be. If he were, you'd actually be friends with him.” Daphne's tone was serious, but she was smiling.

Draco rolled his eyes. As long as he didn't look at Daphne's chair, this was almost nice. Of course, it was pretty much impossible to look at Daphne at all without looking at her chair. Draco busied himself with oatmeal.

After breakfast, Draco found Hermione in the library, most of her hair scraped up into a poof of frizz on top of her head with a few wayward curls stubbornly corkscrewing around her hairline, the table in front of her strewn with books and parchment and one beaten up spiral bound notebook. She looked up briefly at his approach. “Hey, Draco.”

“There is no way you have this much homework already,” Draco said incredulously. “We've only had one day of classes, and I know that at least Lupin didn't assign anything.”

Hermione shook her head and reached for another one of her books. “All I have so far is some reading for Herbology and I already did that last night. This isn't homework.”

“Then what are you doing?”

She propped the book on end so he could see the title while she read and took notes: *Accounts of the Werewolves of Poligny, Their Terror, Trial, and Execution.*

“Oh.”

“It's one of the few well known instances in muggle history of a werewolf scare where the muggles were actually right about what was going on. Usually it was really just a madman or a hyenna loose from a private zoo that was killing livestock, or people, not that they—”

“Hermione.”

She stopped talking and slowly lowered her book. “I'm sorry. I—”

“It's fine.” He shoved some of her books and papers out of the way to make himself room at the table and sat. “I need your help with some homework.”

“What subject?” She frowned curiously.

“Well, uh, Muggle Studies.”

Her forehead crinkled, then she brightened and shoved his shoulder. “Why didn't you tell me you were taking Muggle Studies?”
He shrugged. “It didn't come up. Professor Lee told us to go talk to anyone we know who's muggle or muggle born over the weekend, so—”

“Oh, I know. Jimmy Peakes was interrogating me last night until one of his roommates rescued me by reminding Peakes his sister-in-law's muggle. He didn't mention you're in the class.”

“Sounds like he was a bit busy asking questions to tell you anything.”

“Yes.” Hermione sighed and leaned back in her chair. “What do you want to know?”

Draco shrugged. “We ran into that friend of yours—you’d gone to school with her.”

"Annelise.” Hermione nodded.

“Muggle schooling starts younger than we do.”

“Yeah, most kids start school at four or five, learn their letters, colors, shapes, counting in the first year or so, then reading and writing and basic maths, history, natural sciences. I could already read by the time I started school though, and I knew my times tables when most of my classmates were struggling to count by twos, so I was usually bored in class when I was little. I read a lot.”

“That sounds like you,” Draco snorted.

She grinned. “Some things never change.” She paused. “Actually, I have a question for you.”

“Hm?”

“You've mentioned having tutors, and I know Molly taught all the Weasleys their reading and writing and maths at home, but how do other wizarding kids learn them? I wonder about it sometimes but I've never asked. Obviously, everyone's learned—our classmates are all literate.”

“Well,” Draco leaned into the corner of his chair, “I know most, uh, better off families have tutors for their children. Sometimes, if we had the same tutor we'd be taught together—I knew Crabbe and Goyle since I was about seven because of that. Many kids are taught at home, like the Weasleys. And I think in some places where there's a concentrated wizarding population there are grammar schools. I'm not sure who we know that grew up in a largely wizarding town, though.”

“There's no schoolhouse in Hogsmeade,” Hermione pointed out

“There aren't bloody many kids in Hogsmeade, either, are there?”

“I've seen...maybe six kids younger than eleven in the village, ever,” Hermione admitted.

“Exactly. I don't think the grammar schools are terribly formal, anyway. I've honestly never thought that much about it. I just had tutors and thought that was normal.”

“Fair enough.”

That evening, Draco invited himself to Lupin's office after dinner. Remus opened the door and just looked at him for a moment. “You have amazingly good timing.”

He stepped back to let Draco in—there was a full goblet on his desk, smoking faintly. Draco slipped his flask out of his robes. “We've only been doing this at the same time all summer.”
“True.” Remus shut the door. They each drank their doses, grimaced, then sat in companionable silence for a while.

“What did you do for schooling before Hogwarts?” Draco asked abruptly.

“What do you mean?”

“I was talking to Hermione about how muggle children and wizarding children learn English and maths and so on. Muggle kids start school years younger than we come here. I had tutors. I was just wondering.”

“My mother taught me.”

“I assume Sirius had tutors.”

“Yes.” Remus grinned. “And he hated them. By all accounts his brother was a suck up so their tutors all preferred Regulus.”

Draco chuckled. “Do you know anything about local, informal schools?”

Remus nodded. “Yes. I know some mothers, mostly, who’d get together with their kids and one or two of the mums would teach. Harry and Neville's mothers had planned to do that.”

“That makes sense. It seems strange that no one really talks about these things.”

“There's a lot no one really talks about.” Remus sighed. “Figure I'll be seeing you tomorrow evening as well?”

“Most likely,” Draco admitted. “Are you teaching on Monday?”

“I am, but not Tuesday or Wednesday. At least not Wednesday morning. We'll see.”

Draco snorted and looked away.

“I’d tell you that your teachers would completely understand if you took some time off as well, but I don’t think there’s much point.”

Draco shook his head. “If I make a habit of cutting class on the days after the full moon, people would figure out what’s going on—especially with you here.”

“I understand.”
Chapter 7

Sunday was a pleasantly slow day. Draco spent most of the day in the Slytherin common room working ahead on his coursework and reading after having gone around asking his professors what the next few days worth of homework would be. Maybe if he did his homework beforehand, he’d actually have time to sleep. That was the hope at least.

Starting with Astoria, then Blaise, most of the rest of the house joined him on the floor in front of the fireplace, all with their own schoolwork. None of them talked much beyond the occasional question between classmates.

After dinner, Draco found himself in Remus's office again, as predicted.

“What did you do,” Draco asked, “before wolfsbane potion was invented and you were in school?”

Remus let out the long breath. “I had to be away from people so….” He trailed off and shrugged. “Have you ever noticed, when you've gone down to Hogsmeade, that the Shrieking Shack doesn't actually shriek?”

Draco frowned. “Now that you mention it, yeah, but what does that—? Oh.”

Remus nodded. “That was me. Madam Pomfrey would sneak me out of the castle to the shack before moonrise, come get me when the full moon had passed. The rumors of the place being haunted by dangerous spirits were encouraged to keep people away and safe from me. They never really died, even after I'd left school and the place went quiet.”

“That's mental.” Draco shook his head. “I can't imaging having to juggle that all through school.”

Remus shrugged. “For me, it was normal.”

“How is being smuggled out of school to spend days alone in an abandoned house that everyone thinks is haunted because of you screaming in pain 'normal’?”

“The thing you have to understand,” Remus sighed, “is that I don't really know what it's like to not be a werewolf. I was so young—I do unfortunately remember being bitten, and quite vividly, but I don't remember much from before. This has always been a part of my life, it may not define me but it is inseparable from who I am. I don't know who I'd be as a person without it. I doubt I'd recognize myself.”

Draco nodded slowly. He pulled his feet up and wrapped his arms around his knees. “What happened?” he asked softly. “When you were….”

“Bitten,” Remus finished. Draco nodded again. Remus sunk down in his chair and ran a hand over his face.

“You don't have to—”

“No, it's fine.” Remus took a breath, “I was in bed. I had just turned three. I wasn't quite asleep; out my window I could see fairies in the garden—we always had fairies in summer, I think my mother planted something they liked, I'm not sure. In any case I could see them glowing outside, all these little soft lights, then something blocked them out. This big dark something, I didn't know what, broke the window—not just the glass, it broke the frame out of its tracks and once it was inside—”

He shook his head and rubbed at the now distorted scars through his shirt. “If you've ever seen a
dog—or Sirius—shake a toy, that's what Greyback did with me. Everything was blurred and I couldn't breathe. Felt like fire, but wet. I was screaming, my mother was screaming, my father was—I don't know when they came in, I don't how long it lasted, I didn't really know what was happening, I just knew this thing was killing me.

“Then it was over. I was face down on the rug, everything smelled like metal, and I couldn't move.” He leaned forward on his knees and shrugged. “After that things are vague. I don't think I was entirely conscious. Spent the better part of the next two months in hospital.”

Draco chewed his lip. “You were at St. Mungo's when you first—”

“Yeah.”

“I was at home.” A moment passed, then Draco asked, “Why is the bite so cold?”

Remus sighed. “I have no idea.”

Draco picked at a thread on the cuff of his left sleeve. “After the Department of Mysteries, the Dark Lord decided my father needed to be punished and that the way to do that was through me…. So, we had Greyback caged up in the basement, my mother and Bellatrix and—and Voldemort were there. Greyback was snarling and pacing and clawing at the walls and grate, and it's all stone down there so everything echoed horribly. My mother hugged me just like she would before I got on the train for school when I was little, but she was trying not to cry. I was trying not to be sick.

“Bellatrix put a hand on my shoulder, simpering like she cared, and told me to come along, dragged me over to the grate. Voldemort was standing next to my mother with his wand drawn, and I knew he'd kill her if I didn't do it.” He took a shaky breath. “I had to put my arm through the bars. I asked Bellatrix to make me do it—”

“Under the imperius curse?”

Draco nodded. “Voldemort told me to do it myself. I looked back at my mother—she'd shut her eyes—and I did it. I couldn't look, then I couldn't see. It was just,” he waved a hand in front of his face, “white. Burning, and cold, and wet—like you said. I couldn't feel my hand. I wound up on the floor. My mother was holding me, whispering to me, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. Voldemort grabbed me by the back of the head and made me look. I think I saw bone.” He shook his head. “I passed out. Woke up in my room a couple days later, whole arm bandaged up. My mother would come in a few times a day with food, or to change the dressings, but for weeks she wouldn't look at me. Snape started bringing me the potion. I locked myself in my childhood playroom for two whole days. Hardly even left to eat or use the bathroom. I didn't wanna see anyone.”

Remus nodded. “St. Mungo's has—or, at least, used to have—padded cells on the first floor.”

Draco scrubbed a hand across his eyes.

“Come here.” Remus levered himself up out of his chair and pulled Draco into a hug.

Draco took a deep breath; it stuttered as he exhaled. “I've never talked about it before.”

“It's hard,” Remus said gently. “I know.”

Draco sniffed, detached himself from Remus, and wiped his eyes. “I, uh, I'm gonna go. To bed. I don't expect I'll be by tomorrow. I think I'm going to take a nap after classes.”
“Sleep well,” Remus said, eyes soft.

Monday morning at breakfast, Draco looked up as the owls swooped in with the day's mail. The huge bulk of Harry's new owl, Jarnsaxa, was easy to pick out from the flock. She landed between Hermione and Ginny at the Gryffindor table. A scruffy little grey owl landed in front of Draco, dropped a letter, and flew off again. Draco picked up the letter and flipped it over. He immediately recognized his mother's writing.

“What's that?” Exavior asked casually. He and Draco were on speaking terms as of the day before.

“Nothing.” Draco shoved the letter in his bag. “I'm going on to class.”

He sat alone in the Transfiguration classroom for a while and just started to reach for the letter in his bag when Hermione and Ginny came in.

“Morning, Draco,” Hermione said brightly.

“Morning, ladies.”

“Oh, we're ladies now?” Ginny asked.

Draco arched an eyebrow. “Unless there's something you're keeping from your boyfriends.”

Ginny snorted and Hermione rolled her eyes.

Professor Stebbins bustled in amongst the rest of the class as they drifted up from breakfast. She was no McGonagall, but transfiguration was transfiguration and class was mostly taken up by start of term housekeeping anyway.

Remus dropped into a chair at dinner without really seeing who he was sitting next to, dropped his head into his hand, and started massaging his temple.

“Are you alright, Remus?”

Remus looked up slowly at Angelica, who was eyeing him with concern.

“I'm fine. Thank you.”

“You don't look fine….”

“The full moon is tonight, I feel horribly dehydrated but I'm not. This is normal. I'm fine.”

Angelica frowned. Remus poured himself a glass of wine and started in on his steak.

“Professor Lupin!” Professor Lee took the seat to Remus's other side. “I've just been informed that
I'm covering your classes tomorrow.”

“Okay, good. I was starting to get a bit worried no one was going to cover.” He picked up his goblet. “I can give you lesson plans after dinner.”

“Great.” Lee flashed a smile and held up a finger. “In exchange, I'm planning on having a sort of ‘everything you always wondered about muggles but were too afraid to ask’ session in a week or so and you should tell your students to go.”

Remus blinked. “Once you figure out exactly when you'll be doing that, let me know and I'll pass it along to my students.”

“Good.”

When they were both done eating, Remus had Lee follow him back to his office, handed over his lessonbook, and gave her a quick run through of what each class was doing. “Are you just covering tomorrow, or Wednesday as well?”

Lee shrugged. “I don't know. McGonagall caught me on the way to dinner to tell me I was covering tomorrow. I have classes of my own Wednesday and I don't know if they conflict with yours.”

“Hm.” Remus frowned. “Alright.” He pulled his watch from the pocket of his waistcoat. “Thank you for covering. I have some things I need to do before I'm, shall we say, indisposed.”

“Right. Of course.” Lee held the lessonbook to her chest. “Any particular notes? I know it's only been a couple days, but—”

“No. The seventh/eighth year classes are a bit freeform. That's it.”

“Cool. Well. Have a good night.”

“I'll try,” Remus said earnestly. “I'll try.”

~*~

Draco was just leaving the dormitory, the taste of wolfsbane lingering in his mouth, when Exavior was coming in. The darker haired boy frowned. “Where are you going? It's almost curfew.”

“Prefect duties,” Draco said easily and continued past.

“And you skipped astronomy,” Exavior accused at Draco's back.

“I took it last year,” Draco called back.

“You took everything last year!”

Ignoring his roommate, Draco went up to the seventh floor and turned left, as he had every month for the past two years of his schooling. But something was wrong. It couldn't be gone. There was not time for this.

Draco swore fluently and ran to Lupin's office. He pounded on the door until it opened.
“Now really isn't a good—Draco?” Remus had answered the door in his housecoat, which he was holding closed with one hand because it wasn't tied. “What are you doing here?”

“It's not working,” Draco explained, trying and mostly failing at not sounding panicked. “I can't get in.”

“Where?”

“The Room of Requirement. It's where I go, or it used to be. It won't open. I made sure I was on the right hall three times. No matter what I do, I can't get in. I don't want to hex my roommate, there's people in the hospital wing, it's—what, ten?—minutes to moonrise, and I don't know where to go.”

“More like five. Get in here.” Remus pulled him through the door then shut and locked it behind him. He nodded toward the stairs that lead up from his office to his bedroom. “Go, get undressed. I'll stay down here.”

“Thank you,” Draco said shakily and hurried up the stairs.

He was balled up in the middle of the floor, fur on end, his clothes strewn haphazardly around him, when Remus nudged the door open. Draco didn't move. Remus padded over and nosed at the young white wolf's shoulder. Draco recoiled from the touch, snarling, and Remus quickly backed away. Immediately regretting his reaction, Draco bowed his head, ears back—he couldn't bring himself to make eye contact. Remus pondered Draco a moment then, looking more like a Labrador than a wolf, dropped playfully to his elbows, back sloping down from his flank to his withers.

Draco gave him a confused, quizzical look. Remus made a low chuffing sound and proceeded to herd Draco out of the room. Reluctantly, Draco loped down the stairs then eyed Remus, who had come down behind him. Remus trotted past, reared up to paw at the bolt until it came unlocked, got the door open, and sat in the doorway, looking expectantly at Draco. Draco stared back in horror. He could not be suggesting what Draco thought he was suggesting.

Despite not actually having eyebrows at the moment, Remus quirked an eyebrow.

Draco tucked himself under Remus's desk and continued to stare.

Remus turned away with a movement that wasn't exactly a shrug and went out into the corridor. Draco could hear Remus's nails on the stone floor, clicking lightly down the hall. He was actually leaving Draco alone in his office. And he was just going to go wander the castle. As a wolf. He was insane. He had to be insane.

Draco peered out the open door. Remus had stopped at the end of the corridor, at the top of the stairs that lead down to the entrance hall. He was looking back, waiting for Draco, who glared. Remus play-bowed again, came running back down the hall, skidded to a halt in front of Draco, jumped over him, and shoved him out the door. Draco yelped and growled. Remus rubbed shoulders with him in a gesture Draco didn't really understand, then headed deliberately toward the stairs again, glancing over his shoulder at Draco the whole way. With a huff, Draco gave in and followed.
Chapter 8

Remus loved Scotland at night—the cool wind off the lake carrying all the smells of water and stone and a million different trees and flowers and grasses, the stars strewn across the dark sky brighter and more numerous than they ever were in London, the sounds of the wind and the water and all the living things human ears couldn't make out. For all the pain, the fear, the hatred, Remus had learned to enjoy these experiences and—he thought—Draco needed to at least have them for himself.

Remus set off at a run across the grounds for the edge of the forest and the earthy dampness of its shadows. He could hear Draco behind him, lagging but following nonetheless. It was a bit nostalgic to be out in the forest—when he'd taught before he'd spent every full moon in his office, except for that last one. That one only half counted. This, he realized, was the first time he'd roamed the grounds of his right mind. Or with another werewolf. The thought stopped his loping feet.

Draco caught up and pressed close against him, breathing hard, head down, ears back, looking around warily at the dappled shadows that would have been darkness to human eyes. Remus realized something else: this was only the second time Draco had ever been outside on the full moon. He watched Draco sniff at the air, then lower his nose to the ground and follow a scent Remus recognized a few steps before stopping and looking back at Remus uncertainly. Remus brushed past him, following the scent through the trees, along a stream that he knew eventually twisted its way around to the lake, then to a thicket. He stopped and howled. One, then two, then a dozen voices howled back. Draco froze, one forepaw off the ground. Slowly, a pack of wolves—true wolves, with long tails and near whiteless eyes—emerged from the thicket, ears pricked curiously.

These weren't the same wolves Remus—and Padfoot—had once upon a time had to convince that hunting Prongs was a bad idea. Those had been the now-long-dead parents and grandparents of these, but the cautious interest was the same. An older, dominant female came forward. She circled Remus, sniffing at him with her head raised, then did the same to Draco who looked like he might have forgotten how to breathe. The rest of the pack approached with varying degrees of apprehension. Remus went to stand assertively by Draco who was earning himself no respect hunched down like that. He nosed at Draco, making him lift his head. Draco glanced at him as one of the younger wolves, barely more than a pup, came up to sniff at them, head bowed. The young one licked at Remus's face. Remus pawed it away gently and it rolled onto its back submissively.

Then they all heard hooves.

The pack ran. So did Draco. Remus gave a sharp bark, got in front of Draco, and corralled him against a tree. Remus pawed at Draco's shoulder, reared up against the tree, and howled again. The other wolves didn't howl back, but the hoofbeats changed course and slowed. Then, through the trees came Firenze. He stopped and eyed the two of them warily. Remus barked, trotted forward, and sat. Draco did the one thing he seemed capable of that night and stared.

"This is not how I'm accustomed to seeing either of you," Firenze noted with faint amusement. He crossed his arms and looked down at Remus. "Causing trouble on these nights is an unbreakable habit for you, isn't it?"

Remus glowed, ears back.

Firenze laughed. "So long as you cause no harm, your causing trouble is welcome entertainment."
No need to take offense.”

Draco shook himself and turned back the way they’d come, pausing slightly to sniff for their own trail. Remus glanced up at the centaur then went after Draco, leaving Firenze laughing behind them.

Remus followed Draco all the way back to the edge of the forest, where the younger werewolf faltered, reluctant to step into the open. Remus passed him, stopped, and looked back for him to come along, which he did, up to Remus's office. Draco trotted up the stairs and pushed the door closed. The message was clear: I'm done.

Remus shut the door to the hall, flopped on the floor near his desk, rolled onto his back, and stretched—his hip pop and he whined. He should have lit a fire earlier. Nothing to do about it now, he’d have to remember tomorrow. He rolled back over, curled into a lump on the rug, and tried his best to sleep, ears twitching at every creak and scuttle in the old castle.

~*~

In the morning, Remus pulled himself to his feet with a groan, shrugged into his dressing gown, tied it clumsily, and leaned heavily on his desk, head bowed against a sick headache. He took a deep breath.

“I,” Draco said hoarsely, leaning over the bannister at the top of the stairs in rumpled clothes, “have questions. Starting with, are you out of your mind?”

Remus gave a short, dark laugh. “What makes you ask?”

“You ran off into the forbidden forest, at night!” Draco said, coming down the stairs, dragging his robe behind him.

“What fear the wild things in the woods when you are the wild thing in the woods?” Remus asked, echoing James's words from years ago.

“You took us right to a pack of wolves.”

“We were wolves, you were curious, and true wolves tend to be fascinated by werewolves until they decide we're insane and start avoiding us. I've never had real wolves be aggressive toward me.”

Draco stopped in front of him. “And what the hell was Firenze talking about?”

Remus shrugged. “He's lived in the forest his entire life, I spent years running those woods with Sirius and James and Peter, generally terrorizing the wildlife. Sirius and I used to chase rabbits, for one thing. I'm sure Firenze bore witness to more of those misadventures than I realize.”

“Why did you make me come with you?”

“I believe we've already had the conversation about sitting around moping not being good for you.”
“Were you planning on running off into the woods last night?” Draco challenged.

“No.”

“So you would have stayed here all night?”

Remus nodded. “Probably.”

“Why is that fine for you but not for me?”

“Because you think you have no other choice,” Remus said simply.

Draco ran a hand through his disheveled hair and shook his head. “I’m going to go shower and go to class.”

“Have a good day,” Remus said with mock brightness. As soon as Draco had shut the door, Remus went upstairs and fell into bed.

~*~

After showering, Draco made his way down to the Slytherin dungeon to change and get his school bag. He passed Mrs. Norris on the way and she yowled disapprovingly at him. He half lunged at her and snarled just to send her running. Stupid cat.

The drapes were still drawn around Exavior’s bed so Draco kept as quiet as he could while he changed into something not wrinkled from a night spent on the floor. Even so, Exavior blearily stumbled out of bed just as Draco was slipping his shoes back on. He blinked at Draco. “Why are you up so early?”

“I have rounds.”

“Again?”

Draco shrugged. “There aren't many prefects.”

Exavior yawned and started lethargically getting dressed. “I never heard you come back last night.”

“You were asleep.” Draco grabbed his bag and went up to breakfast. He sat alone partway down the Slytherin table, fished his mother's letter out of his bag, and finally read it. She’d been moved to a safehouse with some other Mark-less spouses who'd agreed to testify. He folded up the letter and tucked it away before going to class.

He might have slept through History of Magic. Blaise poked him awake at the bell. On the way to D.A.D.A., Daphne wheeled alongside him. “Are you alright?”

Draco shook his head. “I had rounds last night and this morning, and might be a little bit sick. I'm fine.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Professor Lee and the Gryffindors were already in the room. Draco took his seat next to Hermione
and she wordlessly set a mug of coffee on the desk in front of him. He looked at the coffee, then at her. “Bless you, Hermione.”

She smiled. “Figured you could use some.”

“Did you have rounds, too, Granger?” Exavior asked.

She looked around at him, confused, then looked at Draco. “You start talking to me like a human and the rest of your house follows suit, that's how this works?”

“We probably all owe you apologies, don't we?” Daphne asked sheepishly.

“Yeah, most of you lot have been really shitty the past few years,” Ginny said.

“Language, Miss Weasley,” Professor Lee singsonged without looking up from the lesson notes in front of her.

“What?” Ginny crossed her arms. “It's true.”

“I think, given the events of last May,” Neville said reasonably, “we all would do best to forget and forgive all around.”

“But, Hermione,” Pavarti began, “rounds, is that why you were up at, what, six?”

Hermione nodded quickly. “Mhm.” She looked at Draco.

“We had rounds,” he said and sipped his coffee. Thankfully, the bell rang, cutting off any further interrogation.

“Okay.” Lee flipped Remus's lessonbook closed. “I have Professor Lupin's notes, but he told me your years' classes are a little freeform, so why don't you all tell me what we're doing?”

At the end of class, Draco slipped off for a nap in the alcove behind a tapestry. He woke up to Crookshanks kneading at his chest.


Crookshanks meowed and swished his tail. Draco rolled his eyes and checked his watch. He'd slept a little too long to comfortably eat lunch, so he grabbed an apple from the Great Hall and ate it on his way out to Care of Magical Creatures. He dropped his bag in the grass and sat perched on the split-rail fence near Hagrid's hut, feet hooked through the lower rail for balance. He was the first one there, Hagrid wasn't even waiting for the class yet. He probably could have eaten lunch after all. Oh well. The bell rang a moment later anyway.

Hagrid came out carrying a large cage covered with a drape which he set down carefully. It was buzzing or humming intermittently, with smatterings of high pitched peeps coming from inside. Draco eyed the cage suspiciously.

When Hermione arrived, she ran up and hugged Hagrid, shared a few words with him, then came to stand by the fence next to Draco. She leaned toward him casually and whispered, “You're inventing prefect duties to cover your condition?”

“I have to tell them something.” Draco shrugged. “Prefect duties are rarely questioned.”
She sighed. “You look less dead than you did this morning.”

“I skipped lunch to nap.”

She shook her head. The rest of the class gathered, Ginny running up to the back of the group still cramming a biscuit in her mouth. Hagrid called a greeting to the class and rubbed his hands together excitedly. “I have a real special treat for you,” he said and patted the cage gently. “Come on, gather ‘round. Nothing to be nervous of.”

With skeptical glances among themselves, the class neared the cage. Beaming, Hagrid pulled off the drape—underneath, the cage was woven of fine silver wire and inside, preening on perches or hovering around a sprig of big red flowers, were half a dozen tiny, fat, gold-feathered birds. A few people cooed. Draco almost laughed with surprise.

“Figure all of you what play quidditch recognize these little beauties,” Hagrid said happily. “Golden snidgets. They’re visiting us all the way from the Modesty Rabnott Reservation in Somerset. Now, I’m not gonna let these guys out, ’cause we don’t want Ginny or Draco to have to round ‘em back up”—the class chuckled—but I think you can see ‘em well enough.”

Draco didn’t bother to take notes as Hagrid ran through the history of the little bird, its use in quidditch, its near extinction by overhunting, and the subsequent conservation efforts, all of which he already knew from reading *Quidditch Through the Ages*. There was a whole chapter.

He stuck a finger in through the wires and one of the snidgets flitted over to investigate him. It prodded his fingertip with its long thin beak, flicked a tiny sticky tongue against his skin, then perched on his finger, folded its so-familiar wings, and peeped. It weighed nothing. Draco grinned.

Once the bell rang and the snidgets went back under their protective drape, the class started to disperse. Hermione shouldered her bag and gestured between herself and Ginny. “We have Potions. How’s Ramsey—you’ve had him already, right?”

Draco nodded. “Yeah. He’s good. You just have a pretest.”

“What do you have?” Ginny asked as they headed back up to the castle.

“Herbology.” He pointed in the direction of the greenhouses. They drifted apart as he went that way and the girls went inside. Herbology—like History—was just a repeat of last year, so that was dull, but a good fifteen or twenty minutes were taken up by Professor Sprout complaining that the local herbivore population had apparently figured out the scarecrows in the gardens wouldn’t really hurt them. That was new.

“What if you bewitched the scarecrows?” Draco suggested. “If they were actually a threat they’d actually work.”

Hannah Abbot glared at him. He shrugged.

“I don’t think,” Professor Sprout said slowly, “that would be the best course of action.”

After class, Draco went to find Remus in his office. He knocked as he stepped through the open door. At his desk, Remus looked up from the parchment he was reading. “Afternoon, Draco.”

Draco shut the door behind him. “I have to come here again tonight.”
Remus nodded. “Alright.”

“But I am not running off into the woods after you again,” Draco said coldly.

“Alright.” Remus re-rolled the parchment in front of him and set it aside. “Honestly, I need to try to sleep tonight.”

Draco frowned at him. “You do look like hell.”

“I feel like hell.”

“I've been in classes all day and you—haven't. How are you more worn out than I am?”

Remus sighed. “I'm older than you. And I've been going through this a long time. It takes its toll.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I started going grey before I even finished school. Lucky for you, your hair's light enough already, probably no one will even notice when you start going grey.”

Draco looked away. “Right. Well, I'll see you after dinner.”
Chapter 9

Remus finished going over the notes Lee had left him from the day's classes then went to find her before dinner. She was in the staff room, sipping at a mug of tea, and writing. She looked up as Remus approached.

“Professor Lupin.”

“Professor Lee,” Remus returned. She clicked her pen closed and he couldn't help but smile as he took his seat. “Don't let McGonagall catch you with that pen.”

Lee tilted her head. “Why not?”

He summoned himself a cup of tea from the sideboard. “Once upon a time, a lovely muggle-born girl named Lily lent her future husband a pen and he thought it was brilliant, so he went around the castle for about a week, clicking it incessantly until McGonagall got fed up, confiscated it, and banned them.”

“Oh.” She tucked the pen under what she was writing, hiding it. “Oops.”

He chuckled and sipped his tea. “Thank you for covering my classes today.”

She shook her head. “I'm happy to help. Especially with you repaying me by telling your students to go to my Q and A.” She paused. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.”

“I'm sure.”

Professor Sprout bustled through to the faculty noticeboard, calling over her shoulder to them, “Hello there, Remus, Elizabeth.”

“Hello, Professor Sprout,” Lee replied brightly.

“Afternoon, Pomona.”

Lee folded her hands, looked to Remus, and sighed. “About tomorrow….”

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “I'm not going to like this.”

“I have a class the same time as your sixth years in the afternoon.”

“I see,” Remus said carefully.

“I asked around, no one else is free. McGonagall says Trelawney is available, but….”

“No.”

“Exactly.” Lee looked down apologetically.

Remus ran a hand over his face and leaned on the table. “I'll teach it.”

“Are you sure?”

“You just told me there's no one else. I have to.” He shrugged. “It's not until three-thirty, I'll
She frowned. “When I was in school here, there was a teacher on call to fill in from time to time—Professor Grubbly-Plank? I remember her covering care of magical creatures and transfiguration.”

“She was killed last May,” Remus said quietly.

“Oh….”

“We lost so many people. That's why you're here, it's why I'm here. We don't have any spare manpower.”

“I know.” She looked off out the window. Suddenly she stood, picked up her writing, and folded it carefully. “Well, I need to send this off to my brother. I'll see you at dinner.”

“See you at dinner.” Remus leaned back in his chair and sipped his tea pensively while Lee left the room.

Professor Sprout came away from the noticeboard and looked at Remus. “I hope you know I'd be glad to cover if I didn't have my third years.”

“I know, Pomona. I appreciate it.” Remus set down his cup and fiddled with it.

“I'm awful sorry you're having to deal with this the first week of term….”

Remus shrugged, stood, and sent his empty cup back to the sideboard. “It's alright.”

“No it's not,” Professor Sprout said with quiet firmness.

“No,” Remus agreed, “it's not. But it's life. How's your first week going?”

She sighed. “Classes are fine. The students are...as well as I could hope. The one thing is all the rabbits and deer have found their way into the gardens and my usual tricks and charms aren't keeping them out.”

“That sounds frustrating.”

“It is.” Professor Sprout shook her head. “Well, I've got a new charm to try on the fence at Filius's suggestion, see if it makes any difference. I'll see you at dinner, Remus.”

~*~

Draco ate his dinner quietly, vaguely listening to the Carrows lamenting how much they missed having Astoria in their classes since she was retaking a year and they weren't, until he heard a voice from down the table say, “I can't believe that new Muggle Studies professor—she doesn't even try to dress like she's one of us, and I heard she's making her classes use muggle pens and things. It's frankly disgusting. And McGonagall's rehired Lupin when we all know he's a werewolf. It was bad enough when it was just Hagrid. I swear, this is supposed to be a *wizarding* school but there's hardly any real wizards left teaching.”

Draco's head snapped up to look at the gangly third year who'd spoken. “Hey, you.”
“Me?” the boy asked dumbly, pointing to his own chest.

“Yeah, you.” Draco dropped his fork. “What's your name again?”

“Nicholas Runcorn.”

“Right—your father works at the Ministry, or he did until he wound up rotting in prison with my father and every other piece of bigoted trash they could find running about, touting the kind of nonsense you just stupidly repeated,” Draco snapped. “Now, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you're just an idiot who got swept up in You-Know-Who's sick little cult, rather than think you're actually evil. On that assumption, let me educate you a bit. Mafalda, move.” Draco got up and switched seats with the auburn-haired fourth year so he was across from Runcorn, folded his hands on the table, and stared the boy down. “Blood status means nothing. I can trace my family with absolute certainty to the early eleventh century. I grew up in a house older than many countries. We're rich, we're ancient, and as everyone in our world knows, we're pureblood. I used to be so proud of all that, I thought it was worth so much. I was wrong. I'm no better than anyone else in this room for having been born into a family where most marriages for the past few centuries have been between cousins. If you think you're any better, you're wrong too, and I suggest you get the notion out of your head before you either do something horrible, or get yourself punched.”

With Runcorn—and most of the table—gaping at him, Draco stood. “One more thing.” He paused, patted down the pockets of his robes, found a ballpoint pen, and tossed it onto the table in front of the underclassman. “Give it a try. They're much less hassle than quill and ink.”

Daphne started applauding softly; next to her, Astoria whistled through her fingers.

“Oh, shut up,” Draco grumbled.

Behind him from the Ravenclaw table, Luna Lovegood's soft voice said, “That was a very nice speech, Draco.”

“Shut up,” Draco huffed, and turned on his heel with a swish of his robes to stride out of the hall.

~*~

Remus let himself into his office to find Draco already there, sitting in the chair across from his desk, reading. Remus paused. “I know I locked this door.”

Draco turned the page. “They teach us alohomora first year.”

“Fair point.” Remus shut the door and came over to drop into his own chair. With a few waves of his wand, he lit a fire in the grate, drew the curtains, and summoned the last near-empty bottle of wolfsbane and a goblet. Draco closed his book around its ribbon and pulled his flask out from his robes while Remus poured his own dose. Remus held out his goblet. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Draco echoed darkly.

Remus shook his head as he set his now-empty goblet on his desk, grimacing. He cleared his throat and nodded at Draco's book. “What are you reading?”
Draco shrugged. “Novel Hermione lent me. It's...rather dry.”

“Yet, you're still reading it,” Remus pointed out.

“I got the distinct impression when she gave it to me that I didn't have a choice, and it's an excuse to not do my History of Magic homework.”

“Fair enough, but you probably should do that homework.”

“It's just reading,” Draco said. “That I already did last year. I still have my notes. I'll look over it before we have an exam or a paper.”

Remus hummed and pulled a sheaf of parchment from his desk drawer. “I'm sure you have other homework, though.”

“I already did it.” Draco fiddled with the corner of his book. He nodded to the parchment. “What's that?”

“Knowledge assessments from the second years.” Remus sighed.

“Pretests?”

“Essentially.” Remus unstoppered a well of red ink. “I have no idea what they were taught last year and what they weren't.”

Draco nodded. “Ramsey's doing something similar in all his classes.”

“I'm mostly only worried about the second years—I need to know if I'm starting from effectively nothing or not.” He dipped a quill and started going down the first length of parchment. “The third years—I trust the foundation they'd have gotten from Snape. Same goes for the fourth years.”

A smirk tugged at Draco's mouth. “Umbridge is as bad as Death Eaters?”

“Yup.” Remus scribbled a correction. “The fifth years, well, Crouch was a madman but by all accounts a decent teacher, if unorthodox.”

“That's being kind,” Draco muttered.

“I did say he's a madman.” Remus frowned. He turned the parchment for Draco to see. “Can you read that?”

Draco tilted his head, squinting at the writing. “Portugal, maybe?”

“That doesn't make any sense.” Remus took the page back. “Why don't you go get yourself a change of clothes to make the morning easier, then come back and help me try to get these graded before moonrise, hm?”

“Alright.” Draco grabbed his book as he stood.

By the time Draco returned with his change of clothes, Remus had managed to get through a grand total of nine assessments. Remus glanced up. “I think he meant 'portego.'”

“The one you had me look at?” Draco asked, closing the door and coming over.

“Yes, which is still wrong, but at least it's actually a spell.” He handed Draco half the remaining stack. “Here, and this is the question list. I've set an alarm for about fifteen to moonrise, so let's see
“No answer key?” Draco reached across the desk to dip his own quill in the red ink.

“I trust you know the answers,” Remus said with a small smile.

Draco snorted. “Write the number wrong at the top?”

“Yes. You remember how I grade.”

“I do.” A few sheets later, Draco asked, “How many of these are there?”

“Seventy-two.”

“And we've done, what, twenty?”

“Looks like it.”

Draco scratched a red X next to yet another wrong answer. “It would be faster if they weren't so bad….”

Remus shook his head. “I should have told Professor Lee to tell them not to guess.”

When the clock started ringing, Remus put a hand on it to silence it. Draco wrote the tally at the top of the sheet with a flourish and dropped it on top of the others they’d finished.

“More than half of them,” he noted.

“I'll finish them tomorrow.” Remus wiped off the tip of his quill and yawned. “Thank you, for the help.”

Draco shrugged. “I was going to be here anyway.”

“Even so.” Remus stood and stretched. “You can go on up while I get all this put away—I'll stay down here like last night.”

“Alright.” Draco got up.

“Toss down my dressing gown?”

“I will.”

“And Draco?”

The blond stopped partway up the stairs and turned back. “What?”

“I don't care what, but go do something tonight.”

Draco crossed his arms. “While you stay here and sleep.”

“Try to sleep, yes. But I will chase you out of here first if I have to.”

“Why?” Draco demanded.

“It's like I said this morning: you think you have no choice but to hide. Me telling you otherwise isn't going to change that, you have to live it.”
“And if someone sees me?”

“The staff all know, it's past curfew so your classmates ought to all be in bed, and if a straggler or someone looking out a window or something were to catch a glimpse of you, odds are they'd think you're me.”

“We don't look anything alike!”

Remus shrugged. “A werewolf's a werewolf, as far as most people care.”

Draco huffed and stalked the rest of the way up the stairs. A moment later, Remus's dressing gown came zooming down. He caught it out of the air and draped it over the back of his chair.

“Werewolf's a werewolf,” Draco muttered darkly to himself as he stripped and folded his clothes into a neat stack next to his bag, then sat down to wait for the pain.

Through the fog of his own transformation and his own cries, he heard Lupin's, and a thud, a clatter, and a crash. Draco lay still a moment, whined, opened his eyes, got shakily to his feet, and slunk carefully down the stairs.

Lupin was standing next to his desk amidst shards of broken glass, ears back with agitation, bleeding from a pair of cuts on the side of his snout, looking about as pissed off as Draco had ever seen him. He'd left the empty potion bottle on the desk.

Draco hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for Lupin to—he didn't know, do something. An insistent instinct in the back of his brain was telling him to go lick Lupin's wounds but that was not going to happen, so he didn't move. Lupin picked his way out of the shattered glass without stepping on any of it and threw himself down on the rug in front of the fire. His ear twitched and he pawed at his face. Draco took that as his cue to leave.

Being out in the corridors was uncomfortable; he felt exposed, like anyone could step out of a doorway any moment and see him. It put him on edge in a way that the heightened senses that came with the transformation did nothing to help. So, when he turned a corner and suddenly found himself nose-to-nose with Mrs. Norris, he jumped back, snarling. She yowled at him imperiously.

He heard Filch wheezing and shuffling along the next hall, saying, “What is it, my sweet? Someone where they shouldn't be?”

Draco turned and sprinted the other way down the corridor. He skidded around a corner, nails skittering on the smooth stone of the floor.

He trotted outside, sat against the still sun-warmed stone garden wall, and caught his breath. He heard rustling on the other side of the wall and he reared up to look over. There were a pair of rabbits nibbling at the plants. Draco narrowed his eyes, jumped over the wall, and chased the rabbits out the gate, barking and growling. One of them veered off across the grounds, but he chased the other all the way to the edge of the forest. He probably could have caught it if he'd wanted to, but he let it go and sauntered back up toward the castle, head held high. That was fun, he'd admit. Maybe. If Lupin asked him directly.

As he approached the gardens he saw there was now a deer taking up where the rabbits had left off. He huffed, chased the deer away as well, then came back to find Professor Sprout standing by the gate, looking at him. He froze, one foot off the ground.

“I was wondering what I was hearing out here,” she said, smiling just a little. “Ten points to
Slytherin, Mr. Malfoy.”

He set his paw down—then swiveled an ear toward a sound and turned to look just in time to see another rabbit squeezing into the gardens by a drainage hole in the wall. He growled. Professor Sprout stepped out of his way of the gate and raised an eyebrow at him. He went in and chased the rabbit out.

“Five points to Slytherin!” Professor Sprout called from her newly conjured chair as he ran past her.

Several rabbits and three more deer later, Draco was exhausted. He lay down in front of the gate, panting. Professor Sprout studied him a moment. “You look like you're done for the night.”

He nodded.

“And it looks like I need to put some grating over those drainage holes.” She stood and vanished her chair. “I appreciate you protecting the gardens, I swear something must have happened to the rabbits and deer around here, magic just doesn't seem to affect them ever since last year and I can't imagine what could be causing that. But anyway I think it's time you went back to—well, no, I suppose you aren't staying in your dormitory tonight are you? Back to bed, in any case. Before you nod off here on the grass.”

He yawned, got to his feet, and headed inside in front of her.

“That's what I thought,” she said gently. “Goodnight, Mr. Malfoy.”

He ruffed in response and made his way back to Lupin's office, where the older werewolf was curled up asleep in front of the smoldering remains of the fire.
In the morning, Draco redressed in fresh clothes, closed his eyes for a moment, and promptly fell back asleep on top of Lupin's coverlet. He woke again sometime later and sat up. He could see Lupin's shadow through the divider screen in the corner as the man dressed.

“What time is it?” Draco asked, voice hoarse.

“Just after seven.”

Draco groaned, pushed up onto his feet, shoved his old clothes in his bag, and went down to breakfast. Most of the rest of Slytherin house was already at their table, eating. Draco took a seat near the Greengrasses around the same time Mafalda joined the Carrows a few seats down. Across the table, Exavior looked up at Draco. “Where were you last night?”

“Hm?” Draco casually served himself some sausage.

“I never saw you last night,” Exavior said. “Where were you?”

“Hospital wing.”

Daphne frowned. “You mentioned you weren't feeling well. That got worse?”

“After dinner, yeah.” Draco summoned the nearest coffee carafe since it was just out of reach. “Just a cold, but made worse by lack of sleep. From having rounds.”

Astoria grimaced sympathetically. “That sucks. Hopefully you can sleep better now the full moon’s over.”

Draco almost choked on his coffee. “What's the full moon got to do with anything?”

“Our mum always has trouble sleeping around the full moon,” Astoria explained. “Are you okay?”

Draco nodded. “Swallowed wrong.”

“She has trouble getting to sleep,” Daphne said, picking up her sister's train of conversation, “tends to wake up during the night, have really intense dreams. We're the same way, just not as bad. Figure we can't be the only people who're affected like that.”

“No,” Blaise said, “my mum's last husband was the same way.”

Next to Blaise, Harper nodded. “My godmum is a healer at St. Mungo's. She says they always seem to get the strangest emergencies in on the full moon.”

“Along with the occasional werewolf bite, I'd bet,” Blaise added, eyeing Lupin who'd just come in make his way up to the staff table. He had a plaster over the two cuts on his cheek.

Harper shrugged. “Couple times a year, yeah.”

Draco meticulously buttered himself a piece of toast.

Remus settled heavily into his seat at the staff table and poured himself coffee. Madam Pomfrey
took the chair next to him. “Did you scratch yourself?”

“Good morning to you, too, Poppy,” Remus sighed. “And no, bottle fell off my desk.”

“I can fix that, then,” she said, drawing her wand.

He held up a hand. “I'd really rather you didn't.”

“Remus.” She gave him a hard look.

“It was the bottle I'd been keeping my potion in—you know how touchy wolfsbane is, I don't want to risk a magical interaction.”

She sighed frustratedly and put her wand away. “Well, come to the hospital wing after breakfast and I'll at least patch that up better for you.”

“Alright,” Remus agreed. “Thank you.”

Once Madam Pomfrey had fussed over him sufficiently, Remus returned to his office to finish the grading that hadn't gotten done the night before. Then he took a nap, ate lunch, and got his things together to teach the sixth years Professor Lee couldn't cover. He lingered just outside the classroom door for a moment and took a breath before going in.

“Good afternoon,” he said as he went up to his desk at the front. “Last week, we briefly began discussion of dementors. Of course, you're all familiar with them from a few years ago when Hogwarts played host to a few dozen of them.” He leaned on his hands on the desktop as his eighteen students blanched and nodded. “And who knows what spell is used to defend oneself from a dementor?”

A few of the Gryffindors raised their hands—the three Slytherins sitting together in the back kept their eyes on their notes.

“Miss Roth?” Remus prompted.

“The patronus charm,” Roth said—she was fairly obviously looking just over Remus's shoulder rather than at him.

“Very good,” Remus continued. “And does anyone here know how to produce a patronus?”

Half a dozen of the Gryffindors and the one Slytherin boy raised their hands.

“Can any of you produce a full bodied patronus? One with a distinct, recognizable animal form?”

All but one of the hands went down.

“Mr. Caruso, would you care to demonstrate?”

“Um.” The freckly blond glanced around. “Not particularly, no, sir. And, I'm sorry, sir, but, what happened to your face?”

Remus suppressed a sigh. “I had a bit of a disagreement with gravity and a potion bottle, nothing serious, I promise. Now, would you be more willing to demonstrate if producing a full bodied patronus would earn you ten points?”
“Well, yes, but, I can't always—what if it doesn't work?”

“You still get five for trying.”

The girl next to him shoved him out of seat to his feet. He drew his wand, cleared his throat, and
enunciated, “Expecto Patronum!”

A wispy, vaguely rabbit-shaped cloud of pearl white mist burst from the tip of Caruso's wand,
hopped once, then fizzled out.

“We'll call that seven points to Gryffindor. That was quite good,” Remus assured Caruso as the boy
folded himself back into his chair. “Many qualified wizards find it nearly impossible to produce a
patronus that's anything more than a wisp of silver smoke, so don't any of you be disheartened if
that's the most you can manage. The charm is cast using the incantation you just heard Luca use
—Expecto Patronum—while concentrating hard on a happy memory, the strongest and happiest
you can think of. That memory is the source of the patronus's power—it is essentially made of
happiness. Ideally, the result looks something like this….”

He called up a memory from James and Lily's wedding of everyone laughing as Sirius gave his
best man speech, took a breath, and cast the spell. The ethereal silver wolf that was his patronus
bloomed forth and trotted silently around the room. The class watched it, a few of them oohing and
ahhing.

“Each witch or wizard's patronus takes a form individual to that person,” Remus explained while
his leapt up onto the desk next to him, sat with a swish of its tail, and began to slowly fade away.
“Mine, as you can see, is a wolf. Luca's looked to be a rabbit. Professor McGonagall's is a cat, like
her animagus form. Harry Potter's is a stag. And so on. The form of your patronus can be a chance
to learn something about yourself, if you're able to produce a full one. Well, stand up, wands out,
find yourselves a happy memory, and give it a try. Mr. Caruso, you get to help your classmates.”

Caruso opened his mouth, shut it, and nodded.

Within moments, the room was full of jabbing wands and eighteen teenagers all shouting Expecto
Patronum at the top of their lungs, most of them producing little wisps of silvery smoke. From time
to time, Caruso's half-formed rabbit made an appearance between him telling those around him,
“You gotta focus on the happiest memory you can think of, like Professor Lupin said, I dunno.
Just, happy.”

“If you start to get frustrated,” Remus called over the noise, “take a break, take a breath, tell a
friend about your memory, tell a joke, laugh a little, then try again.”

Not a minute after he'd spoken, one of the Carrow twins threw down her wand on her desk and
wheeled on him. “Why are we even doing this?” she snapped. “This isn't in the curriculum. It's
never been in the curriculum! It's stupid.”

“The short answer,” Remus said, crossing his arms, “is I'm the teacher and I say so.' The long
answer is, 'it is difficult magic, but it's difficult magic that won't go horribly wrong if not done
perfectly so it's a good way to get you all some practice with more advanced spellwork, and—”

Across the room, Alice Tolipan shrieked excitedly and pointed at her newly manifested patronus.
“It's a lynx!”

“—and occasionally that happens,” Remus finished.

“Well, I can't do it,” Hestia huffed.
“And that's alright.” Remus touched her hand gently and called over his shoulder, “Flora, would you come here?”

The other Carrow twin stepped up at his elbow.

“How's your patronus coming along?” he asked.

“Nonexistent,” Flora said sourly.

“So you're both having some trouble,” Remus said, “but you're sisters, you're close, so I figure you have a lot of happy memories in common. Why don't you talk through what memory each of you is using, see if you can think of any that are stronger, and try again together?”

The girls glanced at each other then nodded.

By the time the bell rang, the Carrows were managing pretty substantial wisps. Caruso lingered as the rest of the class left and came up to Remus. “Hey, uh, Professor?”

“Yes, Luca?”

“I just wanted to say, I'm sorry for asking about your face in front of everybody.” He looked down. “I realize that was probably rude. It's just, I know we all noticed, and—”

“It's alright,” Remus said gently. “Whether you said anything or not, I would have known everyone was looking.”

“Well, I'm sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

Caruso nodded and saw himself out. Remus let out a breath and dropped his face into his hands.

After his last class of the day, Draco went back to his dormitory and fell flat onto his bed, face first. He heard the door open a moment later, followed by Exavior's footsteps. They stopped near the end of Draco's bed.

“Malfoy, are you dead?”

“Yes,” Draco said into his pillow.

“I'm not notifying your parents,” Exavior said over the sounds of him rummaging in his trunk.

“Mc Gonagall will do it.”

Exavior paused. “Does Azkaban even get mail?”

Draco shoved himself up from bed. “You shut up.”

“Oh, come on. Everyone knows that's where your parents are,” Exavior very nearly laughed.

“You don't know anything,” Draco said coldly and strode out to the common room, where he flopped onto the pile of cushions in the corner instead. He dozed there, half listening to the Carrow sisters argue about their sixth birthday party until dinner.
Friday morning, Hermione woke up early and went down to eat before taking her turn at rounds. Padma was already sitting with Hannah at the Hufflepuff table. Since the hall was almost entirely otherwise empty, she went and joined them.

“Morning,” Hannah said.


“No problem.” Padma lifted her own mug but stopped short, looking to the door. “Is Malfoy on the schedule for rounds this morning?”

Hermione and Hannah turned to look. Sure enough, Draco had just walked in.

“I guess he is,” Hermione said. She sat up straighter and waved. “Draco!”

“What are you doing?” Hannah hissed.

“You'd have him sit at the Slytherin table all alone?” Hermione countered. She turned back to Draco, who'd stopped in his tracks. “Over here, you towheaded prat, we have coffee!”

“Honestly, yes,” Padma mumbled, but Draco was already headed for them.

Hermione patted the bench next to her and Draco sat stiffly. She poured syrup on a waffle. “I just think that, especially this year, prefect solidarity and inter-house camaraderie are important. Besides,” she snapped the syrup closed, “you didn't seem to mind Draco joining us at Harry and Neville's party.”

“That was different,” Padma said.

“Why?” Draco asked flatly.

“It just was.” Hannah shot Hermione a hard look.

Draco shook his head and started to get up, but Hermione grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back down sharply.

“I'm not asking either of you to like him, I'm asking you to tolerate him just enough for him to have half a chance to redeem himself. He's not actually that bad when he isn't threatening to tattle to his father every ten seconds.”

Draco sighed. “I'm never living that down, am I?”

“Oh, there's a lot you're never living down,” Hermione said brightly, cutting into her waffle.

“Like almost killing Katie,” Hannah supplied.

“Okay, first of all,” Draco said sharply, “she already punched me for that. Second, she was never meant to be harmed, I wasn't trying to hurt her.”

“But you did anyway!” Padma objected. “It doesn't matter what you meant, it matters what happened. And what happened was you came about this close to killing her, and you had her under
the imperious curse—I really can't believe you weren't arrested for that. Do you have any idea what that does to a person?"

“Yes,” Draco snapped. “Yes, I do. I know full well. I've been there. Bellatrix Lestrange was my aunt, remember? You-Know-Who lived in my house, remember? Everything I did that year and last year, I did under pain of death, so I'm sorry but I didn't particularly want to be murdered.”

Hannah and Padma went quiet. Draco shoveled eggs onto his plate. Hermione sipped her coffee.

Once they'd eaten, the four prefects split up, Hannah and Padma taking the inside of the castle while Hermione and Draco went out to make a circuit of the castle perimeter, each still carrying a mug of coffee to combat the morning chill.

“So,” Hermione asked, “how are you liking *Fellowship of the Ring*?”

“I gave up,” Draco said shortly.

She frowned. “What do you mean you gave up?”

“I stopped reading.” He sipped his coffee.

“Draco.”

“One, that's not how magic works—”

“That's not the point and you know it.”

“—two, it reads like Binns wrote it, and three, I have better things to do with my time than read about a group of mates walking across the countryside to destroy a horcrux. If I wanted to, I'd just write Potter asking him what you lot did last year.”

Hermione sighed. “It's not a horcrux, but I see your point.”

Crookshanks leapt down from a window ledge in front of them. Hermione bent down to pet him while he twined around her legs. He then tried to twine around Draco's legs but he shoved the cat away with his foot.

“Don't kick him,” Hermione scolded. “He likes you.”

“I didn't kick him, I moved him,” Draco corrected. “And I have no idea why he likes me, it's not mutual.”

Hermione poured the last couple drops of her coffee out into the grass, pocketed her mug, and scooped up her cat to snuggle him. “I genuinely think he likes you because of your condition.”

Draco frowned. “Your cat is insane.”

She shrugged. “He likes dogs. He likes you, he likes Lupin and Sirius, he likes Fang.”

“Hagrid's useless mastiff?” Draco scoffed.

“Fang is not useless!”

“Even Hagrid says Fang is a bloody coward, don't even try.”
Hermione shook her head and shoved Draco with her elbow. He shoved her back. She snorted, grinning.

When they'd finished their rounds, they went their separate ways, Draco to History of Magic, Hermione to Charms where she slid into her seat next to Ginny just as the bell rang and Professor Flitwick started in where they'd left off on Tuesday discussing wandless magic. From the seat behind her, Ernie Macmillan poked Hermione in the arm. She glanced over her shoulder. “Hm?”

“Hannah told me you invited Draco Malfoy to sit with the two of you and Padma at breakfast?” he asked accusatorially.

“Yes, I did,” Hermione said shortly and turned back to her notes, bulleting everything Flitwick was saying even though she already knew most of it.

Next to her, Ginny mumbled, “Here we go….”


“Nothing's going on.” Hermione half turned around in her seat. “I've just gotten to know him some over the summer, he's apologized to me for being such a arse the past few years and been trying to make amends. As Neville so astutely put the other day,” she continued with a pointed glance at the boy in question next to Ernie, who looked up startled from his textbook, “now is a time to forget and forgive.”

“Please don't pull me into this,” Neville pleaded quietly.

Talking over Neville, Ernie pointed out, “I don't see Ginny being all buddy buddy with Malfoy. Didn't you all live together this summer?”

“I hold a grudge like nobody's business, ask my brothers,” Ginny said, turning as well. “I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to be welcoming.”

Ernie took a breath and opened his mouth but, at the front of the room, Flitwick cleared his throat. “Miss Granger, Miss Weasley, Mr. Macmillan, Mr. Longbottom, I'm sure whatever your discussing is very important, but unless it's to do with wandless magic I must ask that it wait until after class.”

With a groan, Neville put his face down on his desk.

As soon as the bell rang at the end of class, Hermione swept her things into her bag with her wand, shouldered it, and turned on Ernie all in one movement. “Trust me, I know exactly how awful Draco Malfoy can be. But I also know there's more going on than just the surface we all get to see and I know he's trying so hard to be better. He doesn't want to be like his father; he doesn't want to be the person he's been, but he can't turn that all around overnight, especially if no one will give him a chance. So, whatever anyone says,” she shot a glare at Hannah, “behind my back or to my face, I'm going to treat Draco as the friend he has become.”

She strode out of the room, stepping deftly around Justin Finch-Fletchley in the doorway. He called after her, “You know your 'friend' habitually calls both you and me mudblood, right?”

“I know he used to,” she shot back. “And I know if you confronted him about it now he'd grovel. He's not very good at it, but he tries.”
Neville caught up to her and tugged her by the elbow. “Let's go, Hermione…”

“He spent the last few years scared for his life,” Hermione continued. “I know what that's like, Justin. You know what that's like. And I know that when a person is afraid for their life they can and will do things they wouldn't otherwise. Things they will look back on for their rest of their lives wondering if they could have done it differently. It's bad enough when you know you were in the right.” She sucked in a sharp breath.

Ginny caught her by the other arm and pulled her away with Neville. “Breathe, Hermione,” Ginny said. “You might not be wrong but I really don't think you're helping.”

“He might have made up with you,” Neville pointed out, “but that doesn't mean he's made up with everybody, and while I don't think it's right for anyone to tell you who you can and can't be friends with...” he shook his head, “you really can't blame anyone else not reaching out to him. He's hurt all of us, you know that.”

“I do…” Hermione conceded.

“For some people there's just no making up for what he's done, and that's honestly fair.” Neville shrugged.

Hermione sighed. Ginny patted her back as they neared the D.A.D.A. room. “You really are too idealistic for your own good sometimes.”

“No, I'm not!” Hermione objected.

Neville leveled a skeptical look at her. “S.P.E.W.”

“House elf rights is an important cause.” Hermione crossed her arms. “I have a partial draft of a fair employment contract for the Hogwarts elves that I'm going to submit to McGonagall as soon as it's finished.”

Ginny and Neville shared a look then started laughing.

“What?” Hermione demanded.

“What?” Hermione demanded.

“Never change, Hermione,” Neville said fondly. “Please never change.”

When Draco got to D.A.D.A., there wasn't an open seat near Hermione so he sat between Harper and Daphne instead. He could feel all the Gryffindors sneaking glances at him. Hermione caught his eye and mouthed, “Sorry.”

He shrugged one shoulder and busied himself with his quill and roll of parchment. Lupin got up and clapped his hands together. “I believe you finished up discussing necromancy with Professor Lee, so do we want to start on the Taboo curse, or the jinx that was on this teaching post? Show of hands for Taboo?”

A grand total of five people raised their hands.

“Post jinx it is,” Lupin concluded, waving his wand at the chalk.

As class ended, Lupin grabbed a pair of envelopes off his desk. “Ginny, Draco, hang back a second?” He held out an envelope to each of them. “Madam Hooch trusted me to get these to you.”
“Thanks,” Ginny chirped.

Draco took his note, said a quick “Thank you,” and went after Ginny. “Hey!”

She paused, turning back.

“Why were the Gryffindors all staring at me?”

“He hope went on a bit of a rant about you deserve a chance to redeem yourself,” Ginny said coolly. “Most people don't agree.”

“Oh.”

“You asked.” With a swish of her long red hair, she went off down the hall.

Draco shook his head, looked down, took a breath, and headed to the Great Hall for an early lunch. On the way, he unfolded his note and read it.

Quidditch Captain,

I'm pleased to announce that the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch has been fully rebuilt, as such, the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will be held as usual. The first game will be between Gryffindor and Slytherin on Saturday, the fourteenth of November. Time has been scheduled for each team to use the pitch for tryouts next weekend, the seventeenth and eighteenth of October.

Gryffindor………………Saturday, 9:00 – 12:00

Slytherin……………….Saturday 1:00 – 4:00

Hufflepuff………………Sunday, 9:00 – 12:00

Ravenclaw……………..Sunday 1:00 – 4:00

I look forward to this season, good luck to you all.

~R. Hooch

Draco folded the note closed just as he reached the Hall and looked up at the empty Slytherin table. “Well, shit.”
That evening, Draco stood to the side in the Slytherin common room and did a quick headcount. Sixteen, not including him. “Hey,” he called loudly, prompting every eye in the room to turn to him, “where's Mafalda and Simmons?”

“In their room,” the Carrow twins said together.

“Go get them. We need to have a house meeting.”

The other Slytherins glanced at each other, murmuring amongst themselves, while one of the twins disappeared through the beaded curtain to the girls' dormitory. She returned a moment later with the two forth years in tow.

“Alright.” Draco took a breath. “Madam Hooch sent letters out to all the quidditch captains today. We're having the Inter-House Cup just like any other year. We've been given next Saturday afternoon for tryouts. Problem is, there's so few of us it's going to take almost half our house to field the team, so I need everyone to try out.” He paused. “Except Daphne.”

Daphne crossed her arms defiantly. “Why not me?”

Astoria turned to her sister, mouth agape. “I don't know if you've noticed, but you're in a wheelchair.”

“So? Beaters' brooms have stirrups.” She looked directly at Draco. “I'm trying out. If I suck, don't put me on, but if I'm good, well, we need the best seven Slytherins out there, no matter who that is, right?”

“Right,” Draco agreed. He squared his shoulders. “So, everyone, you have a week to buy or borrow a broom if you don't already have one.”

~*~

Sunday afternoon, Hermione found Ginny sharing a patch of sun in the courtyard with Crookshanks and another cat, a tiny chocolate-tipped fluffball of a kitten. She had quill and ink and a pilfered spiral bound notebook laid out on the stone in front of her, half a page filled with her tight, crisp cursive.

“Hello there,” Hermione said, dropping to sit next to Ginny. She picked up the kitten carefully. “Who's this?”

“One of the Ravenclaw girls found her in the owlery this morning,” Ginny said without looking up from her writing. “She's been following your tiger around, and he's been following me around, so I'm pretty sure this is where the idea that witches have cat familiars came from.”

Hermione chuckled and set the kitten in her lap. “What are you writing?”

“Letter home.” Ginny set down her quill, swung her feet around to sit up, and stretched. Her back popped. “Letting the family know I've survived the first week, nothing has exploded, there've been
no mysterious disappearances, all that good stuff. Also figured Harry and my brothers would want to know quidditch is happening."

"Probably, yeah." Hermione patted down her pockets for a pen. "Here, tear me off a couple pages, I should write home, too. To Grimmauld Place and Australia."

By the time the sun had started to dip low into the early twilight of Scottish autumn, both girls had stacks of letters to send off, roughly a page per person back home. The cats had wandered off when their patch of warm sunlight had abandoned them. Hermione capped her fountain pen, they stuffed their letters into envelopes, and headed for the owlery.

As they walked, Hermione asked, "Are you excited to run tryouts next weekend?"

Ginny grinned. "Yes. It's just so normal, I love it. You're sure you don't want to try out, just for fun? It's your last year."

Hermione shook her head. "I'm absolute rubbish on a broom. First year when we had flying lessons I managed to smack myself in the face with my broomstick at least once every class."

Ginny snickered—and walked straight into Lupin turning the corner to the owlery staircase. "Oh! Sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," Lupin said, steadying her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Ginny assured him.

"We were just on our way to mail some letters home," Hermione said, holding up her three envelopes. Ginny held her pair of envelopes up, as well, and waved them a little.

"Well, wouldn't you know," Lupin chuckled. He untucked two envelopes from under his arm. "I'm doing the same."

"Great minds," Hermione laughed, and the three of them mounted the stairs together.

As they sent borrowed school owls out into the evening with their letters, Ginny sighed. "I should get an owl."

Lupin shrugged. "As long as you have access to a post office you really don't need your own."

Hermione reached out to pet Neville's owl, Carlisle, where he was blinking at them from a perch. "A post office or friends with owls. You know Harry would let you use Jarnsaxa."

"That's true," Ginny conceded.

There was a high-pitched squeak and every owl in the room swiveled its head to stare at its source. The tiny kitten from earlier was standing in the doorway. Ginny ran to scoop up the little cat.

"You are going to get yourself turned into bird food," she chided. "You are too small to be hanging around all these owls; they will eat you."

Lupin stepped past her to the stairs. "Good luck convincing a cat it can't go somewhere."

Midweek, there was a staff meeting. Remus watched McGonagall rub her temple. "So, what I'm hearing," she said, "is that the second years are behind in almost every subject."
“Yes,” Ramsey confirmed. “The older students have enough of a foundation that they seem to be able to make up for last school year being...” he trailed off.

“A sick joke?” Professor Sprout suggested.

“Something like that,” Ramsey agreed. “The second years, though, are pretty much having to start over.”

“In the case of Defense Against the Dark Arts,” Remus said, “they're just starting.”

“I expect we'll be cleaning up from last year for many years to come,” McGonagall said. “I'm afraid the best you can do is just teach them, try to catch them up but don't push them too hard. It would be a mistake to burn them out.”

“I'm also running into a problem in that at least half my students seem to hate Potions as a subject on principle,” Ramsey continued. “In particular, several of the fourth and fifth year Gryffindors have been cutting class. Only about half of them showed up last week and the pattern is continuing this week.”

“I'll talk to them,” Remus said. “Give me a list of who's been skiving, I'll let them know they have detention.”

“Thank you.”

“In other news,” McGonagall said, “Professor Lee, you had something to announce?”

“Yes.” Professor Lee folded her hands. “I'll be holding a Q and A about muggles and muggle culture evening of the twenty-third. I'd appreciate it if everybody, especially the core subject teachers, would encourage the kids to come to it. Muggle-born kids too. My experience isn't universal, I'd love them to come add their perspectives to the conversation.”

McGonagall shuffled the sheaf of parchment in front of her. “That Saturday, the twenty-fourth, is the first Hogsmeade weekend. Heads of house, let your students know, make sure you have permission forms from your students, especially the third years. I think that's everything we need to attend to, so you're all free to go, except, Remus, I need a word.”

Remus stepped aside with her as the rest of the faculty made their way out. He folded his arms over his chest. “I have a guess what this is about.”

“I've had a few letters from parents,” McGonagall said softly.

“That's what I thought,” Remus sighed.

“Most of them have been easy enough to pacify with my assurances that I trust you, that you're safe, and that the students like you. I suspect the students themselves may be defending you to their own parents in their letters home. Loraine Abberley's mother, though, is proving implacable. She's demanding to meet with you.”

Remus took a breath, looked up to the ceiling, and exhaled. “Is she free Saturday morning?”
Chapter 13

After breakfast Saturday, Remus wished the Gryffindor quidditch hopefuls good luck as they trudged en masse out to the pitch, then made his way back to his office to grade quizzes and wait for his meeting with the disgruntled Mrs. Abberley. As the appointed time for their meeting approached, he stood and stepped out into the hallway. She appeared around the corner being led by Orla Quirke, one of the Ravenclaw prefects. Orla gave a little curtsey and excused herself. Remus held out an arm, indicating to Mrs. Abberley to go in ahead of him, put his hand on the door to pull it closed, thought better of it, and stepped over to his desk.

“Please, sit.” He gestured to the chair on the other side of his desk as he settled into his own seat.

She did as invited and eyed him for a long moment. “I know what you are.”

Remus smiled indulgently. “Yes, well, my condition hasn't been much of a secret for some time now, especially since the Daily Prophet identified me by name as a werewolf a few years ago.”

She glowered and studied him another long moment. “Do you have children, Professor?”

“No, I do not. None of my own at least, though I would have liked to. My life just hasn't worked out that way.”

“Because of what you are?” she sneered.

Remus set his jaw and met her gaze. “In part, yes.”

“Because you'd be an unfit parent?”

“No,” he said firmly. “Because the stigma attached to lycanthropy tends to make it hard for me to establish interpersonal relationships. And because a fear of passing on my condition to any children I could hypothetically sire has made me extraordinarily reluctant to try. My fate is one I'd not wish upon my worst enemy, let alone my son or daughter.” He lay his arms on his desk, leaning forward. “I presume you bring this up to imply that if I were an unfit parent I would also be unfit to teach. I assure you, your concerns are unfounded. I have a few bad days a month when I'm tired, sore, and grumpy. As a woman, I'm sure you can relate. I have lived with my condition since I was small child, I am well versed in managing it. I pose no threat to my students, your daughter included. I have no more to say on the subject. If you still take issue with the situation, I suggest you take it up with Professor McGonagall, the headmistress, who, incidentally, hand picked me for the post, and I know has been in correspondence with you already, attempting to assure you that I am safe.”

A muscle in Mrs. Abberley's cheek twitched. “I'll not have a dangerous beast hanging around my little girl.”

Remus arched an eyebrow. “I still suggest taking this up with Professor McGonagall. Perhaps you should request Loraine be removed from Care of Magical Creatures if you're so concerned about her being exposed to 'dangerous beasts.’”

“That is not what I meant.”

“I know.” Remus turned his palms up. “At the same time, I know that she is in far more danger from the subjects of that class than she is from me.”
“Werewolves are dangerous!” Mrs. Abberley slammed her hand on the desk.

“You think I don't know that?” Remus asked sharply. “How do you think I became a werewolf? I was attacked when I was three years old, bitten nearly down to the bone. I almost died. The price of survival was to live my life cast out and harassed, constantly in fear I'd be the victim of a hate crime or—worse—that I'd do to someone what was done to me. Within the past decade, since the invention of the Wolfsbane potion, the latter is much less of a concern. If I did not think it was safe, I would not be here. Since the incredibly bigoted anti-werewolf laws of ninety-three were repealed this summer, I have as much right to teach at this school as any other member of staff. Now, I will not sit here and have you insult me. If you have specific questions and concerns, I will gladly address them. If you don't, I must respectfully ask you to get out of my office.”

Mrs. Abberley looked down at her hands. “I'm sorry,” she said quietly. “I—I just need to know my little girl is safe. She's all I have left. My son, her older brother, Roland, he died last May.”

“In the battle?” Remus asked gently. She nodded. He traced a fingernail along a groove in the wood of his desk. “I'm very sorry for your loss. I've lost or seen terribly injured too many people who are dear to me, some of them children. To some degree I understand your pain. I certainly understand your caution. I want to keep all my students safe.”

Mrs. Abberley nodded, eyes down, then she shook her head. “I still don't understand how you can teach, being what you are.”

“I enjoy my job,” Remus said honestly. “I love children. Hogwarts was a place of safety for me when I was young and I hope to help provide that for younger generations. I always wanted to teach, but I didn't think I would be able to. The invention of Wolfsbane potion changed that. So I teach proudly and gladly, regretting every class I miss due to my condition, eager to return as soon as the moon begins to wane.”

Mrs. Abberley looked out the window. In the distance, little dots zipped around the quidditch pitch.

Out on the pitch, Ginny sat astride her Blitzgewitter broomstick, watching her potential new teammates run drills. A fourth year boy ran into the stands for the third time and Ginny cringed. “Mauer, you're done,” she called. He started to protest but she shook her head. “No, land. Learn to fly where you're headed and try again next year.”

Mauer landed with a squelch in the damp grass and skulked off the field past Dean, who was taking notes for Ginny. Dean gave Mauer a clap on the shoulder as the boy made his way off the field. Ginny sighed, tucked back a strand of hair that escaped from her braid, and blew the whistle she had hanging around her neck. “Okay! Everybody who wants to be Keeper, line up at the bottom of those goalposts.” She summoned the quaffle and caught it easily in her gloved hands. “Everyone else, line up here at center field.” She waited to be obeyed. “Cool. Trent, you're up first.” She tossed the quaffle to the first would-be chaser in line. “Don't let Graham past you. Go.”

Graham tucked his head down, quaffle clutched to his chest, and sped toward Trent guarding the goalposts.

Just before noon, Ginny landed next to Dean. She waved to the remaining hopefuls all chattering excitedly, broomsticks thrown over their shoulders, making their way off the pitch. “I'll post the team roster before the end of the week!”

A few of them flashed thumbs up. Ginny returned the gesture, then turned to Dean. “Let's go nick
butterbeer and sandwiches from the kitchens, hide somewhere, and make some initial decisions.”

“Sounds good.” He looped his arm through hers. “Did I just become team manager?”

“You sure did.”

After lunch, all of Slytherin house headed out to the quidditch pitch, lead by Draco Malfoy. Once there, he pulled on his gloves and announced. “You all have ten minutes to warm up, then I want everyone in the air at the end of the pitch.”

Draco went through his own warm ups, keeping an eye on his housemates all the while. He mounted his sleek new Blitzgewitter and did a quick circuit of the pitch. The broom responded so easily it felt as though he only had to think to steer and the flight was smooth as silk. He watched from afar while Astoria and Harper helped Daphne onto a broom and strapped her feet into the stirrups, which Draco really wasn't sure was allowed but, it wasn't strictly forbidden by the rules, either. He'd double checked.

When everyone had gotten off the ground, they started with sprints—Draco watching for the speed and control required by the sport. The four second years definitely didn't have it, but Draco decided it was best to keep that to himself for the time being. To his surprise, Daphne was doing quite well, leaning to shift her weight in the turns to change direction more quickly.

They ran drills. Draco had everyone take turns practicing trying to score and trying to guard the hoops. When Runcorn's turn came to try his hand as Keeper against Mafalda, he did manage to block her, by taking the quaffle to his face, which nearly knocked him off his broom. Draco sped over and helped Runcorn land.

“I'm sorry!” Mafalda called down, one hand over her face, the other clutching her broom.

“He'll be fine,” Draco called back. He drew his wand, set Runcorn's nose, then conjured a handkerchief and handed it to him for his nosebleed. Runcorn pressed the handkerchief to his face, glowering, and tryouts continued.

With a few minutes left before their cutoff time at four, Draco wrestled the bludger they'd been using back into the ball case and buckled it in. He stood, breathing hard, kicked the case closed so the latch clicked, ran a hand through his hair, and turned to the rest of the Slytherins, who were all watching him. He took a breath. “That's all for today.”

“That's it?” Zabini asked as Draco went past him to put the balls away.

“That's it,” Draco confirmed.

“You're not going to tell us anything?” Harper pressed.

“When have you ever gotten results the day of tryouts?” Draco held out his arms. “It doesn't happen. I'll let you all know.”

They all made their way back to the castle. Draco turned away from the group toward the stairs. Noticing, Morag stopped. “Malfoy, where are you going?”

“To drown myself in the prefects’ bathroom and decide our fate for this quidditch season.”
Draco sank into the bath up to his chest in fine seafoam bubbles that smelled strongly of cedar. He took a breath, dunked himself under the water, surfaced, wiped his hair and the suds out of his face, and pulled himself up on the edge of the enormous tub to stare at the blank roster sheet he'd charmed to the stained glass window, just under the pretty blond mermaid who was batting her eyelashes at him. He reached for his wand and waved it at the quill and ink sitting on the windowsill so it lifted and filled his own name in next to *Seeker*.

He sighed and sank back into the water up to his chin. He knew who he didn't want: not Runcorn, not any of the second years, and not Simmons, since she shrieked and ducked any time a ball got within three feet of her. He tapped the butt of his wand against his lips.

He heard the door to the hall open and he instinctively hid his left arm under the bubbles just in case whoever it was came around the frosted class partition that separated the tub from the rest of the room, but they just used the bathroom, washed their hands, and left. Draco let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

After much pondering and lip chewing—most of it while letting conditioner sit in his hair—he'd chosen his Keeper and Chasers, but that left the Beaters. He sighed and pushed away from the wall the float on his back. He had to face it, Daphne was the best pick—not only was she one of the few who'd actually hit a bludger when it came at her, but she'd smacked it clear out of the pitch. She might not've been able to walk, but her upper body strength was formidable. He needed to talk to Madam Hooch.

Draco pulled himself up out of the tub, set it to drain, rinsed under one of the gilded shower heads set high into the near wall, dried and dressed, then leaned on a sink and ran a hand along his jawline, feeling the near-invisible whiteblond stubble there. He could leave it another day.

Ginny buried her face in the mattress in front of her and groaned dramatically.

“Why is it so hard to make decisions?” she bemoaned, muffled. Neville patted her shoulder sympathetically.

She was in the boys' dormitory, sprawled across what had been her brother's bed, surrounded by Dean's notes, talking in circles with Dean and Neville about who should be on the team while the kitten from the owlery chased Neville's new remembrall across the floor. A note spell-o taped to the outside of the door forbade entry to anyone who had tried out.

“You know,” Dean said, “you don't have to finish this tonight. You could put it down, come back to it tomorrow.”

“I know.” Ginny flopped over to stare at the ceiling, feet propped up on the headboard.

“You've been at it for hours,” Neville pointed out. The remembrall rolled to a stop against his foot, and the smoke swirling inside it turned red. He frowned at it, then gave it a slight kick, sending it under the bed where the kitten dove after it. “You probably should take a break, sleep on it.”

Ginny put her hands over her face and sighed. “Maybe. It's just—everyone left on the list is actually really good and I don't know any of them well enough to pick based on nepotism.” She sat up with a huff and glared at the boys. “Why couldn't you two have tried out?”

Neville looked startled. “Me? Are you joking? I nearly killed myself first day of flying lessons first year, and I've hardly been back on a broom since.”
She looked to Dean, who held up his hands defensively. “Nope, no. I love quidditch, I do, but I want a calmer year for myself than being on the team allows for. I am perfectly happy to be your glorified secretary. Too late now, anyway. Everyone knows I didn't try out, if you put me on the team it would be obvious nepotism and there would be a riot.”

“Gyah, fine,” Ginny conceded.

There was a knock at the door then Hermione's head popped in. “Are you all planning to stay holed up in here all night, or are you going to come down to dinner?”

Ginny rolled off the bed, dropped onto her feet and half skipped to the door, leaving the boys behind her to look at each other in bemusement.
Sunday morning after a rather late breakfast, Draco paused on his way to the staff room to look out a window toward the quidditch pitch, where he could just make out the Hufflepuffs having their tryouts, free from the overcast skies and intermittent drizzle the Slytherins and Gryffindors had had to contend with. He sneered and continued on his way.

He had just raised a hand to knock at the staff room door when it opened. Professor Ramsey stopped, startled, midway through folding a pair of reading glasses to the collar of his robes. “Malfoy. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Professor,” Draco managed, equally startled. He glanced past Ramsey into the room. “I was looking for Madam Hooch.”

Ramsey stepped back, out of the way. At the far end of the room, past the long table, Madam Hooch was situated in an armchair. She was holding an open issue of Seeker Weekly, but she had looked up at Draco, one eyebrow raised. “Well, come in then. What is it?”

Draco made his way over to her. Ramsey let the door close and followed, having apparently changed his mind about leaving. There was no one else in the room except for Professor Binns, asleep, floating about an inch above a chair by the fireplace, which Draco couldn't help but suspect was the one he had died in.

“I checked the rules,” Draco began, “and as far as I can tell, there's no reason a player couldn't be bound to their broom, but I've also never seen it done and I know I'd be inclined to call it cheating if I did see it, so I'm wondering what your stance is, or if you know of any precedent.”

Madam Hooch frowned and closed her magazine around her thumb. “Why would you want to bind a player to their broom?”

Draco glanced down then made himself look back up and meet her piercing golden gaze. “Daphne Greengrass tried out, and she's good, but she can't fly without having her feet strapped to the stirrups.”

Madam Hooch nodded slowly. “At least not safely, I'm sure. You are correct that it isn't specifically forbidden, though under most circumstances I wouldn't allow it. In this case, if it's what's needed to compensate for Miss Greengrass's injury...I'll make an exception. Good of you to come check with me, first, though. Uncharacteristically deferential of you, Mr. Malfoy. I like it. Ten points to Slytherin.”

With a snap of paper, she flicked her magazine open and resumed reading as though she'd never been disturbed. Draco blinked.

“I'm glad to see you putting such thought into the house quidditch team,” Ramsey said softly. “I hear we haven't won the cup since ninety-two.”

“Haven't won the cup since I've been on the team,” Draco said bitterly.

“It's your last chance,” Ramsey noted.

Draco squared his shoulders and gave his head of house a hard look. “I intend to win.”

“That's what I like to hear.” Ramsey grinned. He nodded to the door. “Do you have a moment? I
have some things I need to attend to in my office but I've been meaning to speak with you.”

Draco hesitated half a breath, then nodded. “Of course. Sir.”

Ramsey lead the way out of the staff room and headed toward the dungeons, Draco following a step behind. Ramsey slowed just enough to make it impossible for Draco to walk at a comfortable pace without catching up to him.

“I'd meant to come watch try outs yesterday,” Ramsey said casually, “but some pixies got into the potions' cupboard and created quite a mess. I heard you got the entire house to try out.”

“I did,” Draco confirmed.

“How's everyone doing?”

Draco shrugged. “Fine.”

Ramsey gave him a curious look. “I somehow doubt that.”

“There's tension,” Draco amended reluctantly, “within the house, but there's always been tension. My first year, there wasn't so much, but ever since the whole Chamber of Secrets ordeal, Slytherin house has been…discordant, for one reason or another, every year. That hasn't changed and I doubt it's gong to.”

“I see,” Ramsey mused as he let them into his office. He had evidently replaced the lamp as the office, which Draco remembered always being dim and rather dank, was now bright and warm—almost cozy in a disconcerting way, with the shelves of specimens gone and a plush armchair shoved into the corner. Ramsey came around his desk, where he had out what looked like a particularly thick catalogue with a partially filled out order form across it. “I'd think,” he said, putting his reading glasses back on, “that right now, with there being so few Slytherins and with everything you've all gone through, would be the best chance to mend that discord, and also probably when everyone most needs the security and comfort afforded by house unity. Don't you agree?” Ramsey looked at Draco overtop of his thick-rimmed, square-ish spectacles. His tone was light and casual, but there was something sharp and probing to his gaze that made the fine hairs on the back of Draco's neck and on his arms prickle uncomfortably.

“Maybe so, but I don't see how I—”

“You're prefect and quidditch captain, Mr. Malfoy,” Ramsey pointed out. He looked down at his order form and continued filling it out. “You have quite a bit of standing.”

“Sir, I really do not have the kind of power over my housemates that you think I do.” Draco took a breath. “I might have, a few years ago, but that was before—before I and my family alienated pretty much everyone we know. At this point, I am personally responsible for much of the division within Slytherin, I—”

“Which makes you the perfect person to set about mending that division,” Ramsey said firmly, talking over Draco and cutting him off. He looked up at Draco. “Possibly the only person who can.”

At a loss, Draco stared at him. He balled his fists. “That's not fair.”

“No. It's not.” Ramsey took off his glasses. “Nothing in real life is fair. You know that. You're not stupid. But you have fucked up, a lot. I might not have been here to witness it, but I assure you word has gotten to me, and I know of your family, your father, and the things you've done. You're
lucky that you have a chance to un-fuck anything, so I suggest you stop whining and take initiative. As prefect and captain you have responsibilities to your schoolmates. It's your job right now to do right by them, to help them. I support you in that, I do believe you are capable of it. I realize it's a tall order, that it puts you in an awkward position given your history, but you have a duty given the titles you hold, and I dare say a moral duty to be a better fucking person than your father—"

“"I'm trying to be!” Draco snapped.

“Then act like it,” Ramsey said shortly. Draco gaped at him, openmouthed and fuming. Perfectly calm, Ramsey pulled his glasses back on and returned to his form. “I'm happy to be a resource for you, but I don't suffer shirkers, fools, or those who dodge responsibility. In other news, I'll have your potion ready for you Tuesday of next week.”

Draco stood rooted to the spot, breathing hard, utterly speechless. Eventually, he managed to grunt an acknowledgement then turned and marched out of the office. He didn't pay much mind to where his feet were taking him, just walked until he had more or less calmed down. He was still mentally kicking himself for the gut reaction that had told him to threaten to tell his father on Ramsey when his foot hit something small and bright orange that went tinkling crystalline across the stone floor of the corridor. Frowning, he picked it up.

It was an earring, made out of tiny glass beads carefully sewn together into the shape of a radish, and he knew instantly who had dropped it. He cast around, there was no one but him on that stretch of hall, and he was sure he hadn't passed her on his way, so he jogged to look around the next corner and called, “Lovegood?”

There was a bit of a scrabbling sound from outside one of the windows, which stood open allowing in a cool breeze, then Luna Lovegood popped up from below it, hanging onto the sill. “Hm?”

Draco's forehead crinkled. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Our charms homework.”

“Out there?” he asked incredulously.

She nodded. “I like sitting on the roof sometimes.” She tucked a lock of hair that was a bit too short to stay in her bun behind her ear. “What did you want?”

“Right. I found your earring.” He held it up.

Her eyes widened and she felt at her earlobes reflexively. “I hadn't realized I'd lost it.” She clambered in through the window, took it from him, and put it on. She glanced up at him. “Thank you.”

He nodded and looked toward the window. She studied him a moment then followed his gaze. “It's quite nice out today. The wind is rather nippy but the slate is warm from the sun, so it's comfortable to sit out there. This is the best place to go out on the roof, since these windows are only a few feet up from the roof below—everywhere else like that is too steep.”

“There's a place like that at my house,” Draco said slowly. “The window of my old playroom opens onto the roof of the kitchen. I snuck out there a couple times when I was little, before I got caught.” He rubbed absently at his collarbone then sneered. “I really just want to gut the whole place now, though.”

“I'm sure you do,” Luna said very quietly. She was staring at a spot on the wall, eyes focused far away, and she had gone pale.
A sudden, cold jolt of fresh anger and guilt struck Draco and he stepped toward her. “I am so sorry for what happened to you in my house,” he blurted. “I should have done something to prevent it, or stop it, or help you somehow, but I didn't because I was scared. But I should have. And I'm sorry.”

She was looking at him, stunned and a bit bewildered.

“And,” he continued, eyes stinging for reasons he didn't understand, “it all seems so stupid and trifling with everything else, but I'm sorry for all the horrible names I've called you, and for—I've encouraged people to take your things and hide them and that was wrong, and for that time I had Crabbe throw your bag in the lake, and there's probably a hundred other things I ought to apologize to you for that I don't remember.” He took a breath, rubbed at one eye, and looked down, taken aback by himself.

For a long moment, neither of them moved or spoke, then she took his hand, making him jump, and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I know you could have been killed if you'd tried to help me at your house, so, maybe you should have tried, but I can't blame you for not. As for those other things...you weren't the only one doing them, but you are the only one who's ever said sorry for it. Thank you.”

He shook his head, pulled his hand away, retraced his steps to the nearest boys' bathroom, leaned on the sink, and tried not to be sick.
When the usual flurry of owls came swooping into the Great Hall with the mail during breakfast Monday morning, two of them attempted to land in front of Draco. He had to snatch up his goblet of orange juice to prevent it from being spilled as they vied for position. With his free hand, he took each owl's letter and shooed them away.

One of the letters was from his mother, the other—in its charcoal grey envelope, sealed with silvery wax embossed with an illuminated M—was from the family winery, presumably the executive clerk, Mr. Lavigne. Draco had never gotten anything from the family business addressed to him before; everything had always been sent to his father or, when his father was unavailable, such as the last time he'd been in prison, to his mother. Now, though, his mother was only semi-available, he supposed, and he was of age, and—it occurred to him—now that he was of age, given the wording of the family charter, since he was a son born into the Malfoy line, control of family assets very well might have skipped over his mother entirely and gone straight to him with his father incarcerated.

“That looks important,” Astoria observed from across the table, nodding to the envelope.

“Family business,” Draco mumbled. He popped the seal with his thumb and unfolded the note inside. Below the Malfoy Apothecary letterhead, it read:

Young Master Malfoy,

I regret not having contacted you sooner since your taking over as head of the Malfoy family, but certain upheavals outside of my control robbed me of the time to do so. I am pleased to report that despite the events of the past several months, business operations are continuing to run, albeit at a reduced pace as we have lost a number of employees. The rehiring process is underway, I will keep you apprised of progress in that arena.

Between the staffing issues above described and last year's regrettable damage to the vineyard from which we are still recovering, I fear this year's yield will be rather less than normal. I hope, however, that this will not ultimately result in a loss as this year's vintage being scarce should drive up its value.

We are, though, going to be facing a loss if we cannot address the fact that no one is buying the wine. There have only been four orders since last May, all of them under 200 galleons, two of them under 50. I unfortunately do not know what is causing this astonishing lack of demand. I will let you know of any changes in the situation and of any discoveries on my end that may lead the way to a solution.

I look forward to working with you.

Respectfully,

D. Lavigne
Draco sighed and pocketed the letter. He'd never had much interest in the family business and he had less now than ever that his childhood suspicions that Mr. Lavigne was a blithering idiot had been confirmed. He took a bite of quiche and opened the letter from his mother.

_My Dearest Draco,_

_I fear my last letter to you may have somehow gotten lost in the mail, or else your reply did, as I haven't heard from you. In case you didn't get my last letter, let me say again that I've been moved to a safehouse with a few others who will be testifying in the upcoming trials. I still can't come and go as I please but it is much more comfortable here. You'll have to write to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for instructions on how to visit when you have your school holidays._

_How is school going? I'm sure you're doing well in your studies, of course, you've always been so bright, but I imagine things at Hogwarts are just as shaken up as in the rest of the wizarding world right now._

_I miss you. I hope you're well._

_WITH LOVE,_

_Your Mother, Narcissa_

Draco pocketed that letter too and grumpily took another bite of quiche. He should have responded to the last one she'd sent. Ignoring them wouldn't stop them coming, it would just upset her, which he genuinely didn't want to do. The problem was he didn't really want to talk to her, either.

He looked up to see Hermione walking towards him from the Gryffindor table, three parcels of varying sizes and a letter in her hands. She reached the Slytherin table and held the smaller two packages out to him.

“Jarnsaxa and Pig came from London with loads of letters for everyone,” she explained. “These came for you.”

“Thank you, Hermione,” he said, though he didn't feel very grateful, and took the parcels from her, keenly aware of the other Slytherins watching the exchange. He nodded to the other mail she was still holding. “What are those?”

“For Professor Lupin. It's really amazing how much Jarnsaxa can carry, she's such a big bird.” With that she strode off to the staff table.

Draco looked down at the parcels she'd handed him.

“You're popular today,” Blaise noted.

Draco didn't respond. He tore open the smaller of the two packages and a silver signet ring set with tiny, pale green stones around the side fell out into his hand. The flat of the ring bore the Malfoy coat of arms, precisely engraved. There was a brief note more or less crumpled into the parcel as well:
Found this in the back of a closet. Best guess is it was your great-great-great-great grandfather's, pretty sure he almost married my great-great aunt Elladora. Figure it's technically yours now.

-S.O.B.

Blaise had leaned over to snoop at Draco's mail. “S.O.B.? he asked, laughing. “Who signs their letters 'son of a bitch?'”

“It's 'Sirius Orion Black,' you moron,” Draco snapped, shoving the note and the ring in his pocket with his other mail. “And don't read over my shoulder.”


“He's my cousin,” Draco said exasperatedly. “I lived at his house over the summer. I've told you all.” He shook his head, flipped over the last parcel, which was slightly squishy, and opened it along its neatly taped seam. Inside was a finely knitted green cap monogramed in white with his initials, and another note:

_Draco,

I hope you don't mind me using you as an excuse to finally use up all my green yarn now the weather's really cooling off.

Hope you're doing well.

_Love,

Molly Weasley_

He stared at the note, the hat limp in his hand. Blaise leaned in again and scoffed. “Molly Weasley? Sirius Black I can understand, but why on earth would that fat old cow be—”

“Shut up,” Draco snapped, shoving the note in his pocket with the others. “You shut up, Zabini.”

Blaise gaped at him. “You always say—”

“I said,” Draco corrected sharply, gesticulating with his hat. “I said an awful lot of stupid nasty things that were mean spirited and unwarranted. She knows all about them, I'm sure, but she graciously doesn't hold that against me, which I frankly do not understand. The past three months she's been better to me than I've ever been to her—and better than you've been to probably anyone the entire time I've known you, Blaise, so you shut your stupid mouth.”

He did, glowering.

Up at the staff table, Remus, along with Professors Lee and Flitwick, were being regaled by Professor Sprout with the latest in her ongoing battle with the local herbivorepopulation when Hermione stepped up to the table, respectfully demure. “Excuse me?”
“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Hermione said quickly, “but these are for you, Professor Lupin.” She set a flatish round package about the diameter of a bludger and a letter down in front of his place. “And good morning to you all.”

They all returned her greeting and she skipped off, back to the Gryffindor table.

“As I was saying,” Professor Sprout continued. Remus tuned her out and picked up his mail. The letter was from Sirius, and he tucked it into his waistcoat to read later in private—he didn't think Sirius would send anything too sensitive where it would go to the kids first, rather than straight to him, but just in case. The package, though, worried him for a slightly different reason: he recognized George Weasley's handwriting on the wrapping, differentiable from his twin's by the relative swoopier-ness of his capital letters. Carefully, he removed the paper. The package was a plain, label-less biscuit tin with SAMPLE ONLY scrawled across the top in what looked very much like muggle permanent marker. With cautious curiosity, he cracked the lid open. When nothing exploded or screamed, he opened the tin the rest of the way. There was a slip of parchment, folded quarter, sitting atop a bed of rather splotchy purple gumdrops. He unfolded the letter.

Our Dearest Darlingest Loony Lupin,

You may recall our conversation regarding Berty Bott's egregious oversight in not producing a wolfsbane flavour. Since the stuff's so incredibly rank, we've decided it would make a fantastic flavour for a (literal) gag candy. These gummies are our best attempt to date. We would greatly appreciate your input on whether they're horrendous enough, or if it would be more accurate to their inspiration to make them worse.

Your favorite entrepreneurs,

Fred Weasley

&

George Weasley

Remus chuckled to himself and replaced the lid on the tin. While he was eating was not the time to test the twins' concoction.

~*~

Since he didn't have an eight a.m. class on Mondays, Draco went up to the library after breakfast, took out parchment and pen, and set about responding to his letters. First, to his mother:

Mother,
Your last letter wasn't lost. I've been too busy with start of term and having been unwell to respond. I apologize.

I'm glad to hear you have more comfortable accommodations. I'll be sure to visit during the school holidays.

School is going fine.

He hesitated, handhovering just above the page. He could tell her about the new teachers, about how few students there were, being the only prefect, quidditch tryouts, Daphne, the ring Sirius had just found. A thousand other things. He could. He didn't. He signed the letter, “Your son, Draco,” and took out another sheet.

Mr. Lavigne,

No one is buying because the entire wizarding world hates the Malfoy family right now. Take the name off the bottle.

Other than that, as I am currently occupied finishing my schooling I'm in no position to be running a business. Address all further correspondence to my mother until told to do otherwise.

Respectfully,

Draco Malfoy

He went up to the owlery and whistled for Euphrates, who swooped down from a high perch with silent grace and landed nearby. Draco reached out to stroke the eagle owl, earning a soft, contented hoot.

“Hello, Eu,” he said quietly. Most of the other owls were asleep at this hour. He ran a fingertip over Euphrates's beak and got an affectionate nip. “Do you want to see Mother, or Mr. Lavigne?”

Euphrates blinked at him and hooted once.

“That's what I thought.” He gave Euphrates the letter to his mother and watched him fly off, then found a school owl that was awake to take his response to Mr. Lavigne. He checked his watch. There was still plenty of time before he had to get to Transfiguration so, deciding quickly, he took the shortest route he knew back down to the dungeons and pinned up his finalized quidditch roster on the bulletin board in the common room before going to class.

~*~

Remus took his lunch break in his office. Between bites of absolutely delicious pot roast, he eyed the stack of quizzes he really ought to have been grading. Instead, he took out his letter from Sirius. It was the first opportunity he'd had to read it.
Moony,

I don't really want to start off a letter saying I miss you because that's about the sappiest thing I can think of, but I fucking miss you. I think I may have developed separation anxiety. I blame prison. In any case, by Fluer and Molly's reckoning my moping got so bad last week they've started giving me assignments to keep me busy. Fleur also said a bunch of other stuff I didn't catch because you know my French has never been all that good. Molly went so far as to threaten to teach me to knit. I think she's made a hat for Draco. She'd started on something else this morning. I have no idea what it is, but it's blue and the yarn's soft so it'll be comfortable whatever it is, whoever it's for.

Anyway, I've decided I'm renovating the whole damn house. Might as well, since we started fixing up the ground floor already. I'm trying to work out how to get all my old posters off the walls upstairs. The permanent sticking charm seemed like a good idea when I was thirteen. My mother swore I'd regret it. For once she might have been right, though I hate to admit it. I'll figure it out. Might have to do like we did with the portrait in the hall and tear the whole damn wall out.

I'm redoing the master suite for us once I finally clean all the straw and animal bones out from between the floorboards. I can't wait to tear off the wretched puce wallpaper. At least I'm pretty sure that's what color puce is. What do you think about a dark purple?

Harry and Ron have been working with Arthur at the Ministry. Harry has some sort of official internship with the Department of Muggle Relations but Ron's just helping, I think. Arthur's really gearing up for a lot of reform, reaching out to all the witches and wizards he can think of who grew up muggle for their perspectives, but he's forbidden the boys from disturbing Hermione with it while she's busy with school. Thought you could have a word with that new muggle studies teacher you mentioned.

I'm sure you're busy. Between what I've heard from you, Hermione, and Ginny and what McGonagall was talking about when she came by with your job offer I know this year is weird. The full moon being right at the start of term, too. You know I wish I could change these things for you, and I hate that I couldn't even be there to keep you company. I guess you had the furball but he's not much fun, the little git.

I'm waiting ever so impatiently, I assure you, until we can next see each other. It had best be in a context I can drag you off somewhere and have my way with you, because even if it isn't I'm going to, I swear.

In place of a signature, there was a large inky pawprint in the bottom right corner. Remus couldn't help but smile. Finished with his food, he vanished his place setting, made himself a cup of tea, and experimentally tried one of the twins' gummies. He grimaced and spat it out. He scribbled out a quick response to them first.

Messers Gred and Forge,

Your gummies are of properly atrocious flavor. Good work. I may keep these on my desk just to watch the faces of anyone fool enough to take one. I must admit I'm rather impressed you've managed to recreate the taste after having only tried it once. Unless you went so far as to make...
yourselves a batch of the potion for comparison, in which case I'm impressed both with your dedication and your potion making ability.

Your favorite lycanthrope,

R. J. Lupin

He checked the time before penning his response to Sirius. He didn't want to be late to his own class and he could only write so fast.

Pads,

I miss you too. Honestly, I'd think you'd know by now there's no point pretending to me that you're not an enormous sap, I've known the truth for years. It's sweet, really. At least I think so, and I dare you to tell me whose opinion on the matter is more important than mine.

I think it's good for you to keep busy, and the house needs fixing. Aren't the walls in your old room plaster? If I remember that correctly you should be able to chip the plaster out from behind the posters and take the posters with it, then patch the walls. That seems like less trouble and mess than ripping the walls out entirely.

That wallpaper is chartreuse, not puce. Puce is more of a dark reddish brown and actually a rather nice color. You're absolutely right, though, the paper in that room is hideous and has got to go. Purple sounds good to me. I quite like the idea of sharing the master suite with you. Makes me downright giddy. One thing though, if you damage the built in bookshelves up there I will have your head, Black, mark my words.

I'm glad to hear the boys are doing something productive with their time and I'm sure Arthur needs the help. He's been working so hard ever since Kingsley took office. I really think the poor fellow could use a holiday but I don't dare suggest it—I don't think I have the attention span for the long list of reasons why he can't afford to take one I'd be sure to get. I can certainly talk to Professor Lee. She's already inviting all the muggle-borns at the school around to help her run a Q+A for the rest of the students who don't know a damn thing about muggles. I'll see if she wants to mention it there.

This year is definitely weird. There are so few students, the castle feels uncomfortably empty. Sinestra and Sprout have both had the ghosts of students sit in on a couple of their lessons. I haven't, thankfully. I don't know what I'd do. I'm not sure I could handle it. There's three of them, all underage Ravenclaws who snuck back to the battle. I won't lie to you, I've been avoiding them. I feel bad but I can't face them. If I get a good enough look at any of them to recognize them I expect to break down for a while. The students are all dealing with the same sorts of things and it's just wrong. They're all so young. For fuck's sake at least you and I managed to hit twenty before our friends started getting murdered around us. I'm teaching twelve year olds who keep getting distracted by thestrals flying out of the forest in view of my classroom windows.

That's what I wish you could change for me. Forget the full moon, I've lived with the transformations this long, I'll live with them for however much longer. This month wasn't that bad. Only two nights, and next month is the same. I went on a run with the furball in the forest the first
night. I'll have to tell you more about that in person. The second night I actually managed to get some sleep.

I look forward to seeing you. I hope that's a promise, by the way, you dog.

Yours,

Moony

He folded up his letters and sealed them, then got his things together to go teach his class, with plans to swing by the owlery before dinner.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't plan for this to be an epistolary chapter, but that's what it turned into, and honestly I really enjoyed writing all the letters!
Draco’s last class of the day was Muggle Studies. They were in the middle of a lesson about muggle homes, during which Professor Lee had been explaining electricity, when she asked, “Now, do any of you know if your homes are wired for electricity?”

Most of the class looked around at each other uncertainly.

“Do you have light switches?” Professor Lee pressed.

Slowly, Draco raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Malfoy, you have switches at home?” she asked, beaming.

“Well, not at Malfoy Manor, no,” Draco said carefully, “but at my cousin's house in London there are.”

“Would you tell your classmates what the switches are like?”

“They're just pairs of buttons set into a plate on the wall.”

Something in Professor Lee's expression went oddly rigid. “Pairs of buttons?”

“Yes,” Draco confirmed, uneasy.

“How old is this house?” she asked sharply.

“Victorian. Maybe turn of the century,” Draco answered quickly. He was trying to work out what he could possibly have said to set Professor Lee on edge like this.

“Do you know if the house has been rewired?”

“I'm not sure what that means,” Draco admitted. He could feel the rest of the class staring at him. “I don't think so, though. It's been rather neglected.”

“Okay, then.” Professor Lee took a deep breath and let it out. “Those are push button switches—the name makes sense—and they are very old. Not original to the house, probably; I think that kind of switch became common in the twenties, but still very old. If the wiring is as old as the switches, which it sounds like most likely is, then it is not safe. I highly suggest you write your cousin and send it out today, explaining that no one should use the electrics in that house until it has been fully rewired by a professional electrician. I think now is probably a good time for us to talk about electrical fires.”

After class, Draco went down to the common room, half hoping to get a start on the lengthy Transfiguration essay he'd been assigned that morning before dinner. His hope of that vanished, though, when he stepped into the room and it became immediately apparent that the rest of the house had noticed the quidditch roster. Everyone who had already gotten in from their classes was crowded around the bulletin board, chattering excitedly, and each person who came in hurried to join the throng as soon as they stepped over the threshold. Draco hung back and set his bag on the low table next to his favorite armchair.

Lexus Mafalda broke away from the crowd and launched herself at him, tackling him in a hug that
nearly sent him sprawling.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she squealed into his shoulder. She released him, stepped back, and seized his hands. “You won't regret picking me, I swear. I will be the best Chaser you have ever seen.”

She was pulled away by her fellow fourth year, Simmons, leaving Draco slightly dazed. Meanwhile, Nicholas Runcorn had shouldered his way through to the front of the small knot of bodies in front of the roster and was running his finger down it over and over, reading and re-reading the seven names, looking for his own. He slammed the flat of his hand hard on the bulletin board with a loud thud, followed by the quiet tinkling of several pins falling to the floor. Everyone went quiet, looking at him.

“Malfoy!” he roared, turning to glare daggers. Everyone between the two boys hastily stepped out of the way. Draco locked eyes with Runcorn and didn't move. Runcorn stalked towards him.

“What is this?” he demanded with a sweeping gesture behind him.

“The quidditch roster,” Draco said like it was obvious, because it was.

One of the other third years quietly said, “Nick, don't….”

“Why's my name not on it?” Runcorn snapped, ignoring his roommate.

Draco crossed his arms. “Because you didn't make the team.”

Runcorn's face contorted. “I didn't and the cripple did?” He jerked a thumb at Daphne. “Bullshit!”

Next to her sister, Astoria puffed up threateningly.

“She's better than you,” Draco said shortly. He fiddled casually with the cuff of his left sleeve. “You broke your face attempting a block I could have made, and let's just say there's a reason I don't play Keeper.”

“I made the save!” Runcorn shouted. “If it was such a sorry throw, you wouldn't have put Mafalda on the team, but you did! And I blocked it! You just have it out for me!”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Draco scoffed. “I've been more or less in the middle of a row with Zabini since term started and he still made the team. Sure, I think your attitude is shit, but if you played worth a damn, I wouldn't care! You're only a third year, you have four more years to make the team.”

Runcorn stamped his foot. “I should have made it this year!”

“If you had put in a good showing at tryouts, you would have!” Draco snapped back. “But you didn't! As Captain, I have final say in who's on the team and who's not, and you're not. Get over it.”

Draco saw Runcorn go for his wand and drew his own before the younger boy had the chance to finish the movement.

“Petrificus Totalus!” Draco shouted, whipping his wand at Runcorn. The boy's limbs snapped to his sides and he went completely stiff, except for his face, which was twisted with rage and an increasing amount of panic as he slowly tipped over forward. The thick rug was probably the only thing that saved him from another broken nose. Draco sighed, made a show of putting his wand away, walked over to Runcorn, rolled him over with his foot, and looked down at him. “For as badly as you seem to want to get me to think you're brilliant, you keep doing a spectacular job of
convincing me you're too stupid to breathe.” He bent down close to Runcorn's face. “I know how to duel, you twit. Don't play.”

The next moment, Professor Ramsey stormed into the common room. Draco straightened up quickly.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Ramsey snapped. His eyes settled on Draco. “Malfoy, did you do this?”

Draco opened his mouth to speak, but Daphne pre-empted him. “Runcorn picked a fight with him, sir,” she said quickly, wheeling forward. “Then Runcorn went for his wand. Draco beat him to the draw, that's all.”

Ramsey looked down at Runcorn, whose face had turned quite red, looked at Draco, then at Daphne. “Tell me what happened.”

She did, all but verbatim. Ramsey pinched the bridge of his nose, took a deep breath, deliberately pulled out his wand and swished it at Runcorn, reversing the body-bind. “Get up.”

Visibly seething, Runcorn scrambled to his feet. He kept his mouth shut, though. Probably because Ramsey looked like he was actively restraining himself from cursing someone or something out of existence, both linguistically and magically.

Ramsey took a breath. “Runcorn, you are not entitled to a position on the team. You're being a brat. Insulting your classmates, your upperclassmen? Screaming at a prefect? Please tell me, what world do you think you live in that behavior like this acceptable? Well?”

Runcorn grit his teeth and looked away.

“It's not acceptable,” Ramsey said firmly. “At all. And you're old enough to know that. As for drawing your wand on a fellow student, depending on what you had done that could have been grounds for expulsion. Not only that, but instigating a duel is just about the stupidest thing a wizard can do. Dueling is dangerous, Runcorn, and it can easily be lethal. So anyone with a lick of sense is going to avoid getting into a duel if at all possible. If it can't be avoided, they end it as quickly and neatly as possible—which Malfoy did, because he has dueling experience you do not, which makes your decision to try to fight him even stupider. You should count yourself lucky you didn't end up hurt. You're a good student, you have a good brain in your skull.” He poked Runcorn in the middle of the forehead with a blunt, gentle finger. “Use it. Think before you act or speak. Learn respect for your peers. Look around you. This is your house, these people are your family while you're at school. We're a very small family right now. If you alienate these people, who do you have left who will be there for you when you need someone? Can you afford to have no one?”

“No, sir….” Runcorn mumbled reluctantly.

“Now apologize to Miss Greengrass and Mr. Malfoy.”

“Sorry for calling you a cripple, Greengrass,” Runcorn said, continuing to mumble. Daphne quirked an eyebrow at him and crossed her arms. He turned to Draco. “And… I'm sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Ramsey prompted.

Runcorn sighed. “I'm sorry for disrespecting you as Quidditch Captain and for shouting.”

“And?” Ramsey asked.
“And for trying to draw my wand on you,” Runcorn added.

“Good.” Ramsey gestured between Draco and Daphne. “Do the two of you accept Mr. Runcorn’s apology?”

Draco shrugged. Daphne said, “Yeah, it’ll do.”

Ramsey smiled. “Wonderful.” He clapped Runcorn on the shoulder. “Fifty points from Slytherin and you have detention with me every evening for a week.” Runcorn squawked a protest but Ramsey ignored him, pivoting to face Draco. “And ten point from you, Malfoy. You're an authority figure and of age, you ought to be the adult in a situation in comparison with a third year. Runcorn was being being unreasonable, and all things considered you handled the duel quite mercifully, but you should have de-escalated the situation before it ever came to magic.”

Draco balled his fists but nodded curtly. “It won't happen again, sir.”

“See that it doesn't.”

Ramsey stayed in the common room until it was time for dinner, congratulating those who had made the team, asking how everyone's classes were going, even helping the sixth years with part of their homework they had due to him the next day since one of the Carrows asked him to explain something. Then the whole house went up to the Great Hall together, Ramsey wishing them all a good evening when he left them to take his seat at the staff table.

Draco didn't feel like talking to anyone, so while he ate he pulled out parchment and started writing a letter to Sirius explaining what Professor Lee had said about the electrics in Grimmauld Place, then, as an afterthought, thanking him for the ring. Then, as even more of an afterthought, asking him to thank Mrs. Weasley for the hat. After dinner, Draco turned his steps toward the owlery to mail this letter as well, and found himself walking behind Lupin. He jogged a few paces to catch up. Hearing footsteps, Lupin looked back over his shoulder. He smiled with a hint of amusement. “Good evening, Draco.”

“Evening,” Draco responded.

“I heard a very interesting story at dinner tonight,” Lupin said slowly, still smiling. “Something about a duel with a third year?”

Draco groaned and rolled his eyes. Lupin chuckled. “Runcorn is such a brat. You never heard that from me, though.”

“Never heard what from you?” Draco said coolly.

Lupin's grin widened. “No idea.”
Chapter 17

Friday morning, Remus woke to find a strange bird sitting on his windowsill, feathers ruffled by the wind, scratching at the glass. It looked rather like a spindly-legged crow with bright orange feathers around its body and a white stripe along each of its black wings, and it had a bright purple envelope clamped in its sharp beak. Curious and puzzled, Remus opened the window to let the bedraggled thing in, away from the buffeting breeze. It landed on his nightstand and dropped its letter, which began to smoke faintly from the corners like a howler. Remus took several hasty steps back just before the envelope burst open in a shower of confetti and the Weasley twin's voices chorused through the room, “YOU MADE THE MAP! You made the Map! You made the Map!”

“I can't believe we never put it together,” Fred's voice said.

“We've heard you and Sirius call each other by the names you signed the damn thing with,” George's voice continued

“We are such morons,” Fred's voice lamented, “but I guess we just hadn't thought about it. When you used the word 'messers' we remembered. In any case—”

“YOU HAVE TO TELL US HOW YOU MADE IT,” both voices crowed, then added, “Sirius won't do anything but laugh at us.”

“Says it's mostly your handywork anyway,” George's voice sighed.


The letter exploded once more, reducing itself to a pile of tiny dots of purple paper on the floor. The bird whistled happily. Almost laughing, Remus shook his head, patted Dantes, got dressed for the day, and went down to breakfast. He sat next to Professor Lee.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” he said, scooting his chair in.

“Good morning, Remus,” she returned brightly, reaching across him for a carafe of juice. She picked it up just in time for a small barn owl to land where the carafe had been and drop a letter on Flitwick's plate. “How are you?”

“Well enough,” Remus poured himself coffee. “I've been meaning to talk to you about something, though. I'm good friends with Arthur Weasley, head of the Muggle Relations Department at the Ministry. He's working on setting a fairly extensive overhaul in motion with regards to policy on use of muggle artifacts, interaction with muggle communities, things like that, and he's wanting input from as many muggle-borns as he can get in contact with. I know he'd like to hear from you, if you have any thoughts, and I wondered if you'd want to mention it to the students at your Q and A tonight, if they have any suggestions.”

She hummed curiously and twirled her spoon in her fingers. “Oh, I definitely have thoughts. I will mention it to the kids, too. I'm glad that, for once, the Ministry is actually taking the experiences of those of us who straddle both worlds into account. It's about damn time, honestly.”

Remus grinned a little. “Arthur wholeheartedly agrees.”
Draco spent History of Magic scribbling notes to himself about quidditch plays with Zabini and Harper reading over his shoulder, Blaise in particular giving more feedback than was actually helpful. Around the fifth time Draco hissed, “Shut up, Zabini,” Daphne gave up her pretense of ignoring them and full on moved over a desk to be at Draco's other side. Binns didn't seem to notice, but their Ravenclaw classmates did. Several of them, including Padma, glared pointedly at the little knot of Slytherins. Exavior was glaring, too.

“What are you doing?” Daphne asked quietly.

“I'm trying to figure out what we're doing at practice on Sunday,” Draco muttered. “These two are not helping.”

“I was just saying that,” Blaise started.

Draco flicked his wand at Blaise under their desks and hissed, “Silencio.”

Zabini made a rather feeble wheezing sound, clutched at his throat, and glared at Draco, mouthing what certainly looked like swearwords. Harper bit his lip to keep from laughing. Draco took a deep breath and turned calmly to Daphne. “I'm going to need you to either come to practice early, or stay late.”

She nodded. “I can do that.”

“Good morning, Hermione, Ginny, Dean,” Remus greeted as the Gryffindors filed in. Neville came jogging in the next moment, hugging his bag to his chest as the strap had broken. Remus cringed sympathetically. The rest of the Gryffindors, then the Slytherins arrived—Draco looking smug and Zabini looking even grouchier than usual. It took Remus about half a second to decide he didn't want to know. “Good morning,” he said loudly, quieting the chatter. “We've gotten rather ahead of the seventh and eighth year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, which is bad news for my scheduling, but good news for all of you as I've decided to treat today as a bonus day before we move on to curse breaking. You have three options for what we use this extra hour for: you can take a crack at the Patronus Charm, or practice it if you know it already; you can help me dispatch a nest of bogarts that a very distressed fifth year just informed me have taken up residence in one of the curtained cases in the trophy room; or, in light of recent events in the Slytherin common room, we could have some dueling practice.”

Layla Gardner, a blond Gryffindor seventh year, raised her hand and didn't wait to be called on, “I'm just gonna put it out there for those of us who don't really know how to duel, there's at least, five, people in this class who do know how, and have, in, like, life and death circumstances. Even supervised, in a low-stakes setting, I don't really wanna mess with that.”

Several students looked around at their classmates, nodding.

“About the bogarts,” Dean asked, “just how many is a 'nest'?”

“If the fifth year who reported them to me is to be believed,” Remus said with a slight smirk, “at least six. That seems improbable to me, though; I've never seen more than three in one place.”

Dean whistled, leaned back in his chair, and held one hand up. “I'm putting a vote in for patronuses.”

Remus grinned. “Who agrees with Mr. Thomas?”
Almost the entire class raised their hands.

“I guess I'll be handling those bogarts by myself later.” Remus clapped his hands together. “How many of you can produce a full bodied patronus?”

All the eighth year Gryffindors, about half the seventh years, and none of the Slytherins raised their hands, which provided a perfect opportunity to make the Gryffindors and Slytherins work together, something Remus knew very few of them were inclined to do without prompting. Each of the Gryffindors who could produce a full patronus wound up with one or two of their classmates, demonstrating, coaching, talking. Fay Dunbar said something that made Emmet Exavior snort so hard with unexpected laughter he started coughing. Remus smiled to himself—then immediately bit back a sigh as he heard Draco snap at Hermione, “It's not working!”

“Are you even trying?” Hermione snapped back, and Remus decided it was time to intervene.

“Yes, I'm trying!”

Remus put a hand on Draco's shoulder, and the boy jumped. Remus ignored it. “What's the matter over here?”

Hermione held her hands up. “I don't know what else to tell him. You focus on a happy memory and you cast the spell. It's not that complicated.”

“It's not complicated,” Remus agreed coolly, “but it is difficult. Hermione, you naturally have intense focus and a sharp memory, both of which this charm requires. Now, Draco?”

“Hm?”

“Take a breath.”

Draco did as told, glowering. “Now what?”

“Take another one and try to be less surly—producing a patronus requires tapping into positive emotion, you'll only make it harder for yourself by allowing frustration to get the better of you.”

Draco eyed him sideways. “How, exactly, are you supposed to tap into positive emotion while staring down a dementor?”

“Force of will.” Remus clapped Draco's back. “You're nothing if not stubborn, I think you'd manage once you've learned to do the spell. I suspect your problem may lie in your choice of memory.” Remus stepped away and said, loud enough for the class to hear, “If you're not having substantial results, try to think of a stronger memory.”

A few minutes later, Remus was talking to Neville, Ginny, and Andrew Trent about using patronuses to send messages when the bickering between Hermione and Draco spiked again and Draco stomped out of the room.

Remus bit back a swear, announced, “Hermione is in charge until I get back,” and followed Draco out. The hall was empty, but the nearest men's room door was swinging slightly on its hinges. The next second, a third year Hufflepuff boy fled the bathroom, glancing back over his shoulder and tripping over his own feet. Remus sighed and went in. Draco was leaning on a sink, glaring at himself in the mirror. Remus cleared his throat. Draco's eyes flicked to Remus's reflection, then he shut them and bowed his head.

“I can't do it.” Draco's voice was quiet and cold.
Remus walked over, footsteps echoing slightly off all the tile and stone. He rubbed Draco’s back warmly. “I’m sure you can—”

“I don’t have any happy memories,” Draco insisted, head snapping up.

“I highly doubt that,” Remus said smoothly. Draco started to protest but Remus cut him off. “Look at me.”

Draco straightened up.

“Pretty much every memory I use to conjure a patronus is one of me and my friends when we were young—Sirius before he was tortured and broken, Lily and James before they were murdered, Peter before he ruined all our lives. All of those memories are bittersweet in hindsight and the bitterness can be overwhelming. For the spell to work I can’t think about any of that, I have to remember and make myself relive how I felt at the time. You have to find a moment, any moment, when you were happy, no matter when it was or what else was going on around it, and put yourself back there.”

Draco looked away, swallowed, and nodded. Remus fished in his pockets, pulled out a chocolate bonbon, and handed it to Draco. “Here, eat this.”

Brow furrowed, Draco looked down at the bonbon, up at Remus, then back at the bonbon. “How is this not melted?”

Remus shrugged. “I know I’m the sort of person who just carries chocolate around so I’ve put insulating charms on the pockets of half my clothes. Eat it, you’ll feel better.”

Draco rolled his eyes but dutifully unwrapped the blue cellophane and popped the bonbon in his mouth.

“Ready to rejoin class?”

Draco tossed the bonbon wrapper in the bin. “Yeah, sure.”

By the end of class, Draco had just barely managed to conjure a very feeble, wispy, formless patronus that seemed to just piss him off more. Hermione saying, “No, really, that was very good! You’ve made so much progress, hasn’t he, Professor Lupin?” didn’t seem to be helping.

When the bell rang, Draco strode off with a huff. Daphne glanced over at Hermione. “Is he okay?”

Lips pursed, Hermione shrugged.

“Are you seriously asking if Draco Malfoy, pratlord extraordinaire, is okay?” Dean asked. “Has he ever been okay?”

“No,” Exavior answered shortly on his way out the door,

Daphne looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“I think he’s just frustrated,” Remus said. “Give him a while to cool down, then maybe give him some encouragement. He could use it.”

Daphne nodded, settled her bag in her lap, and wheeled out. The rest of the class trickled away after her. A few minutes later, the next class— the Hufflepuff fourth years and their two Slytherin
cohorts—started trickling in, whispering urgently amongst themselves.

Remus shuffled his notes on his desk, worked on mentally switching gears over to book teaching from the readings he'd assigned on Wednesday, and silently prayed to the powers that be that this class didn't go like he was expecting it to.

“Alright, everyone settle down,” Remus chided indulgently as the last of the class found their seats. “Books out, but don't open them just yet. Did everyone read chapter nineteen like they were supposed to?”

Maybe half a dozen out of the thirty-four students nodded. Most were looking anywhere but at him, though they'd all obediently set their closed textbooks on their desks. Only one, Marian Posely, a girl after Hermione's own heart, spoke: “Yes, Professor Lupin.”

“Thank you, Miss Posely,” Remus said with a smile that absolutely was not forced. He flipped his own copy open to page 400, thumbed back a few pages, and lay his palm over the chapter's opening illustration, which he hated. “Can anyone tell me what chapter nineteen is about?”

The majority of the class fidgeted awkwardly. Marian raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss Posely?” Remus prompted.

“It's about werewolves, sir.”

“Yes, it is. Five points to Hufflepuff.” Remus looked around the room. “Can anyone give me another term to describe what this chapter is about?”

Hamish Faulker coughed quietly. Marian raised her hand.

Remus nodded to her. “Yes?”

“Lycanthropy.”

“Very good. That's another five points to Hufflepuff.” Remus walked around his desk. “And who can describe for me, briefly, what constitutes lycanthropy? Other than Miss Posely.”

Marian, who had raised her hand again, laced her fingers together in her lap.

“Anyone?” Remus asked. No one moved or spoke up and no one was looking at him. With an over dramatic sigh, Remus shook his head. “If no one else can answer, I guess Miss Posely is the only one who did her homework—I'd hate to have to give the rest of you detention, and on a Hogsmeade weekend, but if you didn't do your reading, I don't know what other choice I have….”

Suddenly a dozen hands shot into the air.

“Ah, that's better,” Remus said brightly. “Miss Simmons.”

Simmons lowered her hand and took a breath. “Lycanthropy is, well, a person with lycanthropy turns into a werewolf at the full moon.”

“Yes. Five points to Slytherin for Miss Simmons.” Remus took a step back to sit on the edge of his desk. “Lycanthropy is the condition of involuntarily transforming into a werewolf while the full moon is above the horizon and the sun is not. Persons affected by lycanthropy are properly referred to as lycanthropes, but are almost universally called werewolves, even when not transformed. Technically, though, 'werewolf' only means the canid form. Someone describe that form and its
behavior for the class—Mr. Faulker, if you'd be so kind?"

Hamish looked up, startled, then glanced around in panic. “I don't think I know how to do that without being offensive, sir.”

“You're not going to offend me,” Remus said gently. He saw a score of silent conversations pass between deskmates around the room. He twisted to reach behind him and flip his book closed, then turned back and crossed his arms. “This is awkward,” he said simply and most of the class nodded, “but I promise it's far more awkward for you than for me. If I weren't comfortable talking about this, if I couldn't handle hearing how lycanthropy is handled in academia, we'd have skipped this chapter. Mr. Faulker, if you're worried about saying that werewolves are dangerous, that werewolves hunt humans—it's true. Lycanthropes know better than anyone how dangerous werewolves can be.” He paused, thinking, then asked softly, “Show of hands, and be honest now, you won't get in trouble, how many of you are scared of me?”

The students exchanged looks then, slowly, one by one, almost two thirds of them raised their hands.

Remus nodded thoughtfully. “Keep your hand up if you're more scared since reading the chapter.”

A few hands went down. Remus hummed shortly and pushed off from his desk. “Well,” he rubbed his hands together, “it's pretty clear you all know what a werewolf is, so there's little point continuing to quiz you on it—do make sure you know how to tell the difference between a werewolf and a true wolf, though, it will be on the test. Your textbook goes on a bit about how werewolves specifically target humans, seeking out people to attack. Many authors treat that as a defining characteristic of werewolves as much as the connection to the full moon, but I personally find the descriptions and explanations in frankly every textbook I've ever read somewhat lacking. To begin with, I must emphasize the point that a lycanthrope who is not being properly treated with Wolfsbane potion loses their mind when transformed—that's not to say that they've gone insane, but that their memories, their sense of self, is gone. They don't remember who they are or that they're human, anything about their life. They're operating entirely on instinct. How many of you have a pet dog at home? Or a cat, for that matter, at home or here?”

He waited for a response then nodded. “Enough of you, and I'm sure you've all at least seen someone playing with a dog or cat at some point in your lives. You throw a ball or a squeaky toy for a dog, cats get those bells and feathers on strings. They've been domesticated but cats and dogs are basically predators, so the way they play—chasing things, especially things that make noise—keys into a primal instinct known as the prey drive. A werewolf's prey drive—again, we're talking without Wolfsbane potion—is extremely strong, and happens to be mostly limited to humans. Werewolves do not consciously decide to target people anymore than you consciously decide to flinch when something gets thrown at your face.

“What Wolfsbane potion does,” Remus continued, “is suppress the prey drive and other wolfish instincts and allow the lycanthrope to remember who they are while transformed. Therefore, a werewolf treated with Wolfsbane potion is entirely safe to be around—they're essentially an animagus who can't freely turn back. And untransformed lycanthropes are no more inherently dangerous than anyone else.”

From the back of the room, Lexus Mafalda asked, “And you do take the potion, right?”

“I do,” Remus assured her. “One of the perks of working at Hogwarts is knowing I'll have access to it, thanks to Professor Ramsey. The stuff tastes horrible, but I would never choose not to take it.”

Class went a bit more smoothly after that. Even so, when the bell rang most of the class seemed
relieved and the usual rush out the door seemed particularly hurried. One Hufflepuff girl hung back though. Shy, quiet April Davis stepped cautiously toward Remus where he was standing behind his desk. She was chewing her lip and fiddling with the end of her braid. “‘Scuse me, Professor?” she asked softly. “Are we going to be on this same subject on Wednesday?”

“We are,” Remus confirmed, watching April for her reaction.

She glanced away, took a breath, and let it out, twisting her braid around her knuckles. “Would it be alright if, uh, if I missed class that day?”

“Can I ask why?” Remus was sure she hadn't been among those who had raised their hands that they were scared.

April looked over out the window, shrugging. “It isn't—it's nothing to do with, well no, it is.” She took another breath, pressed the heels of her hands to her forehead, exhaled, dropped her hands, and shook her head. “It doesn't seem right, this is your personal business and you're having to talk to all of us about things I can tell you don't tell people about. I just, it feels like we're reading your diary or something and I really don't like it, I don't wanna—” She held up her hands and folded them over her mouth.

Remus swallowed past a forming lump in his throat. “April, that's very sweet of you to consider, but I promise I don't say anything in class I'm not comfortable sharing with all of you. You're right that I don't often talk to people about being a werewolf, but it's because I couldn't safely, not because I personally want to keep any of it a secret.”

April nodded slightly.

“It's honestly nice to be able to talk about it, if I choose to.” He touched her arm gently. “Don't worry about me, alright? And come to class Wednesday.”

“Okay.” April sniffed. “Can I hug you?”

“You can hug me,” Remus said warmly. April threw her arms around him and gave him a firm squeeze, face smushed into his chest. She let go quickly, ducked her head, and scurried out, just pausing at the door to wave bye. Remus offered her a smile, then turned away from the door to stare at the papers on his desk. He swiped a thumb under his eye.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: we're catching up to how far I've written ahead, so I may have to move to an every-other-week posting schedule soon. I appreciate all your support with this story.

At the end of his school day, Draco sat in Muggle Studies, hunched into the corner of his chair, taking notes while Professor Lee explained the muggle postal service, only half paying attention to what he was actually writing. A hand reached into his field of vision and quickly drew a smiley face in the top margin of his notebook page. Draco looked up to glare at Astoria. She mouthed, “Sourpuss,” stuck her tongue out at him, then went back to her own notes.

Draco huffed.

“Your assignment,” Professor Lee was saying, “is to mail a letter via muggle post and receive a response. I have a post office box in the nearest muggle town which you will use as your return address. I'm hoping to get Professor McGonagall to agree to us all taking a field trip there next week so you can mail your letters yourselves, otherwise you'll give them to me to mail off for you. The letter can be to anyone you like—friends, family, a shop you bought a pair of shoes at one time, anywhere in the world. It doesn't matter so long as they have an address recognized and findable by the postal service. If you can't think of anyone, you may send a letter to any of my three brothers.

“I think that's all we have for today,” she concluded, glancing down at her watch. “Don't forget, I'm holding my Q and A in the Great Hall after dinner. It's five points extra credit in this class and five points to your house if you go.”

As they left class, Astoria poked Draco sharply in the side. “What's eating you?”

He batted her hand away. “Nothing.”

“It's clearly not nothing,” she said sternly. “You've been unusually grouchy, even for you, ever since lunch.”

“I am not usually grouchy,” Draco objected. Astoria just raised an eyebrow at him, shrugged, and skipped off down the hall.

The house elves were apparently feeling particularly artistic that day as dinner was almost entirely made up of hand-raised pies, each decorated with the house crest of whichever table they were on, or the school crest up at the staff table. Remus watched Madam Hooch carefully peel the Hogwarts H off a steak and kidney pie and pop it in her mouth with a self-satisfied grin.

Down at the Gryffindor table, Hermione was glaring coldly at an ornate pie while Ginny cut it and Neville said what was unmistakably, “Just eat.”

For his part, Remus ate more of what was ostensibly dessert than dinner, but it was mostly fruit,
and he was pretty sure he was physically incapable of getting fat, so it was fine.

As dinner drew to a close, McGonagall stood, tapping her wand against her wineglass to get everyone's attention. “As I'm sure you're all well aware,” she began with the barest hint of sarcasm, “Professor Lee's Q and A session will be starting here in the Great Hall momentarily. I can't imagine why any of you would want to miss it, but if you've decided not to stay, please finish eating and be on your way for the evening. Those of you who are staying, please finish eating and step to either end of the hall so Professor Lee can rearrange the furniture.”

With a great murmuring and clattering and scraping of seats, the student body got to its feet. Remus placed the tip of his wand to his throat and called, voice magically magnified, to his students, “A reminder to Gryffindor house, each of you who stays earns five house points.”

Down the staff table, Ramsey did the same, calling, “Each Slytherin who leaves loses five points.”

The other two Slytherin third years caught Runcorn by each arm and hauled him back away from the doors. Professor Sprout eyed Ramsey, who shrugged. All the Slytherins, most of the Gryffindors, and about half the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs stayed, along with most of the staff.

With several grand swishes of her wand, Professor Lee cleared the center of the hall—the tables stacked themselves neatly against the walls and the benches and chairs arranged themselves into two sections, facing one another. Standing in the middle, Lee clapped her hands together once. “Alright, would everyone with muggle background please sit over on this side of the room—that's if you're muggle-born or half blood and have grown up in touch with your non-magical relatives, been otherwise raised in a muggle or semi-muggle household for any other reason, or, for us older folk, if you've lived in muggle society since leaving school. Everyone with no muggle background, on that side of the room please.”

There was a general uneasy shuffling. Head held high, Hermione strode over and dropped onto a bench at the front of the “muggle” section. She crossed her ankles with a graceful flick, smoothed her skirt, and stared intently at her classmates huddled in front of the staff table. Ginny, Neville, and Dean all glanced at each other, then Dean went to sit next to Hermione while the other two took seats in the other section. The rest of the assembly followed suit, filing off into the two sections. The whole of Slytherin house headed for the “non-muggle” seats, Ramsey included, but Mafalda faltered, squeezed Simmons's hand quickly, then ran across the Hall to slide into a chair behind Justin Finch-Fletchly. Remus sat near the back of the muggle section; McGonagall sat next to him and gave a small, proud smile.

When everyone had settled, Lee grinned around at them all and gestured toward the muggle seats. “So, who's surprised at how full this section is?”

Most of the room raised their hands. Lee's grin widened. “I'm not. The wizarding world likes to act as though it's wholly separate from muggle society, but that's just not true. It's never been true. So many of us have at least one parent who is muggle—and plenty of us have muggle siblings, too. Depending where and how we grew up, we may have childhood friends who are muggle. And obviously, from time to time, we fall in love with muggles—that's how come so many of us are half-blood!”

That earned a laugh from the room. Lee continued.

“The wizarding world is a minority population,” she said soberly. “It's simply impossible for us to be as insular as we pretend to be, but a long history of bigotry and prejudice means we rarely if ever talk about our experiences existing in both worlds, so for the most part we, as a culture, don't realize how blurry the line between those worlds is. Now.” She conjured a sparkly baton stripped
with all the house colours and caught it in mid air. “I don't want to stand up here and lecture, so here's what we're gonna do: This is a talking stick. We're going to pass the talking stick around the non-muggle side of the room. If you have the talking stick, you get to stand up and ask a question —any question you can think of about muggles, muggle culture, growing up part muggle.” She pivoted on the toe of her loafer to face the other section of seats. “When someone asks a question, if you have an answer for it, raise your hand. I'll call on a few people to respond. I'm just moderating. Right now, it doesn't matter what year you are, what house you are, if you're student or staff, we're all peers and we're here to learn from each other.

“Any questions before we begin?”

A few people shook their heads. Lee held the talking stick out to the non-muggle side of the room. “Who's first?”

A Ravenclaw third year raised her hand, Lee handed her the talking stick, and the girl fiddled with it a moment, twisting it in her hands, before asking, “With the International Statute of Secrecy, do you have to obliviate all your muggle relatives or what? That all seems very contradictory from what I've heard.”

“Because it is,” Lee said, turning to the sea of hands that had shot up on the muggle side.

“Not your immediate family,” Dean explained after being called on. “My mum, my stepdad, my siblings all know, but my aunts and uncles and cousins don't and shouldn't, so there've been a few times that got pretty close. If my mum weren't quick as she is with making up excuses I'm pretty sure my nan would've needed her memory modified a few times by now.”

A Hufflepuff boy admitted that, “My brother's oblivated his mother-in-law a few times. Figure it's going to happen more now his wife's having a baby.”

Then McGonagall added, “Generally, the muggle parents or guardians, siblings, children, and spouse of a witch or wizard may know about their family member's magic. More distant family may not. It's less common now, but it used to be a witch or wizard who married a muggle wouldn't tell their partner at all unless they later had children who were magical themselves. Frankly, it was a bad custom and I suggest none of you do that to yourselves. If you can't trust them with your secret, or they can't love you as you are, they aren't worth marrying.”

She gave a short, self-affirming nod and folded her hands in her lap as the talking stick was passed to Andrew Trent.

“So,” Andrew began, “muggles go to school way longer than us, right? What do they do in school so long since they're not learning magic?”

“Science!” a Ravenclaw girl shouted from the middle of the muggle side without waiting to be called on. “But really.” She stood, prompted by Professor Lee to continue. “They—no, start school younger to learn a lot of the basics that wizard born kids learn at home. After that, History class is history class, and most all the other classes in muggle schools are skill building classes just like ours, but they're building skills for a world that runs on electricity and science and maths instead of on spells and enchantments.” She shrugged awkwardly and sat back down. Hermione twisted in her own seat to high five her.

“Couldn't have said it better myself,” Lee praised.

Ginny yanked the talking stick away from Andrew and asked, “Two part question: One, what is the thing from the muggle world you miss the most while you're away, and, two, what part of the
magical world do we all take for granted that you really think we should appreciate more?”

“I miss pencils,” Justin said without hesitation, “and we should all appreciate being able to
summon things more than we do. You don't realize how much time you'd spend just getting up to
get things, let alone looking around for them, without that.”

Behind him, someone softly mumbled, “Amen.”

“This is going to sound odd,” a young Hufflepuff said, “but I miss magic? There's a kind of willful
amazement to believing in magical things, things like unicorns or fairies, when the world around
you is completely convinced magic doesn't exist. And for me, at least, when I got my Hogwarts
letter I felt so, so, I don't know—”

“Vindicated?” Hermione suggested.

“Yes! Exactly. Vindicated that I was right all along, it's all real, but by now, and it hasn't even been
that long, all that stuff is normal. It's hardly even interesting anymore, especially with everything
that's happened, and that's sad. On which note, I think we all take for granted how cool it is that
we're all freaking wizards.”

After a few other answers—missing delivery pizza and telephones or living down the street from
most of their friends and classmates, taking for granted healing and repair charms or flight—Remus
stood to answer. “I miss muggle music and music culture, and, on a more serious note, I think that
now more than ever we should really appreciate how much less final death is for us as wizards and
witches. Through ghosts and portraits we can walk up to and hold conversations with, our moving
photographs that we can to some extent interact with, even the echos produced by the Prior
Incantatospell, we have ways to keep in touch with those we've lost, to find closure and solace, that
our non-magical fellows don't have. As much as those same things can be painful reminders, I
think it would be wrong to take them for granted.”

There was soft applause as he sat back down. McGonagall patted his knee once without looking at
him.

Later, Blaise Zabini got the talking stick and asked, “Why does it matter if I know any of this? My
family is all wizarding, all my friends are pureblood, I've never even wanted to go shopping in
muggle London or any of that. Why should I care? It's just muggle stuff, it doesn't have anything to
do with me.”

“Do you realize,” Draco drawled from the seat next to him, “that your attitude is exactly why we
just had war?”

Zabini glared at him. “It's an honest question.”

“May I, Elizabeth?” Professor Ramsey asked.

Lee nodded. “Be my guest.”

“You should care because of all of them.” Ramsey pointed across the room, clapping Blaise on the
shoulder. “This is their lives, and they are your community. They will be your colleagues, the
owners of the shops and eateries you'll frequent for the rest of your life, the teachers to whom you'll
entrust your children. One of those pretty girls may even be your wife. That's why we should all
care. Muggle issues don't just affect them, it affects their families, and we're their families.”

On the other side of the room, Mafalda stood up. “Besides, aren't we friends, Blaise?”
Zabini stared at her.

She shrugged. “I always thought we got along, and we're teammates now, right?” She glanced nervously at some of the many people looking at her and squared her shoulders. “My mum's muggle. And she's brilliant.”

Blaise huffed quietly and shoved the talking stick off onto Draco, who tried to quickly pass it to Luna, but she just blinked placidly at him. “You don't have anything you'd like to ask?”

“Oh, no. And if I think of anything later, I'll ask Hermione.”

Luna's lips twitched into a tiny smile, she took the stick from him, and stood to ask something about muggle pets.

The conversation continued until McGonagall cleared her throat to get Professor Lee's attention and noted, “We're approaching the younger students' curfew, Elizabeth. Best to wrap things up before Mr. Filch gets cross with us for keeping them out of bed.”

“Oh, yes. Of course,” Lee agreed. “If I can have the talking stick back? Thank you, Owen. One last thing before we call it a night: everyone with muggle backgrounds, especially those who live with predominantly muggle families, the head of the Department of Muggle Relations at the Ministry of Magic is asking for thoughts and input on reforming laws regarding Wizarding-Muggle separation. So, if you have anything to suggest or point out about how these laws affect you or could be improved, please write them up and bring them by my office at your earliest convenience.” She smiled warmly and vanished the talking stick. “Thank you all for coming. I hope this opens the door for you to talk more freely about these things amongst yourselves. Have a good weekend.”

As the group dispersed, the two sides of the room converged. Ginny and Hermione caught each other, both frowning,

“Did your dad mention to you about—?”

“No. You?”

“No. Nothing from Harry or Ron about it either. I wish someone would have told me earlier, it's going to take ages for me to write everything down,” Hermione bemoaned.

Neville slung an arm around her shoulders. “Weren't you working with Mr. Weasley's department over the summer, giving suggestions?”

“Well, yes, but—”

Meanwhile, Mafalda rejoined the rest of the Slytherins. Simmons pulled her into an awkward, sideways, walking hug. “You never mentioned to me about your mum!”

“I never mentioned to anyone,” Mafalda said.

“How were you in school last year?” Draco asked, brow furrowed. “If you have a muggle parent, you weren't allowed under You-Know-Who's rules.”

“Well, no, but since attendance was mandatory for everyone else, not coming would have been as good as announcing it,” Mafalda pointed out. “My mum left the country to stay with her parents. If anyone asked, my dad said my mum's a foreign witch. She is foreign, I'm half Swedish, so it
checked out.”

“No wonder you were so jumpy last year,” Astoria said softly.

“Yeah,” Mafalda breathed. “I really thought I was gonna die.”

Simmons gave her a squeeze. “Oh, Lexus, I wish I’d known….”

Mafalda shrugged and shook her head. “I couldn't tell you.”

“Remus?” McGonagall asked as the tables set themselves right behind her.

“Hm?” Remus changed direction midstep to turn back to the headmistress.

“Could you come up to my office with me? I have a letter I've been meaning to send to Zonko's, asking them to restrict sales of a few items to underage students, but I having gotten around to mailing it, and I think they may be more likely to heed it if it shows up with an authority figure attached.”

“So, you want me to hand deliver it,” Remus concluded.

“Yes.” She smirked slightly. “Given your loyal patronage of the shop, you seem the natural choice.”
Chapter 19

The Saturday of Hogsmeade weekend dawned windy and wet. That didn't stop the courtyard from filling up with students, eager to visit the village, decked out in boots and cloaks, many wielding umbrellas, a few casting shielding spells over their heads to keep the drizzle off. Professor Sprout marked them off the permissions list as they filed out down the path to the gate.

With a windbreaker on over his cardigan and an umbrella propped against his shoulder, Remus headed down alongside the chattering hoard. Someone called his name and he turned back to see Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and Dean all huddling in a clump under a shimmering protective bubble Luna was casting over them. Hermione waved. Dean called, “You're going to the village, too, Professor?”

“I'm running an errand for McGonagall,” he called back.

“Cool,” Dean said.

Remus grinned and waited for them to catch up to him. As they neared, he realized that the figure following three paces behind, obscured by the draping hood of its waterproof, was Draco. Remus let the group pass and fell into step with his fellow. “No umbrella?”

“Don't need one,” Draco said shortly. Judging by the lack of damp clinging to him, he seemed to have charmed his outerwear to repel water. Remus gave an approving nod and they made the rest of the walk in companionable silence.

In Hogsmeade, there was a group of four sheltering under the eves of the first shop on the main street, scanning the incoming crowd, waving and calling greetings to some as they passed. Hermione and Ginny spotted the sheltering group as one, shouted, “Ron!” and “Harry!” and rushed forward, abandoning Luna's protective bubble to run and kiss their boyfriends.

Seamus stepped out from under the eves, grinning, and held out an arm to Dean for a half hug.

Remus felt his stomach leap and a wide smile break across his face as he recognized the fourth person under the eves. “Sirius!”

“Remus!” Sirius boomed brightly as the kids traded around hugs and Luna picked a lint ball off of Harry's shoulder, saying something about some kind of animal Remus had never heard of.

“What are you doing here?” Remus laughed, letting Sirius pull him into a warm but casual one-armed embrace.

“Just tagging along with the Boyfriends Left Behind Club,” Sirius said with a jerk of his head toward the three boys he'd been waiting with. Ginny arched an eyebrow at Dean, who looked quickly at Seamus, who shrugged, hands shoved in his pockets.

Remus stood shoulder to shoulder with Sirius, fondly watching the kids catch up, Ginny arm in arm with Harry, Ron with his arm around Hermione, the other four not quite standing in pairs—Draco nowhere to be found. He must have slipped away. Remus leaned slightly into Sirius and murmured, “Why do I have a feeling McGonagall asking me to come to town today was your idea?”
Because it was,” Sirius replied without looking at him. “What errand did she send you on?”

“Delivering a letter to Zonko's.”

“Oh, clever.”

Remus slid his gaze sideways toward Sirius. “I believe you have a threat to make good on.”

“I have a room at the Three Broomsticks.”

“Well,” Remus said, loud enough for the kids to hear, “I'd best run that errand. Sirius, let's leave the kids to their day off, shall we?” With that, he strode off in the direction of Zonko's. Sirius laughed an agreement and trotted after him.

As he caught up, Sirius said, “That wasn't subtle, Moony.”

“No need to be subtle when you're excusing yourself from four couples of teenagers.”

Sirius frowned. “There's only two couples.”

“Are there?” Remus asked with a smirk as he stowed his umbrella and pushed open the door to the joke shop. Once they'd delivered the letter, they headed to the Three Broomsticks.

The moment they stepped back out into the street, Sirius asked, “What do you mean, 'are there?'”

“The entire walk down, Luna and Neville were not quite holding hands, and Dean and Seamus did the exact same half-hug you and I do.”

“Huh. I didn't notice.” Sirius held open the door of the pub for Remus, then lead the way upstairs, fished out his key, and let them in. Remus relocked the door, tossed aside his umbrella, let Sirius pull him by the front of his windbreaker, and kissed him deeply. When they broke apart, Sirius leaned their foreheads together and looped his arms around Remus's neck. “I've missed you.”

“I've missed you, too.” Remus ran his fingers through Sirius's ponytail of damp curls.

“You,” Sirius said with another quick kiss, “are wearing too many clothes.”

Remus pulled out Sirius's hairtie. “What are you gonna do about that?”

Sirius grinned and unzipped Remus's windbreaker.

~*~

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, Harry, Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Luna eventually decided that continuing to stand out in the wind and rain was probably not the best plan, so they got themselves mugs of butterbeer and settled around a table in the corner near the fire in the Three Broomsticks.

“So, the Boyfriends Left Behind Club, is it?” Hermione asked.

“Well, the Boyfriends Left Behind Club,” Seamus said, gesturing between Ron and Harry, “plus me and Sirius.”
“So, the Boyfriends Left Behind Club,” Ginny said flatly, stealing Harry's butterbeer right out of his hand.

“You have your own, you know,” he pointed out.

She shrugged as she sipped. “This one's better.”

“They're exactly the same,” he objected. “They came from the same keg.”

Ginny grinned. “But this one's yours.”

Harry rolled his eyes and took her mug for himself. Across the table, Luna pondered her own mug, switched it with Neville’s, and smiled as he blushed and his in his scarf.

“Male Friends Left Behind Club, sure,” Seamus said into his drink.

“Doesn't sound as good,” Ron said.

“Yeah, but me and Sirius aren’t—” Seamus started but Ginny cut him off with a pointed stare. “I don't have a—” he continued. “I'm not dating anyone.”

Ginny continued to stare. Luna glanced curiosity between Ginny and Seamus. Hermione, Dean, and Neville all occupied themselves taking long sips of their drinks. Harry and Ron shared a look.

“I feel like I'm missing something,” Ron said slowly.

“Same,” Harry agreed.

“I'm not dating anyone!” Seamus insisted. He faltered and looked to Dean. “Am I?”

Dean shrugged.

Ginny groaned in frustration and dropped her head forward so a sheet of her hair blocked her face. “Boys are impossible.”

Harry looked at his girlfriend, then at Ron. “I'm confused.”


“Nothing,” she sighed again.

“Why,” Luna began thoughtfully, “would Sirius be part of the Boyfriends Left Behind Club?”

“Oh, he and—”

“Ginny!” Hermione hissed, cutting her off. “We aren't supposed to tell.”

“Please, look around this table,” Ginny said leaning on one elbow, “and tell me exactly who is going to care.”

“It doesn't matter if anyone would care or not,” Hermione said firmly. “We promised we wouldn't say anything, didn't we? And we're in public.”

“If you're talking about what I think you're talking about,” Neville said slowly, “I already know. And so does Seamus.”

“Hang on, what do I know?” Seamus asked quickly.
“About Sirius's relationship,” Neville said.

Seamus shook his head just a little.

“Yes, you do,” Neville insisted. “The twins talk about it all the time. I've talked about this with you at least twice.”

“Wait.” Seamus's eyes widened. “This's actually what that was about?”

“Yes!” Neville leaned forward. “What did you think we were talking about?”

“I had no idea, and I didn't wanna say what it sounded like.”

“It was exactly what it sounded like, though.”

“I mean, I know that now!” Seamus slumped back in his chair and ran a hand through his hair. Luna leaned in to whisper a question to Neville, he nodded, and she smiled. “That's so sweet.”

Dean glanced back and forth around the table and whispered, “With Lupin…?”

Hermione dropped her face into her hands while everyone else nodded.

“That makes sense,” Dean said.

Ron patted Hermione's shoulder. “Hey, you didn't actually tell anybody, so it's fine, right?”

Hermione huffed and grabbed his butterbeer. Harry pressed his lips into a line and reached across the table to pull Hermione's mug in front of Ron. Ron mouthed, “Thanks.”

“And, Seamus?” Dean said. “It's the Boyfriends Left Behind Club.”

Draco kept walking as Lupin, Hermione, and the others stopped to hug their visiting friends and loved ones. He had shopping to do and he'd just be in the way, anyway. He spent a while in the stationary shop, perusing their limited assortment of fountain pens, because, honestly, since having to use a ballpoint for Muggle Studies he was starting to form the opinion that quills were an outmoded nuisance. Then he went by the bookshop, then Dervish and Banges, then Honneydukes, where he found the blue-wrapped bonbons Lupin kept in his pockets and bought a sackful along assorted other sweets. After that he considered getting a drink at the Three Broomsticks, but through the window he saw Harry Potter and Ginny necking over empty mugs at a table in the corner, so, sneering, he turned away and—since the drizzle had let up—went for a damn walk.

He wound up leaning on the split-rail fence at the edge of the village, staring at the Shrieking Shack with its boarded up windows, cracked siding, and tile-loose roof. For the first time, he looked at the building not with the curious apprehension he had held for students and villagers alike for so many years, but with a kind of sick sadness knowing that this was where Lupin had spent his full moons for seven years, none of them with the potion, out of his mind with anger and pain and the drive to bite, nowhere to turn it but on himself.

Draco couldn't imagine. He didn't want to. He'd seen the layers of scars on Lupin's arms and hands, only half hidden on the full moon now because the fur grew sparsely over them.

Something cold and wet hit him in the back of the head and he turned, glaring, more than half expecting to see Potter's floating disembodied head, but instead there was Astoria Greengrass, Long brown hair pulled over her shoulder in a braid, a capelet draped around her shoulders, and trousers tucked into her boots, wand in her right hand, in the midst of conjuring a second snowball in her left.

" Seriously?" Draco demanded. " It's not even snowing."

" I know." Astoria grinned. " Luckily, I have this really cool ability, so, you see, I can do magic." She threw her new snowball and he dodged it.

He glowered at her, leaned back against the fence, and nodded toward the village. " Where's your sister?"

" Drinking Zabini under the table at the Hog's Head." She came to lean next to him, facing the shack.

" I hope they know being hungover will not excuse them from practice tomorrow."

She snorted. " I think they'd rather die than miss quidditch." She tilted her head as she looked at the shack and her braid slipped off her shoulder. " Have you ever actually heard this place shriek? Because the most I've ever heard it do is kinda moan in the wind, like now, but I'm pretty sure that's not spirits."

" No," Draco said slowly, turning to look at the tattered building behind him. He took a breath. " Professor Lupin says it's been quiet for years."

Astoria nodded and mused, " I wonder what changed."

Draco shrugged, tugging at his sleeve as he did. " Is Potter still eating Weasley's face at the Three Broomsticks?"
“Why do you think Daph's at the Hog's Head?” she asked flatly.

Draco grimaced. Astoria laughed.

~*~

Sirius gently combed his fingers through Remus's hair, smoothing it, sweeping it away from his face. Remus laying against his chest, eyes closed. Sirius poked at a faint pink line on his cheek next to his nose. “What happened here?”

“Knocked a bottle off my desk last moon,” Remus sighed and opened his eyes. He touched Sirius's sliver of a crescent moon tattoo.

Sirius folded his hand over Remus's and shifted them so he could kiss at the new scar. They settled again and Sirius resumed stroking Remus's hair. “You know I love you like this.”

“Hmmm?” Remus hummed.

“I mean, I love you always, but around this time of the month, when you've had time to recover from the last full moon but the next one isn't dragging on you yet,” he ran firm fingers over Remus's shoulder where he knew he tended to carry tension, “you're especially beautiful.”

Remus snorted. “I love you too.”

Sirius cuddled him. “Stay with me tonight.”

Remus sighed and shook his head. “I have to go back to the castle; I have grading to do.”

“Mm, I could come help you,” Sirius mumbled into Remus's neck.

“Your definition of 'helping' is probably distinctly unhelpful,” Remus teased and kissed Sirius's hair.

Sirius pulled back to meet Remus's eyes. “If it means getting to sleep in the same bed as you, I will actually help you grade papers.”

Remus propped himself up on one arm and studied him. “You will run comments by me before writing them.”

“I absolutely will,” Sirius agreed.

“Okay,” Remus said. “You can stay with me.”

Sirius whooped happily and kissed Remus sloppily on the cheek, making him laugh.

“C'mere, you,” Remus chucked, fingers in Sirius's hair to pull him in for a more proper kiss that started warm and sweet and ended with Remus on his back, grabbing at the bedpost to keep them both from falling off the side of the mattress.

~*~
“You told him that already,” Ron pointed out patiently as Hermione went through her list of comments for the Department of Muggle Relations that she’d stayed up to write the night before. They were about a foot down her five-foot roll of parchment.

“Only in passing, though,” she insisted. “It needs to be formalized, and I'm not sure he'd remember me saying it. He's been so busy, hasn't he?”

“Well, yes,” Ron admitted. Hermione took a breath to continue her spiel, but he kissed her quickly, pulled the parchment out of her hands, and started rolling it up. “I love you, but I'm not going to remember all this, and you haven't touched your sandwich. I will give these to my dad. Eat.”

Hermione blinked, looked down at her food, picked up her french dip, and took a bite. Ron laughed at her and she glared at him, but it didn't last long before she started laughing too, hand over her mouth to hide her half-chewed food. She collected herself, swallowed, and scratched her thumb over his chin. “Are you growing this out on purpose, or just being lazy?”

“Um.” He ran a hand over his jaw. “Lazy, but at this point it's lazy with a large side of 'let's see this goes.' Do you like it?”

“I don’t hate it.” She took another bite and chewed thoughtfully. “What is it about autumn and guys growing beards? You haven't shaved, Draco hasn't shaved in long enough it's stopped being invisible, Justin has an extremely ill-advised mustache—”


“Hannah and Ernie can't decide if someone ought to tell him.” She sighed, paused, and looked around the sandwich shop. “About Draco, though—where is he?”

Ron shrugged. “No idea. Haven't seen him.”

She frowned. “He was right behind us leaving the castle.”

“So you really honestly are friends with him, aren't you?”

“Of course I am,” she said, affronted.

“That's so weird.” He shook his head.

“Why?

“Other than that you kinda caught the brunt of him calling people slurs—?”

She continued, ignoring him, “Aren't you friends with him now too? You said this summer that you are.”

“Okay, so,” Ron exhaled and ran a hand through his hair, “it's complicated. Me and Harry, sometimes we're friends with Malfoy, like when we were all talking about the DADA teachers' dramatic exits, but the rest of the time we just sorta tolerate him.

Hermione sighed. “It'll do.”

“Not gonna lie, I'm pretty confused how you've wound up pretty much his best friend.”

She shrugged and picked bits of bread off her sandwich. “I know his secret and all summer he
depended on me. I was responsible for his sanity and he had no choice but to trust me with it. That...that kind of thing, it changes things.”

“I don't think it changed things for Lupin and Snape,” Ron noted.

“I'm pretty sure it made Snape's animosity all the worse.”

“Yeah, good point....”
At the end of the day, with the sun setting and dinner approaching, everyone visiting Hogsmeade began the trudge back up to the castle. Professor Lupin was among them with a duffle slung over his shoulder that he hadn't walked down with, and a massive black fluffball of a dog bounding along with him, barking, tail wagging, making the students laugh.

“I'm going to regret this,” Remus muttered, grinning to himself.

Once inside the castle, Remus lead the way to his office, Padfoot trotting alongside him, nails clicking on the stone.

“You're going to have to register as an animagus if you make a habit of this, you know,” Remus pointed out.

Padfoot gave a dismissive wuff and wagged his tail.

They mounted a set of stairs, which almost immediately began to move under their feet. Remus leaned on the bannister. “Long war around it is, then.”

The staircase settled, they continued on their way, and rounded a corner onto the rare sight of Professor Trelawny not holed up in her tower. She caught sight of them, flattened herself to the nearest wall, one hand grabbing at her many beaded necklaces, and gasped, “The grim!”

“Sybil,” Remus sighed, putting out a leg to stop Padfoot from lunging at her, “it's just Sirius. Pads, don't be an arse.”

Sirius stood up, laughing. “I'm sorry.”

“No, you're not,” Remus chided.

Trelawny was staring, mouth slightly open. Her eyes narrowed. “You.”

“Me,” Sirius said with a grin that was all teeth.

She pointed at him sharply. “You should not be here, after all the things you've done, you—”

“Sybil!” Remus said quickly, stepping in front of Sirius and holding up placating hands. “Sybil, he's not a murderer, he was framed, his conviction was overturned, it was all over the papers this summer, even you must have seen it.”

“Naturally,” she huffed. “But he broke into the school,” she insisted. “He tore the Fat Lady's portrait!”

“Yeah, I did do that,” Sirius mused, hands in his pockets. “Should probably go apologize—if she can see my face without running and screaming.”

“And that animagus form,” Trelawny continued, aghast. “That—” she stopped abruptly, blinked once behind her glasses, then folded one hand contemplatively against her mouth. “I see now, yes, that does explain much.”

“I'm sure it does,” Remus said shortly. He took Sirius by the elbow and steered him along the corridor. “Have a nice evening, Sybil.”
“Still,” she called ominously after them, “I cannot help but worry what it may mean for a person to take such a form.”

“Probably that he's a cuddly doofus,” Remus muttered and Sirius laughed.

In Remus's office, Sirius dropped into the chair across the desk while Remus dug the papers to be graded out of his credenza.

“The grim,” he barked derisively. “Is she serious?”

“No, you are,” Remus replied automatically. He dropped a thick sheaf of parchment on the desktop. “But unfortunately, yes. She's frequently half right and it gives her utter confidence in every ridiculous thing she says.”

“Is she even teaching right now?” Sirius asked, plucking a paper off the top of the stack.

“Nope.” Remus grabbed the next paper as he sank into his own chair. “No divination this year. I keep forgetting she's still here, that was the first time I've seen here anywhere but at staff meetings this term.” He pulled out a well of red ink and set it down with a tack. “Sixth years' homework, describing the functions of the Unforgivable Curses. Can't be word for word from the textbook, I have a copy if you want to check it.”

“Cool.” Sirius pulled a dip pen from his pocket and twirled it in his fingers. “Are we skipping dinner?”

“I was thinking we could eat up here, unless you're that eager to face McGonagall.”

“Eating here sounds great.”

~*~

“Malfoy!”

Draco stopped at the sound of his name and turned to see Neville Longbottom jogging to catch up with him, trainers squeaking with damp.

“Longbottom,” Draco acknowledged.

Neville slowed as he neared. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Draco frowned suspiciously. “Why?”

“Because I want to talk to you.”

“Clearly. Why?”

“Look, I have something to talk to you about that maybe you'd rather we not talk about here.” He gestured around the bustling Entrance Hall.

Draco considered him, then jerked his head toward one of the corridors off the hall. They ducked
into an empty classroom.

“What do you want?” Draco asked.

“You have a terrible attitude, do you know that?” Neville snapped.

“I’ve been told,” Draco said flatly. “Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“No.” Neville sighed, then took a breath. “I was talking to Luna, and she told me about the conversation she had with you. How you apologized to her. That she forgave you. I wanted to tell you that I don’t forgive you, but,” he said firmly, cutting off Draco’s interjection, “I do think that things have a chance to be different now—things are different now, for everyone. And I respect that you’re trying to be better. So, what do you say we start over?”

He held out a hand. Draco hesitated, then clasped the proffered hand.

“I’d like to start over,” Draco said.

Neville nodded, patted Draco’s arm, then let go of his hand and took a step back. “Good.” He nodded again. “Good. So, dinner?”

“Right. Yeah. Let’s go.”
Chapter 22

Draco got up early to head to breakfast before practice and ran into Daphne in the corridor just outside their coming room, having apparently left barely a moment before him.

“Good morning,” he said, doing his best to not be awkward about falling into step next to her chair and honestly failing at it.

“Morning.” They reached the stairs and with a tap of her wand the wheels on her chair morphed into a kind of clover shape and walked their way up. Draco hung back to let her go ahead and stayed behind her once they'd reached the ground floor. “I'm not going to roll over your toes, you know,” she said with deliberate mildness.

Draco squared his shoulders and jogged half a step to resume his previous position beside her. “Didn't see you or Blaise after Hogsmeade.”

She snorted. “No, I went straight to bed. Pretty sure Zabini did the same.”

“You seem surprisingly not hungover given how I hear you spent your Saturday.”

“Have a water between drinks and make sure to eat.” She shrugged. “It helps that Zabini's a lightweight.”

Draco snickered. They settled at the end of the Slytherin table and Draco glanced up at the ceiling sky as he poured his coffee. It was grey and glowering, but not raining.

“I hope the weather holds.”

“Yeah,” Daphne agreed, eyes flicking up as she fixed herself a bowl of cereal. For a moment they were quiet, then she said, “You wanted extra time with me because you're worried about my ability to play.”

“No,” he said firmly. “If I weren't sure you could play and play well you wouldn't be on the team. I just need a better idea of how it's going to work, logistically, having you on the team so I can strategize. We can talk about that more on the pitch.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

They finished eating, headed out, and resumed their conversation through the green canvas wall that divided the boys' and girls' sides of the locker room.

“For this first game,” Draco said, lacing closed his uniform leggings and smoothing his tunic where it tucked into them, “I'm partially counting on the Gryffindors underestimating you and being reluctant to play rough against you initially—it won't take Weasley long to change tact if she needs to, but I'm hoping you can throw them enough to give us an edge.”

“I like it,” Daphne called from the other side of the canvas.

“Good. Now, in order to make the most of this, we both need to know exactly what your limitations are out there, so, uh,” he faltered, “what are your limitations on a broom?”

“Yeah, okay,” she sighed. “I can move my legs, but I can't feel them, so it's really hard for me to tell where they are, which makes walking just about impossible. I also—” there was a muffled crash
and canvas fluttered “—ow, fuck.”

Draco popped his head through his overvest and eyed the divider warily. “Daphne?”

“I'm alright. As I was saying, I don't have a lot of strength in my legs, and I just put a little too much faith in them moving to put on my boots.”

“Okay, then….”

Once they were both suited up, they went out onto the pitch and she showed him how she could more or less slide out of her chair to kneel over her broom so her feet could be buckled into the stirrups. Holding herself up on her knees, she was shaking. Draco lent her his shoulder, quickly helped do up the buckles, then stepped back.

“Let me see you take off.”

She did. It was slow and took the form of an ungraceful lurch, but it worked. A rocky take off played well with his planned mindgame, anyway.

They ran some drills that were more like tests—discovered that Daphne could, in fact, hang upside down with both hands off the broom with her feet strapped in, but getting back upright was a bit of a problem. Draco flew over to help un-capsize her in mid air. “Never do that during a game.”

She flashed a grin. “I won't, unless it's the best move.”

The rest of the team arrived, dressed out, and joined them. Blaise looked a bit queasy but he was at least steady on his feet.

“Here's the plan,” Draco barked as his team warmed up, “throw the Gryffindors off their game. Greengrass is our psychological weapon, so, Daphne, I need you to play mean.”

“Aye, Captain,” Daphne responded gleefully.

“Blaise, she's a little slow off the ground at the start, so I need you in the air quick. Mafalda, Flora, Hestia, I'm more concerned with Gryffindor notscoring than with us making goals—Harper, that's going to fall hard on you, but, chasers, it means you three are going to be playing defensively. All my years at this school I've never seen Slytherin go for a defensive stradegy, so I'm hoping it'll bollocks up whatever Weasley's got planned and leave Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff unsure what to expect.

“Now, Weasley is the strongest player on their team and she's mostly my problem—I also have a bet going with her, so for the sake of my own pride I need to get the snitch. Daphne, Blaise, I'll need you to keep an eye on her, keep her off the scent. Like I said, play mean, just don't go racking up fowls.” He clapped his hands together. “Let's run some blocking drills.”

~*~

Sirius followed Remus down to breakfast looking more skittish than Remus had seen him in years.

“You're not going to get arrested again.”

“I know.”
“Then what's with you?”

Sirius glanced around. “You put the idea in my head that I'd be in trouble with McGonagall for being here.”

“That didn't stop you from breaking in several times!”

“I had nothing to lose then!”

Remus rolled his eyes, strode into the Great Hall and up to the staff table, calling a greeting, “Good morning, Minerva! Pomona, Elizabeth, Aleksandr.”

McGonagall raised her coffee cup in acknowledgement and glanced behind Remus with a smirk. “Good morning, Remus. Nice to see you, Sirius.”

As they took seats, Remus smacked Sirius's arm. “She was your confederate, obviously you're not in trouble.”

“What?” Sirius grumbled.

“Remus?” Ramsey asked, coming down the table to talk to him. He paused to introduce himself to Sirius. “Good morning. Aleksandr Ramsey, Slytherin head of house.”

“Sirius Black,” Sirius said, “former fugitive.”

Ramsey grinned. “So the papers say. This fellow paints you more as a lifelong expert mischief maker.”

“That too,” Sirius conceded.

“Anyway, Remus,” Ramsey segued, “I've been talking with Pomona, and a bit with Filius yesterday, we've all heard students whispering some things about you, and—”

“Story of my life,” Remus said, spearing a sausage with his fork. “Mostly fourth years?”

Ramsey gave a slow nod. “Yes. We thought it best to consult you on how to handle the situation, detention or—”

“No,” Remus cut him off again. “I'm sorry, no. It's not their fault they've been taught to be afraid and hateful. Punishing them will likely just cause resentment and make things worse. The best thing you can do is treat me normally, let the students see that you aren't bothered.”

Ramsey hesitates, nodded, “Of course,” and returned to his seat.

Remus could feel Sirius side-eyeing him.

“What?”

“You're not going to do anything?” Sirius growled.

“I'm already doing everything I can by being here and just being a human person.”

“That's not everything.”

“What would you have me do?” Remus snapped quietly.
“Start by helping Hermione finish writing that book.”
Sunday night, Remus walked Sirius to the school gates, kissed him quickly, and watched him walk past the school's wards, turn back to wave, then vanish with a faint *pop*. Remus sighed, stuffed his hands in his pockets, then got on with his week.

Monday afternoon, the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor fourth years had DADA. Filing in as the Ravenclaw and Slytherin fifth years filed out, the fourth years whispered amongst themselves, glancing unsubtly at Remus. He was sure their yearmates from Slytherin and Hufflepuff had talked to them, but he didn't know what affect that would have on the class.

“All right, good afternoon. Books out, but don't open them please.” He watched the class of forty-two do as told, the whispering now replaced by meaningful looks between deskmates and across aisles. “Before we begin—or, perhaps, as a way of beginning today's lesson, you all know I have lycanthropy, which is what chapter nineteen is about. I realize this particular coincidence is uncomfortable for many of you, for one reason or another, but I assure you all, you won't offend me, so there's no reason no to answer questions—unless you somehow couldn't find any time since last Thursday do do your reading. That said,” he clapped his hands together, “who can tell me what 'lycanthropy' means? Mr. Maur.”

Overall, class went more smoothly than it had with the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs, though after the bell, he heard two Ravenclaws murmuring to each other, “*Byddech chi'n meddwl y byddai'n cywilyddus.*”

The other shook his head. “*Mae'n gwybod ei fod yn gwneud pobl yn anghyfforddus.*”

“Miss Ekert, Mr. Price,” Remus said easily over the previous class's quizzes he was straightening, “it's good to hear that kids are still growing up speaking Welsh. My mother was from Wrexham. I didn't really grow up in Wales, but *myddodd fy mod yn dysgu'r iaith.*”

Both Ravenclaws went very pale. Price stammered, “I, we are so sorry, we didn't know—”

“Whether or not the person you're talking about can understand you shouldn't be how you decide if you should say something.” He set the quizzes aside. “I'm not ashamed, and I do know that my condition makes people uncomfortable. I'd rather it didn't, but it does, and I can't wave my wand and make that not so. In future, I'd rather you talk to me if you have concerns—in English, or Welsh, or my extremely poor French if you want a laugh.”

“Yessir,” Ekert said. “I'm sorry, sir.” She and Price skittered out. Remus sighed.

When classes finished for the day, Remus made the now-rare trip up to Gryffindor tower where the Fat Lady greeted him with a huff and a, “That horrible friend of yours is gone, then?”

“He would have apologized if you'd let him get a word in,” Remus noted. “*Ventus fortis.*”

She rolled her eyes and swung open to let him in. Through the portrait-hole, the Gryffindor common room was warmed and lit by a fire in the hearth. Students were scattered around on chairs and sofas and floor poofs, doing homework, playing chess or exploding snap, or just chatting.
before it was time for dinner. Jimmy Peakes straightened up so quickly when he spotted is head of house that he about fell out of his chair.

“Professor Lupin, what are you doing here? Did something happen?”

“No, Jimmy, everything's fine,” Remus assured. “I'm just looking for Hermione.”

“Over there,” Dean said, gesturing without looking up from his cardgame toward a wall of books set up on a table in the corner.

“Thank you, Dean.” Remus took a step toward the table and Hermione's head popped out from behind the bookburg.

“Did someone say my na—oh, Professor.”

“Do you have a moment?” Remus asked, eyeing the books. As he neared, he realized the majority of the pile was law texts. “What are you working on?”

“A few things,” Hermione hedged. “History essay, a follow up letter for Mr. Weasley's department, second draft of the employment contract for the Hogwarts elves—McGonagle said the first draft was good in theory, but not a very good contract….”

He nodded slowly. “Have you worked any on that book you started over the summer?”

She held up one finger, rifled through the scattered papers and scraps of parchment, pulled one out from under a book, and waved it a little. “History of legislation pertaining to werewolves.” She frowned at it. “I really understand why you more or less left wizarding society for a while.”

“Yes, well,” he cleared his throat, “I had a thought earlier, something you could help me with that would also help you with that book.”

“Oh?”

“I think I might do a Q and A.”

“Like Professor Lee?”

“Sort of.” Remus looked aside, watched a sixth year wad up an essay and chuck it in the fire. “Sort of.”

~*~

Draco got back from dinner, ignored Exavior quietly hexing a pair of socks and the giant squid staring down through the ceiling, dropped into bed, and felt something crunch underneath him. He sighed, toed off his shoes, then rolled over to examine what he'd flopped on. It was a short, and now crinkled, note:

See me tomorrow before classes

--A. Ramsey
With a huff, Draco crumpled the note and chucked it in the bin. That answered a few questions. Ramsey hadn't forgotten.

In the morning, Draco knocked at Ramsey's office door. The door opened.

“Draco, good morning, come in.” Ramsey crossed to the cabinet behind his desk, leaving Draco to shut the door. “How are you doing?”

“I'm fine. I assume you asked me here because you have the potion for me,” Draco said to a sparkly rock on the nearest shelf.

“Yes.” Ramsey turned around holding a sizable, opaque black bottle. He held it out.

Draco took it. “Thank you.”

“Anything else I can do for you?”

“No—actually,” Draco interrupted himself, “any chance you could cancel class next Thursday?”

“Absolutely not.” Ramsey smiled indulgently. “But I swear there won't be a quiz.”

“Thank you.”

Draco stowed the bottle in his trunk back in the dormatory, went to breakfast, and took his coffee with him to History to finish drinking it during their in-class essay on the patronage structures of alchemical research culture. He was the first one done, which probably had more to do with opting to use a fountain pen than with his actual understanding of the subject.

The seventh and eighth years walked in to DADA to find Lupin wearing dragonhide gloves, laying out an odd assortment of jewelry, snuff boxes, a bottle of wine, a taxidermied bat, some unremarkable looking books, and a pair of red ballet shoes on the front row of desks.

“Don't touch anything,” Lupin instructed, stepping back and removing his gloves. “All of these objects have been cursed, by either myself, Sirius Black while he was visiting this weekend, or Professor McGonagall. Your assignment is to identify the curses and break them. Have fun. Work together.”

Most of the class turned to Hermione, but Katarina Morag spoke up, “Well, I'm prepared to bet the shoes make you dance yourself to death if you put them on.”

Hermione grinned at her. “They're The Red Shoes, of course, like the fairytale and the ballet.”

“Very good,” Lupin praised, “many curses are informed by cultural context or other well known instances of cursing.”

While the two girls and Dean carefully examined the shoes, prodding at them with their wands, debating how to confirm Katarina's guess and how to undo the curse if she was right, Draco wandered over to the wine bottle. He smirked and called to his classmates, “Does anyone have a knife on them?”

Neville conjured a pocketknife. “I do now, why?”

“Look at the cork.” Draco pointed to a symbol branded into the end. “That's not a maker's mark, it's made by a spell. If you unseal the bottle by breaking it or removing the cork, it'll pull you inside
and reseal. I don't know the counter-curse, but….” He took the knife from Neville, picked up the bottle, deftly cut off the top of the cork, and set the branded bit on fire. “Curse broken.” He put the bottle back down and vanished the knife.

Neville gave a mildly impressed, “Huh.”

“That was supposed to be one of the harder ones to work out,” Lupin said.

Draco shrugged. “My father puts that spell on most of the good wine in the house. I've been getting around it for years.”

By the end of class, Exavior and Daphne had broken the energy-sapping curse on the taxidermied bat, Ginny and Fay had wrestled a screaming book off of Blaise and belted it shut so it wouldn't attack anyone else, and Andrew Harper and Andrew Trent had dismantled a music box to figure out which part of it was cursed, broken the curse, and mostly put the music box back together.

“Alright,” Remus said pulling his gloves back on, “you're welcome to keep your successfully uncursed objects, I'll get the rest of these put away.”

Dean dropped the ballet shoes on the desk in front of Hermione, she pushed them away, and Katarina scooped them into her bag.

“We'll keep at this until you've broken all the curses.”

“What about the other class?” Exavior asked.

Remus flashed a grin and locked the trunk of cursed objects. “They have their own set. Before you all go, though, Hermione already knows about this because she's kindly agreed to assist me, on Saturday after the Halloween feast I'm going to hold a question and answer session in my office about lycanthropy—more informal than Professor Lee's, mostly for the benefit of the fourth years, but I do encourage you all to come. I'm hoping to dispel some of the mystery surrounding my condition, so if there's anything you've ever wondered but didn't think you could ask, Halloween will be the time.”

As they all filed out of class, Draco eyed Hermione retwisting her hair up into a bun. She noticed.

“What?” she asked sharply, snapping her elastic sharply around her hair. “I've been doing research so Lupin asked me—”

“No,” Draco cut her off, “is your hair bigger than usual?”

She blinked at him, rolled her eyes, and sighed. “It's been rainy for a week and a half and humid, yes my hair is bigger. You're really not looking at me sideways for helping with Lupin's Q and A?”

“Granger, you're writing him a book, I'd be shocked if you weren't helping with this.”

Chapter End Notes

So, I don't speak any Welsh at all, so the Welsh in this chapter is straight off of Google Translate and therefore probably wrong. If any of you lovely readers happen to speak Welsh, please correct me!
Translation of what it's meant to say:
E: "You'd think he'd be ashamed."
P: "He knows it makes people uncomfortable."
R: (Talking about his mother) "She insisted I learn the language."
That evening, Draco waited until Exavior had gone to brush his teeth to pull the black glass bottle from his trunk and choke down a goblet's worth of potion. He really needed to decant some into his flask, but he just had time to shove the restoppered bottle away and wipe his mouth when his roommate got back.

They went to bed without a word.

After an unexpectedly exciting breakfast that included a small explosion at the Gryffindor table that sent a soft-boiled egg wizzing across the room to crack against the back of Runcorn's head, the day was uneventful, leaving Draco plenty of time to rehearse in his head what he was going to say when he hung back at the end of Muggle Studies to talk to Professor Lee.

“Excuse me, Professor?”

She finished shoving a stack of phone books back into a cabinet then turned. “Mr. Malfoy, if you're wondering if there's been a response to your letter yet—no, only three have come in yet, and since you wrote to Australia I expect yours to be one of the last back.”

Draco blinked and shook his head. “That's not what I was going to ask.”

“Oh.” Lee leaned on her desk. “Sorry, I've been getting variations on a theme a few times a day, everyday for about a week, but I shouldn't've assumed. What's up?”

“I'm going to have to miss class next Wednesday,” Draco said simply.

Lee frowned and tilted her head. “Can I ask why?”

Draco glanced toward the door. “Full moon.”

“Oh. Ohh. Yeah, that's fair.” She crossed her arms and looked out the window into the dark. “Because we live in freaking Scotland, and it's almost November, so sunset's at, like four but we're in class til four-thirty. I can see how that would be a problem.”

Draco nodded.

“I'll make sure to write up notes for you.”

“Thank you.” Draco started to leave then turned back. “And if anyone asks where—”

“If anyone asks,” Lee shrugged one shoulder, “I didn't ask.”

“Thank you.”

~*~

At dinner, conversation at the Slytherin table cycled through homework and quiditch to Lupin's Halloween night Q and A.

“We're going,” Simmons said, nodding toward Mafalda.
“Why?” Runcorn asked incredulously.

“We've just done werewolves in class.” Mafalda shrugged. “We're curious.”

“I think I'd like to go, too,” Exavior said, carefully picking the meat off a drumstick. “It seems interesting, and I don't think it's ever been a disadvantage to know more about the world.”

Blaise rolled his eyes and looked to Draco. “What do you think, Malfoy?”

“I have no idea what's possessed him, and I wouldn't go on my own, but Granger's asked me to, and I owe her a few favours, so I'm going.” Draco knocked back the rest of his pumpkin juice, got up, and went back to his dormitory to take his potion and decant some into his flask.

He was midway through his potion and had tucked his now-full flask into his schoolbag when the door opened. He quickly downed what was left of his dose, vanished the goblet, and almost managed to not gag.

Exavior eyed him warily, but grabbed his shower bag without a word and went to the adjoining bathroom. Draco punched his mattress and let out a breath.

~*~

Halloween being a Saturday, without any classes to take up students' time, left the population of Hogwarts Castle free to throw several small, individual Halloween parties that had bled into one another to form one sprawling school-wide party not long after lunch. There was a small mountain of autumn vegetables in the courtyard, curtesy of Professor Sprout and Hagrid, that kids were carving despite the intermittent drizzle. Dean cussed fluently under his breath while he carved a turnip, Luna and a pair of younger Ravenclaws were carving a mural of the Forbidden Forrest into a pumpkin that was nearly as tall as they were, and Justin Finch-Fletchly was using magic to glue together a few white-skinned pumpkins and gourds into a snowman.

In the entrance hall, someone had set up an enormous apple-bobbing trough full of highly evasive enchanted apples. Ginny emerged triumphantly from the trough with a gold-leafed apple clamped in her teeth, what hair had escaped her ponytail clinging wetly to her face while water dripped down her neck to her bright purple sparkly jumper. She took a bite of the apple, swallowed it mostly whole, and crowed, “Suck it, Harper!”

Andrew Harper glared, stripped off his own already damp jumper, and stuck his head in the trough again.

Upstairs in his office, though, Remus wasn't celebrating. He was grading, humming along to Night on Bald Mountain playing on his phonograph, and trying not to forget about the tea steeping on the corner of his desk for a third time.

He'd actually managed to drink his tea and get through two classes worth of essays by sunset when a knock at his doorframe made him look up. Hermione was leaning in, bundled in a black and orange striped cardigan, a cat ear headband nestled in her hair. “Hey, happy Halloween.”

“Happy Halloween,” Remus echoed, dabbing off his quill and propping it in its holder.

“I thought, since it's almost time for the feast, I'd come see if there was anything that needs doing
in here for the Q and A before dinner.” She stepped in, hands tucked into her opposite sleeves.

Remus let out a breath, leaned back in his chair, and looked around his office. It was one of the larger offices but rather sparse—he had his desk, two chairs, a rug, the phonograph, a couple cabinets, a bookshelf, and, at the moment, the crates of cursed objects the seventh and eighth years hadn't yet broken and a pair of black taper candles flickering in the window. “People are going to need places to sit.”

“Yes, they are, aren't they?” Hermione agreed, eyeing the two crates in the corner. “And maybe the cursed objects should be made more inaccessible, just in case.”

“I'll put them upstairs.”

It didn't take them long to shove the desk out of the way, conjure a couple of sofas, a few more chairs, and some floor poofs.

“Thank you, by the way,” Remus said while he dumped the dregs of several different bags and tins of sweets into a large, pumpkin-shaped silver bowl, “for making sure I'm not rushing to do this after dinner. It's a fifty-fifty shot I'd've lost track of time otherwise.”

Hermione laughed lightly, fluffing a cushion. “Oh, it's no trouble. I'm honestly excited for later.”

“Frankly, I'm nervous,” Remus admitted. He folded flat a now-empty bag of bonbons and dropped it in the bin. “I haven't got a good idea how many people are coming and I really don't know how the reception is going to be.”

“I'm sure it'll be fine,” Hermione said softly.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “You were with me at the apothecary this summer. You were at this school when the student body found out I'm a werewolf, I'm sure you remember the way your classmates talked. Do you remember your own reaction when you figured it out?”

She looked at her shoes and mumbled, “Good point.”

He rubbed her shoulder. “You didn't know better, but neither do your classmates, which is why I'm nervous. C'mon, let's head down to the feast.”

She nodded and glanced at the window. “Should we put those candles out?”

“No,” Remus said, grabbing his cloak and heading out the door, “those are staying lit til they burn out.”
Chapter 25

The expected chatter and clamour of the Halloween feast was occasionally punctuated by the fluttering and squeaking of a rather large flock of bats as it swooped around the hall. The frog choir had sung a short set, including a couple old Gaelic songs for Samhain, McGonagall had given a speech that opened with her leaping dramatically as a cat from her seat to the podium, and now the festive air was beginning to wane as the serving platters emptied, and everyone faced increasing danger of falling into food comas.

At the Gryffindor table, Hermione was watching Ginny and Dean toss bits of food across the table into each other's mouths, laughing. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lupin rise from the staff table and leave. She wiped her hands. “Hey.”

Dean caught a hunk of roll and half choked. Neville thumped him on the back.

“Hey,” Hermione said again, “I think we ought to go to Lupin's thing now.”

“He just left,” Neville pointed out. “Let's give him a minute to get set.”


Over at the Slytherin table, Draco bounced his crumpled up napkin off Zabini’s head and stood. He caught Hermione's eye, arched an eyebrow at her, and strode out. She readjusted her headband superiorly, got up, and went after Draco. Ginny, Neville, and Dean exchanged glances and followed.

Lupin looked up and smiled thinly at Hermione, Neville, Ginny, and Dean as they came in.

“How did we get here before Malfoy?”

“Happy Halloween.”

They echoed the greeting.

“Ooh, candy,” Dean said brightly, going for the silver pumpkin bowl.

Ginny dropped into a chair and looked around the office. “How did we get here before Malfoy?”

“She probably went to the bathroom,” Hermione said to Ginny with a pointed look toward the boys. She picked a seat and pulled a clipboard, notebook, and pen out of her purse.

The next moment, Draco came in, spotted the candy bowl, and silently grabbed a bonbon, unwrapped it, and crammed it in his mouth. Hermione caught a look of commiseration pass between him and Lupin, who had just gotten his bottle of wolfsbane potion from the cabinet and set it on his desk. Draco perched himself elegantly on the arm of a sofa, leaning against the wall, as other attendees began to arrive: Fay, Pavarti, Padma, Luna, a few other Ravenclaws, three Slytherins, and one timid seeming Hufflepuff girl, no one younger than fourth year.

Lupin made a quiet show of conjuring a goblet for himself, pouring potion into it, taking a sip, and grimacing. He checked his pocketwatch and almost started to speak, but was stopped by Astoria Greengrass skittering into the room, hopping over the pair of her underclassman sitting on the floor, and squeezing herself onto the sofa next to Luna, more or less on top of Draco's feet. It was crowded with almost twenty people in the room.
“Welcome, Miss Greengrass,” Lupin said, a hint of a smile playing at his eyes. “I was just about to say I think it's time we get started.” He settled his weight on the edge of his desk and sipped his potion. “Well, I don't have much to say by way of introductions. You all know I'm a werewolf, and we're here for me to answer any questions you may have about that. So, ask away.”

The room was quiet, several of the kids glancing at each other. The candles in the window flickered. Lupin swirled his faintly smoking potion and took another gulp of it. Draco gestured broadly toward Lupin and the bottle on the desk. “What's that crap taste like?”


Draco stared at Lupin briefly in sour disbelief, then he opened the tin and at a gummy. He grimaced, conjured a handkerchief, and spat it out. “Disgusting.”

Astoria curiosly plucked a purple gummy from the tin, gave it an experimental squeeze, then popped it in her mouth. “Uhg.” She chewed. “Ach. That is so gross.”

Luna reached across her to take the tin from Draco.

“What's it like?” Sue Li, a short haired Ravenclaw seventh year, asked, fiddling with the hem of her skirt. “When you, um, you know. Transform.”

“It hurts,” Lupin said. “Very badly. The fur coming in itches so badly it burns.” He downed the dregs of his potion and set the goblet aside. “It's extremely disorienting. There's a minute or two of sensory overload. And it's exhausting, it's quite the strain on the body.”

By now, the tin of gummies had made its way across the room to Hermione, who passed it to Exavior without taking one and without pausing in jotting her notes.

“When is the next full moon?” Mafalda asked.

“The third and fourth,” Lupin, Hermione, Draco, and Neville all said together.

“And no, I don't know who's cobing my classes yet,” Lupin said. “I...need to work that out. Anyway.”

“How did you handle it, early on?” Luna asked gently.

“Not well.” Lupin took a breath. “I was very young and very scared. I didn't really understand what was happening, and because this was before wolfsbane potion was available, I had to be alone.”

“When did the potion become available?” the Hufflepuff girl asked at the same time Padma asked, “How old were you?”

“I was three. The potion came around when I was in my early twenties, but other than when I taught here, I never had reliable access to it until the past three years or so.”

Things went quiet again.

“Okay, less serious note,” Dean said, “weird question, maybe, but is drinking from a bowl rude, or would you be offended if someone offered it to you?”

Lupin—along with a few others—laughed. “No. It's rather difficult to drink from a glass without
thumbs, so it's more or less the only option. It can feel demeaning, so it takes some getting used to and a bit of pride swallowing, but it's what works.”

“Hey,” Ginny grinned, “if you shaved your head right before the full moon, would you turn into a hairless wolf? Just have a bald spot? Or does it matter?”

“My friends talked me into testing that one summer,” Lupin said with a fond but exasperated smile and a glance toward the window. “It really doesn't make any difference, other than making me look like a bit of an idiot for the few weeks it took any of us to find a hair growth charm that actually worked.”

Draco snorted once while Ginny broke down into a fit of giggles. Neville gave her knee a light disapproving smack and she laughed harder.

“It's alright, it is funny,” Lupin said. A few more people laughed, then everyone quieted again.

“You ever gone after anyone?” a younger Ravenclaw with a Welsh accent asked sharply.

Lupin nodded slowly. “A few times. I've done my best as an adult to keep away from people on the full moon when I haven't had access to the potion, and to always take it when I can, but sometimes things don't go to plan, and, frankly, I was a stupid reckless teenager. By some miracle, I only had three close calls the entire time I was in school. One was with Mr. Filch, because I was somewhere I should not have been that night. I really should have gotten in trouble for that. Once was one of my friends, who well meaningly but stupidly came to check on me. He didn't realize that, that night moonrise was before sunset so I had transformed as soon as the sun went down. Then, I did come rather close to biting Severus Snape because he found my hiding place, and—it's a bit hard to explain, without wolfsbane potion, when I'm transformed I don't know who I am or that I'm human, I don't remember most things about my life but there are some things that I do remember. For instance, I'll still know my way around areas I'm familiar with. You see, Severus and I were never exactly friends, may he rest in peace, and even transformed I knew I didn't like him. That, combined with the strong instinct to bite that all werewolves have if not treated, if he had not been removed from that situation very quickly, I definitely would have bitten him and probably would have killed him. He knew it, too, which didn't do anything to improve our relationship.

“The most recent and probably worst close call I've ever had, some of you might remember if you're night owls—or a particular kind of trouble magnet—the night after exams when Sirius Black was captured on the grounds and subsequently escaped, the castle was locked down overnight. That was less to do with Sirius, more to do with me.” He wandered over to the window and broke a drip of wax off the sill. “I'd gotten caught up in my own personal connection to the situation, still believing at that time that Sirius had murdered all of our friends, so when I thought I had a chance to confront him, catch him, maybe protect someone from him this time, maybe make him pay—I literally ran to do it, stupidly forgetting a dose of potion in the process. One missed dose makes the whole thing useless, so I was wild and dangerous and loose on the grounds the night.” He dropped the bit of candle wax into the bin, resettled against his desk, and paused, head bowed. “Hermione, you're in an uncommon position of having come face to face with an untreated werewolf and leaving that interaction unscathed. Would you like to share?”

Hermione looked up from her notes and around. Most of the room had turned toward her. She looked to Lupin. “Well—you remember what happened, don't you?”

He met her gaze. “Vividly.”

“Right, well.” She fiddled with her pen. “I was worried, for you, at first, because we'd seen you transform—me, and Ron, and Harry—”
“Because of course it was you three,” Draco interjected.

“Of course.” She flashed him a tight grin. “If it wasn't us three, was it really something gone horribly wrong at Hogwarts?” Her grin faded and she looked down. “We'd seen you transform, and it was obvious that it was extremely painful. It's a gruesome thing, really, I can hardly imagine what it's like to go through… We didn't know if you'd taken your potion or not, and I tried to talk to you, but you had no idea who I was or what I was saying. I could see in your eyes, you weren't really there.” She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. “You lunged for us, for me, and you would have bitten me except Sirius went and tackled you down the freaking embankment, and we have never actually talked about this before.” She scrubbed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“No,” Lupin nodded, “we haven't.” He was gripping one wrist tightly with the opposite hand. “It makes me feel sick to consider how easily I could have infected or killed any or all of you that night.”

“Hang on,” Sue said, “Sirius Black tackledyou? While you were, like that? That seems like, not a good idea.”

“It's not,” Lupin confirmed. “He was, however, in a better position than anyone else present to manage me, because Sirius is an animagus, he turns into a tibetan mastif the size of a small horse, which is supposed to be a secret, but he's taken to running around Hogsmeade, changing back and forth with little regard for who's around to see, so I don't feel bad telling you. It's true that werewolves target and attack humans, because the prey drive instinct in an untreated werewolf says humans are prey—the useful flip side of that is anything that doesn't appear human, doesn't register as prey, so a werewolf isn't going to attack another animal or animagus in animal form, unless they attack first. Which, tackling me down an embankment certainly counts as, but my fighting back was only to get him to leave me alone, not to maul. Even so, if I had bitten him, the effect would have been the same.”

“How—” Hermione cleared her throat and tried again. “How would being a werewolf interact with being an animagus?”

Lupin paused. “I'm not sure, exactly, I've never known anyone who was both, but I do know that injuries sustained by an animagus in their animal form do persist when they change back, and most magic doesn't play nicely with werewolves on the full moon, so at the very least I'm certain they would not be able to take their usual animal form when transformed. Now that you bring it up, though, I'm curious what would happen if they were already in their animal form at moonrise.”

“Probably something weird,” Luna mused.

“Probably,” Lupin agreed.

A different Ravenclaw, a fifth year Hermione knew on sight but not by name, twisted her hair and quietly asked, “Have you ever killed anybody, Professor?”

“Loraine,” Lupin sighed, “the unfortunate reality of there having just been a war is that I'm not the only person in this room who's killed. We're all a little too acquainted with Death.”

Loraine looked down. Ginny rubbed Neville's shoulder—he squeezed her ankle. Luna murmured, “There's ghosts in our common room.”

“More to the spirit of your question, though,” Remus continued, “I've never killed as a wolf.”

“I heard you killed Fenrir Greyback,” Fay said, speaking up for the first time and startling
Hermione, who'd honestly forgotten her roommate was sitting behind her.

“I did.”

“I heard you ripped his throat out,” Mafalda said flatly.

Lupin gripped the edge of his desk. “I did—Dean, I swear if your mouth just opened to say 'cool' that'll be a hundred points from Gryffindor and detention until Easter,” he snapped.

“Nope,” Dean said quickly. “Wasn't gonna say that—not sure what I was gonna say, was probably a swearword.”

“Good.” Lupin let go of his desk with apparent effort and crossed his arms over his chest to grip his own biceps instead, fingers digging into his jumper. “Because it's not cool. Killing is horrible. Even if it has to happen, even if the person probably deserves to die, it's horrible, and it stays with you no matter what you do.”

“Is—is Greyback who bit you?” the young Hufflepuff asked.

“Yes, April,” Lupin said quietly, “he is.”

“He killed Lavender Brown,” Pavarti said. Padma took her sister's hand.

Lupin nodded. Hermione capped her pen and gripped it with both hands. The wind outside threw raindrops against the window glass. For a long time, no one said a word.

Draco started to speak, half choked, and cleared his throat. “I saw what happened. You tried to stop him, tried to save her, but you were about a second too late. The spell hit—I don't know what you threw at him, I've never seen a curse behave quite like that, sent him flying like he'd been hit by a train—but it was just barely too late. You didn't let him get up; you went and you did to him what he'd done to her.”

Lupin nodded again.

“If,” Fay began, then stopped. “I know it doesn't matter, there's no changing anything, but if you had been able to stop him soon enough for her to live, but not soon enough to keep him from getting to her...?”

“Yes,” Lupin said firmly. “First of all, it wasn't a full moon. She wouldn't have been turned, not really. Some nasty scars, a taste for rare steaks every twenty-eight days, but she would have fine. Even if it had been a full moon, though, yes, if I could have saved her life I absolutely would have—there are fates worse than death; I don't think being a werewolf is one of them. Especially not if you have people around you who care about you, who you can turn to, who'll be there to help you while you heal and adjust to your new reality. And you're here, I'm here, so I know she would have had that.”

~*~

After Fay's question about Lavender, everything else that was asked was notably of the light and interesting—but-inconsequential variety. By the time they started to creep up on the younger students' curfew and Remus called an end to things to send them to bed, everyone seemed mostly
recovered. Sarah Ekert paused in the doorway, “Mae’n ddrwg gen i.”

She left before he could accept her apology.

Hermione, Ginny, Dean, Neville, Luna, and Draco lingered behind the rest. Luna touched Remus's elbow lightly. “Are you alright?” she asked. “A lot of that was clearly hard to say.”

“I'm okay,” Remus assured her. “Thank you.”

Luna turned to Hermione. “Are you alright?”

Hermione let out a breath while she shoved her notes in her purse. “I will be.” She gave a small smile. “I am.”

Ginny fluffed up Hermione's hair fondly.

“Are these really what that tastes like?” Neville asked, gesturing between the tin of gummies he was putting the lid back on and the bottle of potion.

“Almost exactly,” Remus said.

Draco's nose wrinkled. “The real thing lingers worse.”

Dean looked at him sideways. “Why the hell do you know that.”

“Because if I was cat, I'd be dead,” Draco said and slipped out with half a wave over his shoulder.

“There was an evening this summer when, I think, all the young men in the house decided they wanted to try some of what was left in my goblet, just to see,” Remus said. “That's when the twins realized Bertie Bott's doesn't make a wolfsbane jellybean and got it into their heads to make these.” He picked up the tin and chucked it back into the desk drawer. “And Draco is right, the real thing sticks around, coats your tongue in a way the gummies don't.”

Hermione froze, then hurriedly got her notes back out of her purse and scribbled something while Neville said, “That sounds absolutely vile.”

“It is,” Lupin agreed. “And you never quite get used to it. Would you all mind helping me set my office right?”

With their help, it only took a couple minutes to return his office to its usual state. Hermione hugged him hard, then Luna glommed on, and the rest followed, enveloping Remus in a group hug that almost knocked him off his feet. Then the kids went off to bed.

Remus locked the door, put the potion bottle away in the cabinet, traded it for a bottle of wine, poured himself a glass, shoved his desk chair over by the window, dropped into it, took a drink, set the glass on the sill between the two barely still-lit nubs of candles, propped one elbow on his knee, and rubbed at his temple. “Well, that certainly could have gone a lot worse. What d'you think?”

The lefthand candle burnt out with a tiny splutter that left smoke curling from the wick. Remus snorted and picked up his wine. “Screw you too, James.”
Chapter 26

When they got back to Gryffindor tower, the common room was empty except for a pair of passed out second years in an armchair, and a pile of cats that had spilled itself on the rug in front of the fire. Dean headed on up the boys' stairs, muttering under his breath about needing to pee. Ginny went and scooped up her cream coloured kitten, Byrd, from the cat spill while Hermione gently prodded the second years awake and shooed them up to bed. Crookshanks got up from the middle of the pile, sauntered over, and flopped back down at Hermione's feet—she picked him up. Neville reached out to scratch first Crookshank's ears, then Byrd's.

“Bed time for us, too, then, I guess,” he said.

“Maybe for you,” Hermione sighed. “I expect my whole room will be up for a while still.”

“I'm surprised Kellah didn't come tonight,” Ginny said. “The rest of you were there.”

Hermione shook her head. “We'd talked about it. Kellah was worried that Lavender would come up—and she was right, wasn't she? She didn't think she could really take that.”

“That's fair,” Neville said. He started to turn away to the boys' staircase, took a step then turned back. “This might sound crazy, but do you ever think that Malfoy might—” He cut himself off.

“Actually, no, nevermind.”

“What?” Ginny asked, grabbing Byrd's paw to free it from her jumper.

“It doesn't matter.” Neville held up his hands. “It's not my business, and if I need to know I'll find out. Goodnight. Happy Halloween.” With that he trotted up to his dormitory.

“Do you ever think,” Hermione echoed, face half buried in Crookshank's fluff while he purred, “that Neville is the most astute boy we know?”

Ginny nodded. “Definitely.”

~*~

Tuesday at breakfast, up at the staff table, McGonagall caught Remus staring blankly into his coffee cup. “I hope,” she said, “you're not considering drowning yourself in there, Remus.”

“No,” Remus sighed and looked up. “Just nursing a headache and trying to think of anyone other than Binns who can cover my classes tomorrow and Thursday.”

McGonagall frowned, taking her seat. “Hm, he is a less than ideal option—very knowledgeable about his own subject, but not the most versatile.”

“That's a way to put it,” Remus snorted.

“There's really no one else, then?” She served herself a scoop of egg.

He shook his head. “Hagrid's free, but he's really not qualified to be teaching cursebreaking and dueling.”
“I have been talking to Rubeus about him working to complete his studies evenings and summers and sitting exams when he's caught up, but as of now you're right, he's not.”

Remus perked up. “That's wonderful. Let me know what I can do to help with that.”

“I'm sure he'll appreciate your support.” McGonagall smiled, poured herself a cup of coffee and refilled his. “To address your trouble, though, I suppose I'll just have to cover your classes myself.”

“You don't have to do that.”

“Apparently I do,” she said firmly. “You've just told me there's no one else available.”

“You're headmistress, you have other responsibilities,” Remus objected.

“Nothing I can't put off or slow roll for a couple days.” She put her mug down with a solid thunk. “I'll be covering your classes, and you'll be getting some rest. I expect you'll be getting your lesson plans to me by this evening.”

Remus shook his head and gave a resigned chuckle. “Yes, ma'am.”

The day went fairly uneventfully for Remus, much to his relief and gratitude—not counting the moment at the start of the seventh and eighth years' class when he came very close to having to physically restrain Draco from hexing or punching Ginny, who had just told him, “Oh, by the way, I've booked the quidditch pitch for the Gryffindor team every evening til Saturday, since we're closing in on our match. I hope you weren't planning on trying to squeeze in any practice this week.”

Hermione and Zabini had intervened, one telling Ginny off, the other confidently declaring that they were going to wipe the floor with the Gryffindors, “no matter how much you lame lions practice.”

There was a fair bit of chatter in his younger classes from students who hadn't come on Halloween, lamenting that they now wished they had.

After his last class of the day, Remus made his way across to the second floor, blandly told the gargoyle “Xanadu,” and, once the stone beast had moved aside, took the stairs up to the Headmistress's Office, where he deposited his lesson book in front of McGonagall on her desk. “There's that. And, thank you.”

“It's hardly any trouble,” McGonagall smiled as she flipped open the book and glanced through it. “I rather miss actually teaching.”

“Well, have fun then. I have,” Remus checked his watch, “about an hour before moonrise, so I'm going to go grab an early dinner and choke down tonight's dose of wolfsbane.”

“Very well. I'd say goodnight, but….”

Remus snorted, turned to go, but stopped and turned back. “You know we need a substitute on call again—it can't keep falling on other teachers or on you to cover my classes when I'm unwell.”

McGonagall sighed. “I know, but I'm running conspicuously low on candidates, Remus.”

“I have an idea you're not going to like.”
She narrowed her eyes. “Who?”

“Sirius.”

McGonagall let out a long breath, took off her glasses, and leaned back in her chair, face tipped toward the ceiling. “It's his birthday today, isn't it?”

“Yes, I sent him a card a couple days ago.”

She rubbed at the bridge of her nose and put her glasses back on. “I don't think I'd call him teacher material.”

“He's qualified, and he's available.”

“I'll consider it,” she promised. “Go eat. Try to limit how many muddy pawprints Mr. Filch has to mop up in the morning.”

“I'll do my best.”

~*~

“Yes,” Draco said sharply, striding through the Slytherin common room toward the door. “Practice every day next week. Get ahead on your homework.”

“Where are you going?” Astoria called after him.

“To get ahead on my homework!”

He pushed out into the corridor and went up to Lupin's office.

Lupin was sitting at his desk when Draco got there, eating a sandwich with one hand, writing with the other, a goblet smoking gently within easy reach. “Good evening, Draco,” Lupin said distractedly, then stowed his pen and held up a second plate with another sandwich. “I took a gamble that you haven't eaten yet. Are you alright? You seem...agitated, even given the moon.”

Draco shook his head, dropped his bag, and took the plate. “I've decided I hate Tuesdays.” He took a vicious bite of sandwich. “I hate Ginerva Weasley. I hate this shit.” He dropped his flask onto the desk. “I hate the full moon. I'm starting to really hate the rain. I also hate my father, and the stupid git he's got as our business manager, who is still pestering me about our damn winery when I've told him in no uncertain terms to address all such to my mother.”

He dropped into the available chair, knocked back the contents of his flask, and immediately took another bite out of his sandwich without pausing to wipe his watering eyes. Lupin watched all this and stood smoothly. “I'm going to make tea.”

“As if we'll have time to finish it,” Draco muttered darkly. An unfamiliar trunk in the corner rattled and caught his attention. “What the hell is that?”

“We have a good twenty minutes or so, and I have an alarm set,” Lupin said, pouring magically heated water into a pair of mugs. “And it's a boggart.”

“For the third years?”
“Yes.” Lupin set the mugs on either side of the desk and sank back into his seat. He took up his goblet and sipped. “I am not looking forward to that lesson, not with what these kids have seen.”

Draco frowned at the case. “Wonder if mine's changed. I haven't actually faced one since third year.”

“It probably has,” Lupin said honestly. “You've been through a lot since then, and you've matured quite a bit. You're welcome to have a go at it sometime when we're not on a clock.”

Draco fished the teabag out of his mug. “What's yours?”

“A full moon. Always has been.” He finished his potion and vanished the goblet. “Which I find a bit curious, because I haven't really been afraid of the moon, per-say, in years. It does, though, remind me of all the things that that do truly scare me, and I guess that's good enough.”

~*~

Remus rolled himself over with a low whine, shook out his fur, and resettled himself more comfortably on the rug in front of the fire. Draco came loping down the stairs and curled up across from them. Given the early hour and the wretched weather, there wasn't much for them to do but sleep, so they did. At least, Remus did for a while. He woke abruptly from a dream that was part memory, sat up, and looked around, ears swiveling. He couldn't immediately pinpoint what had woken him.

Draco was still asleep, snoring quietly, one paw twitching intermittently.

Remus got to his feet, stretched, then went and reared up on his desk to peer at his clock. He'd slept just over an hour, dinner would have just started for the rest of the castle. He slid back down to all fours. Getting more sleep would be advisable but, for whatever reason, he was now very awake and drifting off again didn't feel like an option. He sniffed at the boggart's trunk in the corner. It just smelled like trunk. For a moment he wondered what would happen if he let it out now—boggarts only responded to humans—but he discarded the idea as a bad one. That would be a horrible way to wake Draco, assuming he could get the buckles open in the first place.

Next, he wandered over to the window and looked out into the dark, damp grounds, the moonlight shining silver on the wet grass. The wind tousled the trees and the pennants on the quidditch pitch, heavy as they were with nearly three weeks worth of rain. At least it had stopped for the time being, but Remus doubted anything would have time to properly dry before the next round of showers swept through.

There were deer along the edge of the lawn—it was tempting to go chase them just to have something to do other than stare out the window while pretending not to see his own reflection, but not tempting enough to actually get him out in the wet and the mud, McGonagall didn't need to worry about pawprints. Besides, it was still dinner. He couldn't go out now, even if he wanted to, there could still be stragglers in the halls, or students skipping dinner entirely, he'd done the same a few times in his youth.

He went back to the fire and curled up dejectedly. Maybe if he just lay still long enough he'd fall back asleep….

But—he could go out, if he wanted to. It wasn't just that he could run the grounds in the middle of
the night, that the risk of being seen was less, the consequences less if he was seen. He could be seen.

He stood.

Everyone knew. The entire staff, all of the students. He talked about it at meals, in class—he had just held an interview session about it. It was hardly different from being home at Grimmauld Place.

It was different for Draco, he still had a secret to keep, but Remus had well and truly burnt that bridge.

Fuck it.

He let himself out and pulled the door shut behind him. Someone—Madam Pomfrey, judging by the handwriting—had neatly taped a do not disturb sign above the handle, which was honestly a good idea since he'd taken to not locking the door, especially with it being before curfew. He'd have to thank her.

Out in the corridor, he felt exposed in a way he didn't when he knew the castle was asleep. He took a breath, lifted his head, and trotted off toward the staff room with as much normalcy as he could muster.

The halls were empty. Probably anyone not at dinner was at the library, or in their offices or common rooms. When he got to the staff room, though, it wasn't wholly unoccupied—Professor Lee was seated at the long middle table, bent over a mess of papers spread out around her, a mug of what smelled like vegetable soup held to her chest with one hand. She looked up at the sound of the door opening, then down to Remus's current height. She cocked her head slowly. “...Remus?”

He whuffed softly, let the door close, and trotted into the room.

“I...wasn't expecting to see you this evening,” Lee said. “It's an early moonrise, so—of course you know that, though, obviously. I'm sorry, I have no social framework for this. I really ought to have gone to your talk, I probably owed you that anyway. Sorry.” She put down her mug of soup. “Hi. Would you like a biscuit?” She pulled a tin out from under some of her papers, popped off the lid, and held it out.

He took one happily. She smiled.
Draco woke to a dim, empty room—the fire had burned down, and Lupin was gone. That was...concerning. The trunk in the corner rattled then banged sharply against the wall. Draco jumped, fur on end, and growled. He cautiously went to sniff at the trunk then slunk back. He couldn't smell the boggart he knew was in there and that was just wrong. Even dementors had a smell—quite a strong one. Even ghosts had a smell, like cold air before a snowstorm.

He glanced outside. It looked late—late enough to be past curfew—so, fur still bristling over the back of his neck and his shoulders, he cautiously fled the room. Out in the hall, he stopped. He hadn't thought past “I don't want to be near that boggart” and wasn't sure what to do with himself. It was still wet and disgusting outside—Care of Magical Creatures had been absolutely miserable that afternoon, Hagrid had let them go a quarter hour early to clean up the mud—so Draco had no desire to venture out of the castle. He figured Lupin would be of the same mind, but Draco had no idea where he'd have gone. Nose to the floor, he set off to find him.

It was a bit overwhelming—there were a lot of smells wafting around and clinging to things that Draco was aware of as a wolf that didn't exist to him most of the time. He generally tuned out most of the olfactory static, but now he was paying attention and hunting for something specific, not even just following something that had caught his attention, there was more than he'd ever realized. He could pick out and follow Lupin's trail—it was very familiar by now and the only other wolf scent in the castle—but it was easy to get distracted.

He'd retraced his own steps back and forth in the general staff room area a few times—Lupin had definitely been there, but it was empty now—when shuffling footsteps and off-tempo humming a corridor over in the Entrance Hall stopped him, ears swiveling.

Filch.

Draco shouldered open the staff room door and ducked in. He could still hear Filch, getting closer now. The swing of the door might have been enough to tip off the caretaker that someone was there—hopefully if it was, he'd assume it was a professor since it was the staff room, but Draco didn't trust Filch not to check. He still wasn't quite sure what curfew meant for him on these nights, but he did know the ornery old squib would jump at any chance to catch a student out of bed when they shouldn't be, even a prefect, even a canine one.

He had to hide.

The only place that wouldn't leave him exposed was the wardrobe of cloaks and spare robes that had also housed the boggart he'd faced in Lupin's class third year. Hoping there wasn't one in there now, he quickly pawed and nosed at the door until it was open enough for him to climb inside, closed the door behind him best he could, and curled up, feet and head tucked in so that maybe he could pass for a fur coat fallen off its hanger if seen through the gap in the door.

Sure enough, Filch's footsteps continued to approach, then entered the room. Draco held his breath, heart pounding against his ribs, while the caretaker made a slow circuit of the room, still humming to himself. He stopped directly in front of Draco's hiding place—only to close the wardrobe door the rest of the way and carry on, pushing in chairs, tearing old notices down from the bulletin board and crumpling them into the bin.

A lone, long howl—slightly muffled by distance and thick stone walls but immediately recognizable to Draco as Lupin's—broke the nighttime quiet, followed a moment later by a chorus
of fainter farther-off howling from the direction of the forest. It made Draco's fur prickle. Filch huffed and grumbled something to himself about, “Bloody fool making a racket, can't believe, McGonagall won't, used to get kicked outa the damn castle, damn trouble maker, people never change, bad example...” as he left the room.

Draco waited until Filch was well away then tumbled out of the thankfully boggartless wardrobe. Lupin howled again and Draco set out after the sound, following it up to the Astronomy tower, where he found Lupin hanging partway out of one of the unglazed windows, forelegs braced against the sill. Draco joined him at the window—Lupin shifted over mid-howl to give him room. As the wolfpack in the forest returned the call, Lupin nudged Draco's shoulder.

The pack's chorus died away, Lupin took a breath to howl back and Draco did the same. This time, along with the pack, Fang started baying. Lupin made an odd chuffing noise Draco realized was laughter, then a light flared on in Hagrid's hut. A moment later, Hagrid himself stepped out onto his stoop with his quilt wrapped around him like a cloak and hollered up at the castle, “Remus! Go to bed!”

Lupin dropped back from the window and rolled to the floor, chuffing with mirth. Draco sighed and rolled his eyes—not that he wasn't amused too. Lupin got to his feet and the two of them wound their way back down the spiraling staircase of the tower toward Lupin's office.

~*~

Just before dawn, Draco woke to the agony of transformation. He lay flat on his back for a long moment staring at a cobweb on the ceiling of Lupin's room, waiting for a sick, pounding headache to fade along with the rest of the pain. It refused, even as everything else diminished to general soreness, so he swore quietly and dragged himself up to get dressed. He slunk downstairs with his bag on his shoulder, grunted a greeting to Remus—who was wrapped in his housecoat, hunched over in his desk chair, glaring at his kettle—and headed for the dungeons, fingertips to the wall the whole way so he could keep his eyes closed at least for a couple paces at a time. He leaned face first against the cool stone of the common room door while he racked his brain for the password, finally remembered and mumbled it, and went to his room—where he immediately found himself shoved into the corner with his bag yanked away and a wand held to his throat by Exavior.

"Where were you, what are you doing here, who are you, and what have you done with Draco Malfoy?" Emmet demanded.

Draco gaped at him blearily. “What?”

“You heard me.” He adjusted his grip on his wand.

“Yes, I did,” Draco agreed, “but I don't—”

“Who are you?” Emmet asked again. “Where's Draco Malfoy?”

“I'm Draco Malfoy! We've been roommates for eight years, Exavior; I know we're not friends, but really.”

“Yeah, eight years, so I know how Malfoy acts. You've been doing a piss poor job of impersonating him,” Emmet sneered.
“What are you on about?” Draco asked with total incredulity.

“Don’t play dumb,” Emmet snapped. “You think you’re so sneaky, but I’ve seen you drinking the potion, and I know you’re up to something.”

“Oh, fuck.” Draco shut his eyes. “You think it’s polyjuice.”

“Obviously!” He jabbed Draco’s chin with his wand.

“Oh,” Draco whined.

“What are you trying to pull? Who are you?”

“I’m your roommate, I’m not trying to pull anything. For fucks sake, Emmet, my head hurts, let me—”

“If you’re really Draco Malfoy then prove it.”

Draco stared at him. “How?”

“You tell me.” Emmet took a step back but didn’t lower his wand. He was shaking slightly but his jaw was set and his eyes were cold.

“Uh.” Draco shook his head. “I’m allergic to avocados—I’m not sure I’ve actually mentioned that, never mind. Um. Our first night in the dormitory, your things were originally at the bed between Crabbe’s and Goyle’s. I told you to move them. Third year, in Defense Against the Dark Arts, my boggart was my father and I swore I’d hex anyone who ever said anything about it. Later you brought it up because I was making fun of yours being a bug. I tried to hex you, but you disarmed and jinxed me first. You asked me, ‘What are you going to do about it? Tell your boggart?’ We didn’t speak directly to each other the entire rest of the year. Fourth year, you blew it trying to ask some Ravenclaw girl to the Yule Ball and you spent so long wallowing in the shower we had to go get Champlain to drag you out.”

“Okay,” Emmet said slowly. “I buy it, you’re Malfoy. But you’re still up to something—”

“I’m really not.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Emmet snapped. “I know you are! You’re sneaking around, out of the dorm all night, scrambling for excuses, drinking whatever that was and hiding it, not acting like yourself. Last time I noticed you were acting weird and sneaking around, you were smuggling Death Eaters into school! People died, Malfoy! I saw something was wrong and I didn’t saw anything and people died. That’s not happening again so you’re gonna tell me right now what the hell is going on with you, or I swear I will curse you into oblivion and let Madam Pomfrey work out what’s left!”

“I’m not—!”

A spell hit Draco in the chest, knocked the wind out of him, and slammed him to the floor on his knees, sending fresh pain shooting through his joints. Gasping, he tried to get up but his legs were magically fused to the stone.

“Tell Me.” Emmet loomed over him.

“It’s the full moon,” Draco blurted, shoulders slumped. He fumbled to unbutton his left cuff as he continued. “Yes, I’m out all night, but only on the full moon.” He held out his bare arm, showing the scar. “Greyback bit me. I’m a werewolf. What you saw me drinking was wolfsbane. I’ve been
human for about twenty minutes so far this morning, I'm exhausted, my head hurts, and I feel sick. Please, just let me up so I can get my shit together for class and go eat.”

Emmet lowered his wand and swished it in a figure seven—Draco felt his legs unbind.

“You could have told me,” he said quietly.

“Why would I?” Draco stumbled up, retrieved his bag from the floor between them, and dragged it over to his bed. “I hardly know you, I don't trust you—”

“And I don't trust you, either. Which is why you should have told me.”

Draco looked up at him from the schoolbooks he was shoving in his bag for the day. “That doesn't make any sense.”

Emmet held his arms out. “Think about what you've done—”

“I do. Frequently.”

“Then you ought to understand how this looked to me. How it would look to anyone. How does look. Do you want people thinking you're the bad guy?”

“I don't want anyone to know.”

“Granger knows, doesn't she?”

Draco squared his jaw and nodded.

Emmet nodded back. “Look, I won't tell anybody. I'll cover for you if you need me to. But we're gonna be friends now, whether you like it or not. No secrets.”

“I don't think that's how 'friends' work,” Draco hedged.

“Well it's how we're gonna work.” Emmet grabbed his own bag. “You want breakfast, right? We've got about an hour until class—plenty of time for us to start catching up. We cam swing by the Hospital Wing, get you something for your head and the bruises on your knees, then you get to hear all about how I never tell anyone that I love romance novels.”

“I don't want to hear about that,” Draco almost pleaded, reluctantly following Emmet out of their room because, well, that was the way toward food.

“Too bad.”
Chapter 28

Remus went to bed after a cup of tea infused with a pain relieving potion and slept until lunchtime. McGonagall sat next to him and updated him on his students—all perfectly behaved, probably, they both suspected, because having the headmistress teaching their class was borderline terrifying. He also went down and apologized to Hagrid, who clapped him on the shoulder with one massive hand. “I don't mind you playin’ with Fang, and he sure don't mind either, but I'd rather you set him howlin' and barkin' some time before I'm in bed.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Remus said sheepishly.

That evening when Draco arrived, he shoved the door closed and dropped into a chair as usual.

“Do you still hate everything?” Remus asked mildly, reading Sirius's extremely sappy, yet raunchy, response to his birthday card.

“My roommate knows I'm a werewolf now and he's decided we're friends,” Draco said bitterly.

Remus looked up sharply. “Are you okay?”

“I'm irritated, but it's fine, he's fine. He won't tell anyone.” Draco slumped forward on his elbows. “How does curfew work for me, on the full moon? Am I technically allowed to be running around?”

Remus frowned thoughtfully, folded up his letter, stuck it in a drawer, and got up to get his potion. “No, I don't think so. If you happened to have rounds, you'd be in the clear, otherwise, since there aren't any rules specifically for lycanthropic students, no, the usual rules would apply: you're not technically allowed out past curfew unaccompanied.”

Draco nodded. “Then maybe don't ditch me. I had to hide from Filch in the staff room wardrobe—I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

“Ah. I wondered what you were doing in there—I borrowed a cloak earlier and noticed fur on the hem. I'll talk to McGonagall about having some auxiliary rules written up.”

After moonrise, since it had resumed raining and the halls were still populated, they wound up playing something like football with a wadded up chocolate wrapper from the bin. Draco waited in the office while Remus went to the kitchens to shamelessly beg a chicken from the very startled house elves.

They made an active effort to keep a more normal sleep schedule, which made Thursday morning better, but not good.

At dinner, Remus had a mouthful of potatoes when McGonagall told him, “I'm going to want to speak with you about a few things—tomorrow evening in my office, if you would.”

He nodded, gave her a thumbs up, took a gulp of his drink, and kept eating. Next him, Angelica shook her head, watching him. “You eat like this and you're still so skinny.”

“He's better than he was,” Madam Hooch noted from Angelica's other side. “Oh, don't look at me like that, Remus, you've spent the last decade as a bag of bones and you know it.”

Remus rolled his eyes.
Friday evening after classes, Remus saw himself to the headmistress's office and rode the staircase as it corkscrewed into place. McGonagall was waiting for him, stirring honey into a cup of tea. “Good evening, Remus. Come in, sit.”

“I'm assuming this isn't to do with my classes yesterday,” Remus said as he took a chair. “I think I would have heard by now if things had gone awry.”

“You probably would have,” McGonagall agreed. “No. I've been thinking about what you said regarding our need for a dedicated substitute. I must concede that you're right, Sirius is the best qualified available candidate. I still have reservations, though, so my thought is, since the December full moon is before we break for the holidays, I'll offer him those days as a trial run, to see how things go. If they go well—and, of course, if he's interested—then he'd be hired. How does that sound to you?”

“That sounds great.”

“I'll write him up that offer, then.” She folder her hands around her mug and nodded to the teapot on the corner of the desk. “Would you like some?”

“No, thank you.”

She made a sound of acknowledgement, sipped her tea, and put it down. “How's Draco doing?”

Remus settled back in his chair and let out a breath. “He's alright. Mostly.”

“He's still keeping his condition a secret.”

“Trying to. His roommate, Emmet Exavior, knows now—I'm not sure if he told him or what happened, he didn't say. He's not thrilled about it though.”

“Is that something we need to be concerned about?” McGonagall asked slowly.

Remus shrugged. “Draco says it's fine. I'm inclined to leave it be. Managing people knowing or not knowing, people finding out, is something he's going to have to do for the rest of his life. Unless he asks for help or it seems like there's a problem or conflict that we as teachers would intervene with no matter what the cause was, I'd leave him to it.”

She nodded. “Fair enough.”

“On a related note, though,” Remus sat forward, “there's an amendment that needs to be made to the curfew rules for students with Lycanthropy.”

“Oh?” One of McGonagall's eyebrows ticked up. “And what is that?”

“There needs to be a curfew exception for the full moon. Obviously it was different when I was in school—I absolutely could not stay in the castle at the full moon, it wasn't safe, so curfew wasn't an immediate issue. For Draco, though, and for any other young werewolves who may attend this school in the future, with the potion they can stay in the castle and there's an argument to be made that they should. I could write you a treatise on all the reasons why being removed and isolated due to lycanthropy is horrible for a person, especially a child.”

“I'm sure you could, but don't need any convincing on that matter.”
“Good, then we agree it's best for such students to remain on campus. However, it's not reasonable to expect them to stay in their rooms. For one thing, the dormitories do not provide sufficient privacy. Even with wolfsbane potion, it's not safe to be near a werewolf during the transformation, and it's not the kind of thing you want to go through observed. I guess they could lock themselves in the bathroom, but that's demeaning, has too many hard surfaces to bash against while writhing in pain, and presumstes these students would be comfortable with their roommates knowing.”

“Which they most likely would not,” McGonagall noted.

“No,” Remus agreed. “I hope someday they wouldn't have to worry about their roommates knowing, but that day is far off and it would still be their business to decide if they want to be open about it. Anyway, point is, lycanthropic students can't keep to their dormitories, and it's also very difficult to sleep through the night of the full moon as a werewolf. If you make an active effort to keep a human schedule, it's doable, but it's hard. There's a lot of restlessness, it's not natural to stay still and cooped up as a werewolf. The potion blunts the urge to attack people and lets the human mind keep control, but it doesn't touch the drive to run around all night—and I can tell you that was even more true when I was young.

“There won't always be a teacher who can supervise the full moon. As things are now, I am there to at least check in with Draco, but I'm not babysitting him all night. He wouldn't appreciate it, and frankly I don't want to have to. It's not in my job description anyway. I won't always be here, though, I'm not immortal, there simply may not be anyone on staff in a position to babysit these hypothetical future students. So, I think in order to be prepared for them, when and if they come here, the curfew rules need to be amended such that students with lycanthropy are free to move about the castle in public areas just like they are during the day.”

McGonagall hummed. “That's a major exception, and while I see the need for something to be put in writing, because you're right, locking kids up because they're werewolves is wrong when there other, better options. I think a review of all the rules is in order soon—there are old ones that may need to go, new ones to be added, and plenty to be tweaked I'm sure. I'll keep this in mind when that review happens. In the meantime, I'll tell Mr. Filch that Draco has me express permission to be out of bed on the full moon.”

“Thank you.”

~*~

The next week flew by with both the Slytherin and Gryffindor teams cramming in practices every moment they possibly could, and Draco and Ginny alternating between trash talking and pointedly ignoring one another's existence. After lunch on Thursday, where about half of each of the two teams had traded a flurry of insults a couple of harmless but obnoxious jinxes, the two captains were dead to each other during care of magical creatures. Sitting between them on the fence, Hermione could do little but roll her eyes at them while they took notes about *cath palug*—a kind of magical semi-aquatic wildcat native to Wales. Hagrid had a pair of the dark, silky panther-like cats on chain leads that clinked quietly as they rolled over and stretched, lounging lazily in the cloud-filtered sunlight.

Fang had been slowly inching toward the cats since the beginning of the lesson, sniffing curiously. He got a little too close and the larger of the cats swatted him away with a warning growl, sending Fang yipping away to hide behind Draco.
“Ah, now,” Hagrid said, “they’re particular about their personal space. He shoulda known better.”

“Your dog's an idiot,” Draco grumbled, shoving Fang's massive, drooling, whimpering head away. “And a coward.”

“I know!” Hagrid huffed, coming over to tug Fang away by the collar and shoo him toward home. “I told you that your first year.”

“He did,” Hermione agreed, biting back a grin. Ginny snorted.

Potions was uneventful, then in Muggle Studies Professor Lee handed them all the replies to their letters, but didn't give them time in class to read them. Once class was over, Draco and Astoria headed toward the common room together, each tearing open their letters.

“Who did you write?” Astoria asked.

“Granger's parents,” he said quietly

“Oh. I just wrote to one of Professor Lee's brothers.”

They read as they walked. Hermione's mother had written him back—short and polite, glad for him that he was learning, broadening his horizons. Apparently Hermione came by it naturally.

Draco and Astoria parted—she joining the Carrows on a sofa near the fire, he going on to his room, where he found Emmet with a green sheet strung across the posts of two beds, painting on it in silver. Draco stopped in his tracks. “What is this?”

“I'm making a flag,” Emmet said simply.

“Why?”

Emmet shrugged and kept painting. “While you all have been practicing, the rest of us were talking. We figure since we're such a small cheering section, we better be the most enthusiastic Hogwarts has ever seen. So I'm making a flag. I'm making a big damn flag.”

“Thank...you?”

“You better make it worth this for me, Malfoy,” Emmet threatened with a grin. “You can't let me down, I have dirt on you.”

“If you tell anyone,” Draco said coldly, “that I'm a werewolf, I will end you.”

“I don't doubt that, but c'mon just because you're the kind of twat who would do that sort of thing doesn't mean I am.” He picked up a jar of black paint and opened it. “I mean the thing with avocados—you have to realize that's a hilarious allergy and the rest of the housewouldtease you about it to no end. How did you even find it out?”

“My mother likes foreign food.” Draco dropped his bag, stared at the half-painted flag for a moment, shook his head, and turned to leave the room again. “I'm going...somewhere. Might drown myself in bubbles if the prefects' bathroom is free.”

“Have fun,” Emmet called after him.
Saturday, November the fourteenth dawned clear, pale, and cold. The whole of Slytherin house was at breakfast all together with the quidditch team clumped in the middle. Between the team's uniforms, the rest of the house in their in their best spiritwear, and Emmet with his flag draped around him like an oversized cape, the entire table was a small sea of green.

“You look ridiculous,” Draco told Emmet between bites of ham and potatoes.

Emmet scoffed. “I am here to support you, and you wounded, Malfoy. And at least I don't look like a bloody Christmas tree.” He gestured at Astoria, who had charmed her hair into tinsel.

She glared and threw a grape at him.

“See, she looks good,” Draco said, “you look like a massive caterpillar or something.”

“Thank you,” Astoria said, tucking her silvery fringe back. “Since when do the two of you actually talk to each other, though?”

Draco and Emmet looked at each other. “Last week.”

“What changed?” Daphne asked from beside Draco through a mouthful of eggs.

“We nearly got into a duel at six in the morning over something stupid,” Emmet said, preempting Draco who was mid-bite. “Shouting match turned into a heart to heart, and now we're friends.”

For a beat, everyone around the two roommates was quiet, then Daphne shrugged, “Yeah, that sounds about right.”

Draco rolled his eyes, swallowed, then leaned across the table to snap his fingers Mafalda's face. “Hey—stop staring into space like you're facing your execution, and eat something.”

“I'm not hungry,” Lexus mumbled.

“I don't care,” Draco said firmly. “You're going to eat, and you're going to shake off whatever mood this is before we get out on the pitch. It's a quidditch game—you know how to play quidditch. You'll be fine.”

Over at the Gryffindor table, Ginny was devouring a muffin while pep-talking/lecturing her team. “So,” she concluded, “we're going to kick their arses.”

Down the table, Neville leaned to Hermione and quietly asked, “Is it bad that I hope we win more so I don't have to deal with Ginny if we lose out of any kind of house pride?”

Hermione shook her head making the scarlet and gold ribbons and bobbles Kellah had braided into her hair jangle and flutter. “Honestly, I'm the same.”

Draco lead his team out of the locker rooms onto the pitch to line up across from the Gryffindor team, Madam Hooch standing between them. He already knew from breakfast that, if he looked up, he'd see the vast majority of the stands decked out in scarlet and gold. He didn't look up. Instead, he turned to Madam Hooch, pretending to pay attention to her pre-game spiel while actually observing the Gryffindors covertly watching as the Carrows helped Daphne from her chair.
and strapped her feet to her stirrups. She gripped her bat flush along her broomhandle.

“Captains,” Madam Hooch said, “shake hands.”

Draco and Ginny each stepped forward—she held out her hand and he clasped it. “May the best seeker win.”

“I intend to,” she said lightly, squeezing his hand hard enough to hurt.

“Keep telling yourself that, Weasley.” He dug his fingernails into the side of her hand through her glove, then yanked out of her grasp and stepped back.

The rest of the players mounted their brooms, the bludgers and snitch were released—Draco and Ginny's heads both snapped around to watch the snitch zip off—Madam Hooch blew her whistle and tossed the quaffle into the air, and the game began.

Draco rose quickly and leaned into an easy turn, doing a lap of the pitch, scanning for the tell-tale glint of gold in the cool November sun, keeping part of his attention tuned to the commentary since he couldn't afford to actually watch the rest of the game, not with Ginny doing a similar methodical sweep of the pitch.

“That's Simon Graham with the quaffle, Gryffindor in possession,” the announcer, Leah Roth, a younger Gryffindor, narrated. “This is Graham's first game—in fact, we have a pair of almost entirely new teams on the pitch today. Only two returning players per side, seeker and one beater each. Oh, Graham just dodges a bludger from Zabini, Slytherin's returning beater, only to have it sent right back at him by Greengrass, and he drops the quaffle! One of the Carrows—I think that's Hestia?—with the quaffle, Slytherin in possession. That was some unexpectedly agile flying from Greengrass.

“Carrow headed up the pitch, she passes to her sister—passes to Mafalda, and, ooh, intercepted by Kellah Akintola.”

A flash of gold caught Draco's attention, down near the base of the Gryffindor goalposts. He spurred his broom toward it, but Ginny had already spotted it and she was closer.

“Daphne!” Draco yelled, pointing at the opposing captain.

In short order, there was a sharp crack of wood on metal, a bludger went wizzing by, and Ginny had to pull up short to avoid a broken nose. Draco had lost sight of the snitch, but so had she.

“Alice Tolipan going in for the shot,” Roth announced excitedly. “Can Harper block—? No! He can't! Tolipan scores! Ten-zero Gryffindor.”

A few minutes later it became twenty-zero, then thirty.

“Harper,” Draco called, swooping by the goalposts, “get your act together before Runcorn starts making his case to replace you!”

Andrew gripped his broom. “Tell the girls to keep the damn quaffle away from Tolipan!”

The game went almost twenty minutes without anyone scoring, Roth cutting herself off to keep up with all the passing, intercepting, bludger dodging and not dodging, fumbling, and general movement of the quaffle. Then, just as Draco spotted the snitch again, flitting near the Ravenclaw stands, Mafalda took possession, turned sharply, and sped up the pitch. The Gryffindor chasers went after her, putting themselves between Draco and the stands. He swerved to get ahead of them,
then darted through them on his way to the snitch, forcing them to either scatter or get hit. The snitch fled as he neared it and he pursued—there was a chorus of groans and boos broken through by extremely jubilant, magically amplified cheering as Mafalda scored.

“Thirty-ten Gryffindor!” Roth summed. “Gryffindor's Graham in possession. And Malfoy's after the snitch, Weasley's seen it too, she's closing in. These two seekers have identical brooms this year, so it's all down to skill. I have it on good authority that they've got a bet going about that. Carrow with the quaffle now. Both seekers—Merlin's beard, they've collided!”

Draco hit the grass hard and skidded several feet. He lay still a moment, staring at the sky, winded—he heard the whistle blow. As he pulled himself to his feet, he could see Ginny doing the same a few yards away.

She spat out some grass and glared at him. “Did you do that on purpose?”

“Are you kidding? You hit me!”

Madam Hooch touched down between them. “It looked to me like you hit each other. Are either of you injured?”

Ginny shook her head. Draco said, “I'm fine.”

“Back on your brooms then.”

With another blast of the whistle, play resumed. Flora made her next goal, bringing the score to thirty-twenty, then Harper blocked Akintola. Three goals later, the score was tied forty-forty. Draco hadn't seen the snitch since his and Ginny's crash—he'd got a glimpse of gold out of the corner of his eye after Gryffindor's latest goal but when he turned to pin it down he couldn't find it. He and Ginny were both high above the field, scouting, scanning the stands, the grass, watching for metallic flickers that weren't Emmet's flag waving back and forth, Astoria's hair, Luna's bipartisan pompoms, or any of the dozens of Gryffindor pennants among the crowd. He saw Ginny drop lower and he started to mirror the move, thinking she'd seen something, but no, she was still searching, just changing her vantage point. Draco, being the slightest bit farsighted, was just as likely to spot the snitch from his current altitude as lower, but if she saw it, she'd be closer. Unless—

“Graham scores! That brings us to fifty-forty with Gryffindor back in the lead.”

On a hunch, Draco looked up, squinting into the pale blue of the near-cloudless sky. If the snitch was nowhere below him, then—there. He raced toward the tiny speck of gold.

“—to Carrow, and she—but Caruso blocks it. What is Malfoy doing? It looks like he's flying away from the game, but almost straight up. Has—I think he's seen the snitch. Uh, Gryffindor in possession. Now Weasley's flying up, too. They're definitely after the snitch!”

The snitch swerved sharply back down toward the pitch and Draco jerked his broom around to follow it.

“Malfoy's diving! But Weasley's still climbing—the snitch is between them, they're definitely risking another collision. Unless the snitch drastically changes direction—”

Sure enough, the snitch darted out to the side. Draco waited a heartbeat and a half before turning to follow; he cut Ginny off, reached out and—

“Malfoy's got the snitch! Slytherin wins, one-ninety to fifty.” Roth took a breath and there was a
slight squawk as McGonagall snatched the megaphone away from her before she could swear.

Draco grinned, drifting easily back toward the ground. “I win,” he singsonged at Ginny. He held out the snitch, dangling it by one wing while it struggled. She reached for it but he snatch it away, laughing.

“I hate you,” she growled as they landed.

“I know!” Draco managed, before being tackled by his team. He’d just broken free enough to breathe when the rest of the house made it down from the stands, ran across the pitch, and enveloped him in a second wave of hugs. Emmet fought to the middle and wrapped Draco in the Slytherin flag.

“Now who looks ridiculous?” Astoria teased.

“Still him,” Draco ran his fingers through his windblown hair and nodded toward Emmet. “I actually look good in this monstrosity.”
After the game, the Slytherins tumbled away from the pitch, one big ball of laughter and celebration.

“Where's my chair?” Daphne called over the chatter, being held up on her feet by her sister and Lexus.

“I'll get it!” Emmet jogged back toward the stands against the tide of other students.

The rest of Slytherin house continued toward the castle in their clump. Professor Ramsey joined them, high-fiving the team. He clapped Draco's shoulder. “Well done.”

Draco winced slightly—he was starting to feel his earlier impact with the ground—but grinned. “Thank you.”

As soon as they reached the common room, the Slytherin revelry turned into a proper party. Two of the younger girls ran off to fetch food from the kitchens. Andrew took the flag from around Draco's shoulders and tacked it up over the fireplace. Daphne, Astoria, and Lexus got there not long after everyone else, Astoria riding on the back of her sister's chair like a shopping trolly. The pair of second year girls returned from the kitchens with their arms full of snacks and drinks. Someone shoved a butterbeer into Draco's hand.

Emmet burst dramatically into the common room, arms up in triumph. “We won the game, we're somehow in a close second for the House Cup, and I have a date for next Hogsmeade weekend!”

A cheer went up around the room. Daphne called, “Who with?”

“Sue Li.” Emmet beamed.

“Isn't that who you failed spectacularly to ask to the Yule Ball?” Draco asked.

“Yes,” Emmet confirmed. “Yes, she is.”

~*~

Mid-morning Tuesday it started to snow for the first time that year. Ginny and Draco still weren't speaking, though this was now one-sided on Ginny's part. Draco was rather enjoying teasing and goading her while she refused to respond beyond the occasional irritated huff or roll of her eyes.

“Please don't,” Neville said, rubbing his face with one hand at the end of DADA while an origami snitch of Draco's creation bounced repeatedly against the back of Ginny's head. “For all our sakes, please. You don't know what it's like in Gryffindor tower right now.”

“I'll stop when she stops making it so easy,” Draco quipped.

Ginny caught the paper snitch, crumpled it, and tossed it in the bin on her way out the door. One wing twitched feebly among the sweets wrappers and parchment scraps.
That evening, Draco had rounds just after curfew with Jimmy Peaks, the youngest of the three Gryffindor prefects, who happened to also be one of their beaters. The two boys walked the corridors in silence for a while, then Peaks blurted, “The entire Gryffindor quidditch team hates your guts.”

“That’s not new,” Draco said flatly, then glanced sideways at his fellow prefect. “What did Weasley do?”

Peakes snorted. “Other than accosting all of us at random to talk strategy? She would have had us practicing all week if the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff teams didn’t have the pitch reserved. She was gonna make us stay here Hogsmeade weekend to practice but Granger and Thomas talked her out of it—our next match isn’t until February!”

Draco laughed.

Peakes grumbled.

Later, near the end of their rounds, after they’d fallen into silence again, they turned a corner near Gryffindor tower and something cold and wet smacked into the back of Draco’s head, immediately dripping down the collar of his robes. He and Peakes both spun to face the crosshall just in time to catch a flash of red hair disappearing around the next bend. Draco ran after, drawing his wand—there was Ginny, sprinting up the stairs toward the Fat Lady’s portrait.

“Go to bed, Weasley!” Draco shouted. She flicked him off at the top of the stairs and kept running, pausing only slightly at the portrait to give the password. He huffed, vanished the snow and wet from his hair and clothes, and stowed his wand.

Peakes eyed him warily. “Are you going to report her?”

“Just,” Draco growled and gestured up the stairs, “go to bed.”

Peakes hesitated, nodded once, and followed after his team captain.

Draco stood at the bottom of the staircase for a long moment. There were still a couple corridors he and Peakes were supposed to check but, screw it, he was done. He was going to take a bath, and if Filch gave him hell on his way back to the dungeons he’d hex the crotchety old squib, consequences be damned.

~*~

Friday at breakfast, a bird that looked like a pigeon that desperately wanted to be a peacock landed haphazardly in front of Remus and dropped a letter on his plate emblazoned with a familiar purple tripple-W seal.

“What is this thing?” Professor Sprout asked, gently dabbing clinging moisture from the powder blue bird’s tufted feather crest.

“I have no idea,” Remus said, popping open the envelope. “I think the Weasley twins have started collecting exotic birds.”
"Heaven help us," she breathed, shaking her head.

Remus snickered and unfolded his letter.

_Loveliest Lupin,_

_I'll be in Hogsmeade this coming Saturday for a meeting with Zonko's management and to see Ginny. I have some ideas that George and I have scribbled down that I want to run past you so I was hoping you could find an hour—longer if you'll actually tell me about the map!

_Yours,_

_Fred Weasley_

Intrigued, Remus tucked the letter away and looked up to see Hermione trotting up from the Gryffindor table, opening an aggressively yellow cardboard box on the way.

"Good morning, Professor," she said brightly and held out an equally yellow, palm-sized packet from the box. "Eat this please, then I have a question for you."

"What is it?" Remus asked, taking the packet warily. It said _Gushers_ in large white letters.

"Muggle candies," Hermione waved a hand. "It's mostly just sugar. I promise it's safe."

He gave a _why not_ sort of half shrug, tore open the packet, pulled one of the bright gummy candies from the wad they'd all stuck to one another in, and ate it. It popped wetly. He made a face. "I don't think I like that."

"Okay, but is that more the kind of mouth-coating that you get from wolfsbane potion?" she asked seriously.

"Actually, yes," Remus said, taking a drink of his juice.

"Wonderful!" Hermione beamed. "I'll have to write the twins."

Remus shook his head and held out a hand for the box. "I'm meeting Fred tomorrow; I'll pass them along."
Chapter 31

Before the end of the day Friday, Remus sent a letter ahead to Zonko's for Fred, confirming details. Saturday, he met him for a late lunch in a back corner of the Three Broomsticks.

“Lupin, hey!” Fred greeted warmly, pulling Remus into an odd cross between a handshake and a hug. He was dressed in a purple velvet suit with a faint paisley pattern to it and a black scarf.

“It's good to see you, Fred.” Remus smiled as they took their seats. “You look good,” he noted.

“Thanks,” Fred laughed. “This is my 'pretending to be a professional adult' suit.”

“Well, it's very convincing.”

They each ordered drinks and sandwiches from Madam Rosemerta. Remus reached into his bag and handed the box of Gushers across the table. “Here, these are for you.”

“What is it?” Fred asked, taking the box.

“Muggle candies—they're from Hermione, a suggested improvement to the wolfsbane candies since they coat the mouth more like the real thing.”

Curious, Fred got out a packet, tore it open, and ate one of the sweets. “Oh, that's bizarre,” he said excitedly and ate another. “We can work with that. It'll take some reverse-engineering, but, yes, this works.”

“I'm sure Hermione will be thrilled. How was your meeting?”

“It went well,” Fred said around another couple Gushers. “As our catalogue expands and the school rules change and Zonko's makes deals to not sell forbidden items to students, we keep having to renegotiate with them what of our products they carry and terms and blah blah blah business. It's honestly a hassle but it's fine. I saw Ginny too; that was good.”

“I'm sure it was,” Remus said, then thanked Madam Rosemerta as she brought their lunch. “How much contraband did you supply her with?”

“Only a little.” Fred grinned wickedly and chomped into his sandwich.

Conversation lulled as they ate. Remus dusted off his fingers as he finished his sandwich. “So, what was it you wanted to see me about?”

“Mm!” Fred took a swig of his drink. “Okay, so! Recently, George and I have been dabbling in disability aids, mostly for ourselves. We've modded an extendable ear into a pretty functional prosthetic for him, and I've been tweaking my leg, but really the most most useful things we've done have been little changes we've made to our shop and our home and our habits. Even with his extendable, George's hearing on the one side is kind of shit, so we rigged a thing to the shop door that shoots sparkles when it opens so it gets his attention even if he doesn't hear the bell. And, okay, I've been trying, without much success yet, to find or develop a spell or a potion or a combination of the two that'll keep my leg from rubbing without making it ridiculously prone to falling off. I cannot be on my feet all day running a shop, I have chafed to the point of bleeding—so we put a damn stool behind the counter so I can sit and run till. It's been a matter of taking a step back to look and see what individual problems we're dealing with, and changing our thinking to find the simplest and most effective solutions we can.”
“All right,” Remus said slowly, not sure what this had to do with him.

“It occurred to us that we've never really seen you do the same, and we've sure as hell nevr seen anything on the market meant to help you with that.”

Remus frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Lycanthropy is a chronic illness,” Fred said, laying his hands on the table palms up. “People tend to think of it as a curse if they think past all the 'werewolves are monsters' bullshit, but it's nott—it's a magical illness.”

“Well yes,” Remus agreed. “There is wolf's bane potion.”

“Yeah,” Fred nodded. “But the potion's at least as much for everyone else as it is for you. It's a safety thing and it gives you peace of mind, but what it does more than anything else is it makes werewolves easier to be around, easier to ignore, easier for most people to not thing or care about—and it's absolutely rank, but you choke down like a gallon of the stuff every month. If you weren't worried about other people, would you drink it?”

Remus let out a long breath and leaned back in his chair. “Probably not, no,” he admitted quietly. “I do prefer to keep my wits about me—it's pretty unsettling in the morning to regain your sense of self after not having had it all night, but it's the kind of thing you get used to. It gets to be like waking up from a dream. Without the fear and guilt associated with the risk of attacking someone, it wouldn't be that bad. If that risk were a non-factor, no, I wouldn't voluntarily drink the potion. It wouldn't be worth the gagging.”

“That's what we were thinking. So then we thought, public safety aside, what problems does living with lycanthropy cause for a person? We got three off the bat, but we wanted to hear from you.”

“What did you come up with?” Remus asked curiously.

“First off, wolfsbane potion is disgusting which makes having to take it suck,” Fred said with an obvious shrug.

“Yes, we've established that,” Remus laughed a little. “Professor Ramsey has an altered recipe he's come up with that he says isn't so bitter. I'm a little wary of it because I don't know if his edits impact its efficacy. I haven't been willing to test it while I'm at the school, around the kids, without someone like Sirius on hand to keep me in line if necessary.”

“Reasonable. Interesting,” Fred said thoughtfully. “Definitely let us know when you try that and how it goes. If it doesn't work—and even if it does—we've found something that we think could help, maybe a lot, without having to change the potion itself. There's just some snags importing it from Africa….”

“Africa,” Remus echoed.

“There's this fruit—muggle, apparently? Or if it's magic, it's magic the muggles don't know is magic. Not sure. It effects flavour. There's tests we wanna do if we can just get out hands on some. Anyway.” Fred sighed then sucked in a deep breath. “The next obvious problem we thought of is that the transformation is extremely painful.”

“Yeah, that's probably the worst problem.”

Fred nodded. “We're already looking into developing a potion to mitigate that.”
“That would be a godsend,” Remus breathed

“Right now, it's just in preliminary research stage, reading through what little we can find about the couple of previous known, failed, attempts. It's bound to be a long, slow R'n'D process, especially since it can only be tested once a month once we're to that stage.”

“I appreciate that you're trying.”

“No problem—it's something that ought to exist; we want to make it exist. The third thing we thought of is the whole matter of having to keep careful track of the phases of the moon. You can do it in your head, I know—”

“But not everyone can.”

“Exactly. Moon charts calendars are a pain. Lunascopes are expensive and the so-called pocket ones are still almost as big as a bludger. So we made this.” He fished in his pocket and handed over a pendant, about the size of a galleon, enameled in dark blue and silver.

“It's like Sirius's tattoo,” Remus observed, rubbing a thumb over the slightly raised outline of a barely-there waxing crescent moon. The reverse gave the days since and until the last and next full and new moons in neat silver type.

“That's part of where we got the idea, yeah. We figure anyone can wear this or carry it in a pocket or bag. It looks cool, it's not real conspicuous. What do you think?”

“I like it.” Remus handed the pendant back.

“Good.” Fred sounded relieved. “Good, I'm glad.” He folded his hands. “Now then, what haven't we thought of?”

Remus ran a hand over his face and rubbed at his jaw. “Other than making people not be awful?”

Fred snorted. “Isn't Hermione working on that with her book? Hell, aren't you?”

“Good point,” Remus chuckled. “I can't say I've ever sat down and thought about this before—but you know what? There's no such thing as a good place to transform.”

Fred's eyes glinted. “Okay. I can work with that.”

~*~

Draco came back from Hogsmeade early. He'd shopped just a little, had a drink with the Greengrasses and Carrows, then gotten bored and headed up to the castle. He took a bath, then a quick nap, then he wound up laying across a few cushions on the floor in front of the fireplace, working on an essay for Transfiguration, sucking on a lolipop that changed flavour and colour every time he took it out of his mouth. The four second years who were still too young to be allowed off campus were working together at a table in the corner on what sounded like Herbology, but they mostly left him alone.

Some of the other older students came trickling back: Mafalda and Simmons giggling all over each other; the other third year boy, Samuels, dragging Runcorn by the sleeve down the hall to their
room, then back out of the common room without explanation, arguing in whispers all the while; Zabini, dripping with some kind of stringy, crystalline goo, looking disgusted and bewildered, muttering that it wouldn't come off, while trudging, presumably, to the showers.

Then Exavior came bursting through the door, scrubbing an arm across his face, eyes red. He made a beeline for his and Draco's room. The door slammed. Everyone in the common room had turned to watch him; now they looked at each other.

“Is he okay?” one of the second years asked.

“Did he look okay?” Mafalda shot back.

The second year shook her head.

With a sigh, Draco got up from the floor. “I'll go check on him.”

Draco pushed the dormitory door open carefully and stepped in. Emmet was kneeling on his bed, punching his pillow—then he mashed the pillow to his face and screamed a swear into it. He tipped over slowly and fell onto his side, pillow still clutched to his face.

“Emmet, are you dead?” Draco asked, holding his lolipop.

“Yes,” Emmet said pitifully, muffled. He pulled his pillow away and looked at Draco. “Sue hates me.”

“Your date was that bad?” Draco went over to his trunk and picked up his Honeydukes bag from earlier.

“Everything went wrong. I stepped on her foot, and I pulled out her chair for her because that's what you're supposed to do, right?! That's what my gran says you do. But I could tell she felt really uncomfortable about it. Then I couldn't manage to pronounce anything on the menu even though it's all just tea and pastries so I looked like an idiot. Then I kept interrupting her—I didn't mean to, but it happened, so I'm an idiot and a twat. And then! I insulted her favourite quidditch team because I didn't know it was her team and—” he broke off and screamed into his pillow again.

Draco poked him in the arm repeatedly with a chocolate bar until he looked up and took it. “Could be worse.” Draco shrugged. “She could have legitimate reasons to actually hate you.”

“Not helping,” Emmet grumbled through a mouthful of chocolate.
Chapter 32

The next Wednesday was the start of the potion regimen for the next full moon. That weekend was the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff match, which Hufflepuff won by only fifty points. The Tuesday after that, Sirius arrived at Hogwarts in the evening. His first order of business—as mandated by every one of the several letters he'd gotten over the past weeks—was to see McGonagall.

“Your responsibility is to keep order, and keep the students on track with their lessons so there is as little disruption as possible caused by Remus's absence,” she instructed strictly. “Remus has lesson plans for you, and I've had him write up guidelines for you for classroom management.”

“I know.” Sirius nodded. “He sent them ahead to me.”

“Good.” She folded her arms. “Since the full moon begins tomorrow night, Remus will still be teaching his own classes tomorrow until sunset, since he's well enough to manage until after he's been through a night of transformation you'll only have to cover his last class of the afternoon. I suggest you take the opportunity to observe him, unobtrusively. I expect it will be informative for you.”

Sirius nodded again, looking over the schedule she'd handed him of Remus's classes. “Yes, ma'am.” He paused and looked up at her. “You really don't trust me with this, do you?”

She sighed. “I want to. I know that Remus trusts you, and I do trust him. Unfortunately for all of us, I know you, and I can easily see you raising absolute hell given command of a passel of teenagers.”

“That's fair,” Sirius admitted. “I've definitely thought about rallying the kids into an army against Filch.”

“That's Mr. Filch,” McGonagall corrected. She looked askance. “And the students hardly need prompting for that, as I'm sure you know.”

“Yeah.” Sirius grinned. “I won't, though. I really don't want to make trouble for Remus, if nothing else.”

McGonagall snorted slightly. “I'll take what I can get. I do hope you alleviate my concerns, because, frankly, Remus is right. We need to have a dedicated substitute, and you're the best candidate readily available.”

“I have...a lot of motivation to make this go well.”

“See to it that you do.”

Sirius let himself into Remus's office without knocking and kicked the door back closed behind him.

“Boo,” he said gently, walking over to Remus's desk where he was staring at an unfurled roll of parchment, chin propped on his fist.

“Boo, yourself.” Remus set aside his quill and stood. “I wasn't sure if I'd be seeing you until tomorrow.”
Sirius scoffed as he sidled around the desk. “Don't tell me you actually thought there was any chance I'd be in the vicinity and not at least stop by to say hello.”

Remus shrugged, smirking, and let Sirius pull him down for a kiss by the lapel. He grinned as they broke apart. “Hello to you, too.”

Sirius kissed him again quickly, then pulled out the other chair for himself and sat in in backwards. “Grading?” he asked, nodding toward the roll of parchment.

“Fourth years' essays,” Remus confirmed, resuming his own seat. “I have three left, after this one.”

“Are they better than what I helped you with last time?”

“Yes, actually.” Remus took up his quill. “I have to finish these tonight, so I'm afraid I'm not going to be much fun. You're staying in the village, right?”

“I am.”

Remus nodded, paused to make a note on the essay, then slowly said, “You should probably go get dinner if you haven't, and get some sleep.”

“We can both sleep when you've finished,” Sirius countered. “I ate before I left London, and I am going to take advantage of getting to spend time with you—especially since I don't get to sleep with you.”

“I told you, it's not a good idea—”

“Because Blondie comes here to transform and it would be weird with me there, and because you're unlikely to sleep much, which would keep me up, and if neither of us are getting any sleep it defeats the purpose of me coming to cover your classes, I know, I know.” Sirius sighed. “You're right, and I recognize that, but I'm still pissy about it.”

“Trust me, I'm not thrilled either,” Remus muttered. For a while they were both quiet, Remus grading, Sirius curiously looking over some of the papers Remus had already done. Remus got to the end of the current essay, moved it over, grabbed the next, and unrolled it. “You could stay tonight,” he said suddenly. “If you left now to get yourself a change of clothes for the morning I might even be done by the time you get back.”

Sirius looked up sharply then stood slowly. “I'll go do that then.”

~*~

Remus was not done grading when Sirius got back, but he had made his was through to the last essay. Sirius leaned against his back. Remus reached up to ruffle his curls. “Go on up to bed, I'll be right there.”

“Mm, but I like it right here,” Sirius mumbled, pressing a kiss to Remus's temple.

Remus rolled his eyes and turned to kiss him back then shoved him off. “All you're doing is making this take longer. And you know it.”

“Yeah, I do,” Sirius admitted. “I just...I miss you.”
“I know,” Remus said softly. “I miss you too, and I will be up as soon as I finish.”

“Nope, I'm waiting here,” Sirius said decisively and flopped in dog form at Remus's feet.

“That works,” Remus laughed shortly. He gave Pads a quick scratch behind one ear and got back to grading. When he finished, he and Sirius went up to bed together. Remus sank into his mattress with a tired groan and Sirius immediately cuddled up to him. They both fell asleep quickly.

In the morning, Sirius joined Remus as the staff table for breakfast. Angelica sat with them and spent the entire meal happily chatting away at them. “I really never thought I’d see you teaching,” she said, slathering marmalade on her toast. “Remus, sure, but it never struck me as the sort of thing you’d like to do—I think it's wonderful though that you are. Of course, I never really saw myself teaching but now that I'm doing it it I can't imagine not. I love it, I love the kids, and I'm so glad to be able to have a part to play in helping all these kids move forward from everything that's happened.”

“I feel the same way,” Remus said into his coffee.

Sirius nodded along agreeably. After they ate, Sirius walked with Remus to the D.A.D.A. classroom and asked, “Is Stebbins always like that?”

“Yes,” Remus confirmed. “You should know, she's been the same since we were kids.”

“Yeah, I'd forgotten.”

They talked through the lessons Sirius would be covering that afternoon and the next two days while Remus got his things in order for that morning's first class, the seventh and eighth year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs.

“And, don't mention quidditch,” Remus said, checking his watch. “The Ravenclaws are still a little sore over last week's match.”

“I won't say a word,” Sirius promised.

Students began to arrive. Justin Finch-Fletchly was first through the door and he stopped a few steps into the room. “Professor, I have to ask because of what class this is, does that dog have anything to do with detecting intangible magic, or is it just here?”

Before Remus had time to finish glancing over to see Pads sitting as unobtrusively in the corner as a dog his size possible could, Luna Lovegood breezed in past Justin with a casual, “Don't be silly, that's Sirius Black.”

“Is it?” Justin asked.

“Yes,” Remus confirmed, resisting the urge to sigh. “He'll be coving my classes tomorrow and Friday, so he's here to observe, but I suspect he'd be far less distracting as a human.” He looked pointedly at Sirius, who turned back with a shrug and conjured himself a stool.

Watching Remus teach was fascinating, heartwarming, and enlightening for Sirius. He'd known that Remus enjoyed teaching, and he'd known from Harry and his friends that Remus was a good teacher, possibly the best Hogwarts had had this decade, but it struck Sirius that he had rarely ever
seen Remus as comfortable and confident as he was in front of his classes. His demeanor shifted from one class to another, Sirius noticed. With the seventh and eighth years, class was more of a conversation with the students contributing at least as much as Remus did. With the fourth years later in the morning and the second years after that, it was still a dialogue, but one that consisted of Remus asking and the students answering, with the forth years having to give more in depth explanations for their answers.

Remus's last class of the day began at three-thirty, after the rather late lunch break his schedule allowed for on Wednesdays. He checked his watch and glanced anxiously out the window as he and Sirius left the Great Hall. Sirius gave him a gentle shove in the direction of his office. “Go, drink your swill and cloister yourself.”

“Sunset isn't until almost fifteen minutes after class starts, I can take a minute to introduce you,” Remus offered but Sirius shook his head and prodded him again.

“I have all your notes, I've been watching you all day, I have this under control. Don't put yourself under more time pressure on my account.”

Remus took a breath and nodded. He squeezed Sirius's hand then walked away. Sirius watched him go, then cracked his tattooed knuckles with a series of rune-enhanced pops, adjusted his low ponytail, and strode purposefully toward Remus's classroom. His classroom.

The Gryffindor and Slytherin sixth years chattered excitedly in hushed tones as they came in, all glancing at Sirius. Clearly, word of his presence had gotten around the school.

“Good afternoon,” he barked as the school bell finished tolling. “I'm covering your lesson for today. You can call me Professor Black.” He smiled against how incredibly wrong the moniker felt.

“You're Sirius Black,” a dark haired Gryffindor girl wearing a prefect's badge noted.

“Yes, I am, Miss…?”

“Vane,” the prefect provided. “Romilda Vane.”

“Miss Vane,” Sirius finished.

“You broke into the castle our first year!” another Gryffindor girl said. “And you ripped up the Fat Lady!”

“Weren't you trying to kill Harry Potter?” the only Slytherin boy in the class asked.

“Alright, no,” Sirius said sternly. He summoned his stool from earlier forward, perched himself on it, and crossed his arms. “Let's get this straight: Harry Potter is my godson. I love him and would never harm him. I broke into the castle to try to kill Peter Pettigrew since I'd already done twelve years in Azkaban for killing him, but I hadn't actually killed him and he was living as Ron Weasley's pet rat. I'm very tired of being accused of the wrong attempts at murder. On that note!” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “You're going to be continuing to work on nonverbal magic today, with more complex spells than yesterday.”

“I don't think nonverbal spells and accusations of murder are on the same note,” a Gryffindor boy said warily.

Sirius arched an eyebrow at him and grinned. “You wanna bet?”
After that last class of the day, Sirius went to Remus's office where he found a note spell-o taped to the door saying FULL MOON, DO NOT DISTURB. Inside, Remus and Draco were both curled up on the rug in front of the fire, neither of them asleep. They looked up at his entrance.

“Classes are over.” He shrugged. “Thought I’d off to bring dinner up.”

Remus got to his feet, shook out his fur, trotted to the door, and looked expectantly at Sirius.

“Okay then.” He held a hand out to Draco. “You're not coming?”

Draco glowered and wuffed derisively.

“Right. Of course. Well, we'll be back.” He unlatched the door and followed Remus out. Down the corridor, he asked, “I assume we're just nicking food from the kitchens?”

Remus paused thoughtfully, one paw off the ground, then carried on. At the next junction he took a turn that lead decidedly toward the Great Hall, not the basement.

Sirius grinned. “I love that being out as a werewolf as reduced the number of fucks you give to zero.”

Remus snorted and bounded down the next staircase.

It was still a little early for dinner when they got to the Great Hall, so the tables were sparsely occupied even for the current normal, but all of the students looked around curiously at Professor Sirius Black and a thin, scrappy, mottled brown and grey wolf striding casually up to the staff table. Within two seconds whispers started running through the Hall in tones ranging from incredulous to shocked to delighted to exasperated.

“Is that Professor Lupin?”

“Of course it is! Do we know any other werewolves?”

“We're sure that's a werewolf though?”

“Yes, he hasn't got a tail, see!”

When they got to the staff table, McGonagall leaned back in her chair to grin at Remus. “What a surprise to see you this evening, Remus.” She glanced up at Sirius. “Was this your idea?”

“No, ma'am,” Sirius laughed, loading up a pair of huge levitating golden plates, mostly with meat. Her eyebrows ticked up and she patted Remus's shoulder as he reared up to snatch a ham off the table. “I'm very glad your comfortable. Sirius, how was teaching?”

“The kids think I'm a madman—it's great.” He grabbed a pitcher of juice.

“I see,” McGonagall intoned warily.

Sirius swished his wand to send the plates floating alongside him as he and Remus made their way back out. He caught a scrap of conversation from the Entrance Hall ahead of them just as they crossed the threshold.

“Has anyone seen Draco?” a girl's voice asked. “He missed Muggle Studies again.”
“He's sick,” a boy responded authoritatively. “I walked him to the Hospital Wing earlier.”

“He was looking kind of peaky during Herboligy,” another girl noted.

The small clump of Slytherins—one sandy-haired boy and two dark haired girls, one of them in a wheelchair—stopped in their tracks as Sirius and Remus crossed the Hall in front of them. The boy recovered first, letting out an “Evening, Professor—or, Professors. Evening, Professors,” that almost sounded unfazed.

Sirius waved, “Evening!” and Remus woofed softly around his ham.

After eating his dinner with the local lycanthropes, Sirius vanished the emptied dishes back to the kitchen and reluctantly got up to go. Canine, he rubbed up against Remus affectionately, then he scritched under Remus's jaw with human hands and kissed his forehead. “I'll see you tomorrow. And you,” he added to Draco, “get into some trouble.”

Remus knocked him over for that. He laughed, picked himself up, said one more goodbye, then made his lonely way to Hogsmeade to his room at the inn.
Thursday morning, Sirius went up to the castle for breakfast—Remus was notably absent—then went to work. Promising to answer the students' questions about his tattoos and his past if, and only if, they got through everything Remus had left for them to do proved quite the effective motivation technique. He told Remus about that discovery over lunch, which made him laugh.

“I'm glad you've found something that works,” he said. He had the kind of wrung lout look about him that made Sirius want to just bundle him up in his arms, but he couldn't and he hated it. “I'm also glad,” Remus added, “that your method of choice isn't leaning into your image as a murder and terrorizing them.”

“No, I'm pretty sure McGonagall wouldn't let me stay if I did that,” Sirius sighed. “Besides, the reversal of my conviction was too well publicized to pull that off.”

That evening, Sirius and Remus went to fetch dinner again to bring it back to Remus's office. And again, Sirius then went back to the village for the night, alone.

Sirius opted out of breakfast Friday and instead snagged himself a pastry in Hogsmeade before going up to the castle through gently blowing snow. He had fifth years first thing, and then the seventh and eighth year Gryffindors came galloping in, all crowing his name discordantly.

“That's 'Professor Black' to all of you!” Sirius corrected, returning Ginny's side hug then shooing her back to her desk as the Slytherins filed in, eyeing him apprehensively. “Good morning, good morning, your fates are all in my hands.” He rubbed his hands together nefariously, then grinned. “I'm kidding. Mostly. Who's ready to detect some intangible magic?”

Over the course of class, Sirius noted that Malfoy looked like absolute hell—pale and hollow-eyed. It wasn't lost on his classmates, either; most of them were treating him with a kind of quiet caution, but Hermione, Ginny, and one of the other Slytherins, Exavior, the boy from Wednesday night, had a different air about them. Because they knew. That was interesting.

At the end of the hour, Sirius asked Draco to hang back a moment.

“What?” Draco asked wearily, taking a step toward the desk at the front of the room.

“You look like crap,” Sirius said flatly.

“So I've been told, more than once, this morning already.” Draco rolled his eyes.

“I seriously suggest you consider taking the rest of the day off sick,” Sirius continued. Draco smirked slightly. “Seriously?”
“Yes.” Sirius grinned, then sobered. “I mean it, you're doing yourself no favours running yourself ragged. Take a nap.”

“I might,” Draco half-agreed with a glance over his shoulder at the younger students starting to come in. He adjusted his bag on his shoulder and headed out without another word.

Sirius sighed, cracked his neck, and turned to the next page of lesson plans.

Draco picked at his lunch, not talking much, hyper aware of but ignoring the Greengrasses shooting him sidelong glances.

“Draco?” Astoria began gently after a while. “Do you think, maybe, you ought to go back to the Hospital Wing? You really seem ill.”

He shook his head and put down his fork. “I'm fine, it's just...a migraine, or something.”

Daphne cringed sympathetically. “That's rotten. I didn't know you got migraines.”

“I don't—not often.”

“Hey,” Emmet joined in, “Astoria's right. You need to take care of yourself. Daphne and I can tell Ramsey you're out sick and take notes for you.”

“And you can have my Muggle Studies notes,” Astoria added.

Draco looked around at them. “You're really all going to bully me into taking off, aren't you?”

“Yup,” Emmet said brightly.

Daphne leaned across the table to pat Draco's hand, grinning wickedly. “It's because we care.”

“Fine, fine,” Draco grumbled, getting to his feet. “I'll go—if only because I think I'm going to hex the next person who tells me you look like crap.”

“You look like crap!” most of the Slytherin table chorused as one.

Draco flashed them all a rude gesture on his way out.

Right around curfew, Hermione slipped her shoes and cloak back on and made her way through the common room.

“Rounds?” Neville asked as she passed him, curled up on a sofa with his pop up herbology encyclopedia.

“Mhm,” she hummed in confirmation.

“Have fun, stay dry.” He turned a page.

“I'll try.” She stepped out of the Portrait Hole, but instead of starting on her usual beat around the castle, she made her way to Lupin’s office and knocked directly on the note spell-o taped to the door. She heard absolutely nothing through it, which either meant that there was no one there, or that someone had charmed the room to be soundproof—
The lock clicked and the door swung in. “Hello, Hermione.”

“Siri—I mean, Professor Black,” Hermione stumbled.

“Sirius, just Sirius,” he said tiredly, holding one hand up to quiet her. “Please, I'm off the clock. Get in here.”

He stepped aside to let her in, then closed the door behind her. She smiled at Lupin lounging on the rug in front of the fire. “Evening, Lupin. Where's Draco…?”

She looked up as a bit of light-coloured movement at the top of the stairs caught her attention.

“Hiding,” Sirius said shortly and dropped to the rug next to Lupin, cross-legged. Lupin lay his head on Sirius's thigh; Sirius scritched absently behind his ear.

“C'mon, Draco! It's just me!” Hermione called, crossing her arms to wait for him to come slinking down the stairs. “There you are,” she said mock-sternly once he'd plopped his bob-tailed butt on the floor in front of her. “It's past curfew, I have rounds, and, by the schedule, so do you, so I thought I'd come see if you were up to coming with me, or if I'll be wandering the castle in the dark all by my lonesome.”

He glowered at her skeptically.

She shrugged. “If we run into anyone, I'll just tell them you're Sirius's Patronus.”

Sirius snickered, Lupin snorted, and Draco looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“Oh, go on,” Sirius chided. “I mean, unless you'd rather stay here with us, catching up on all the cuddles we've been missing out on.” He pulled Lupin fully into his lap, wrapped his arms around him, and kissed his forehead. Lupin licked his cheek.

Draco made short sound in his throat, shook himself out, and trotted to the door. Hermione followed. “Okay, let's go.”

They set about their rounds, Hermione humming to herself, Draco's claws clicking softly on the stone. When they got to the part of their rounds that included going outside—the courtyard and its walkways, mostly—Hermione drew her cloak closer around herself against the cold and still-falling snow.

“You're almost invisible out here,” she told Draco.

He glanced back at her with a curious sound and proceeded to dive into a small snowbank and curl up.

She laughed. “Oh, I wish I had a camera.” She stooped to gather a snowball. “Hey, Draco.”

His head popped out of the snow.

“Catch.”

She lobbed the snowball at him and he snapped it out of the air with all the intensity due a very tight quidditch match. Laughing again, she ruffled the fur on the top his head. “I'm glad you're doing better than you were this morning.”

He rolled his eyes, huffed, shook off the snow, and carried on.
Later, near the end of their rounds, Hermione paused just past a window, backtracked, and looked out it. “Is that Lupin and Sirius?”

Draco reared up, paws on the sill to look out. He tilted his head slowly—unconsciously, Hermione mirrored the movement. Out on the grounds, two canine forms, semi-indistinct through the weather, were bounding through the fallen snow, falling in it, chasing each other, jumping to bite at snowflakes.

With a snort, Draco dropped away from the window and continued down the corridor.

“Oh, don't be like that,” Hermione scolded venomlessly. “They're cute.”

Draco snorted again. She bumped her knee against his hip, grinning.
Saturday morning, Draco stiffly made his way down the stairs from Lupin's room wrapped tightly in his housecoat against the winter chill in the castle, passed through the office with barely a hand raised in acknowledgment to Lupin and Sirius where they sat bundled in a blanket on the floor in front of the mostly-dead fire, and shuffled sleepily down to the dungeons. Thankfully, the common room was empty when he got there—it being December, dawn was late enough in the morning that it wasn't unreasonable for people to be awake. He'd been late to History of Magic the day before because class had actually started well before the sun was up.

When he got to his room, though, Emmet was awake, sitting up in bed with one lamp on, holding a book open on his knee such that Draco could see the cover—a woman in a white dress standing in a rainstorm, clutching a bouquet of roses to her chest with one hand, brandishing her wand with the other, her hair and the roses both tossing in the wind while lightning flashed intermittently behind her. Draco let the door close with a soft thud. Emmet looked up at him, startled, then deflated.

“Aw, hell, it's past sunrise?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck….” Emmet hunted around for his bookmark. “I've been up all night. I did not mean to stay up all night….”

Draco dropped heavily onto his own bed. “I'm going back to sleep. You, just, go to sleep.”

“Yeah….” Emmet agreed. “Sleep is good. Sleep, then we can get our stories straight as to where you were last night.”

~*~

Remus sank into his mattress with a groan, then rolled to cling to Sirius, who hummed softly and smoothed Remus's hair out of his face. After several long, crawling minutes Remus mumbled, eyes still closed, “I don't think I'm falling back asleep.”

“D'you wanna get up?” Sirius asked quietly.

“No.”

“Okay.”

They did, eventually, get up almost an hour later and had a late breakfast. Remus finished his second cup of coffee, set down his mug with a clack, rubbed at his temple, and looked at Sirius. “Have I mentioned to you that Ramsey has a tweaked wolfsbane recipe he thinks should taste less awful but still work?”

“Vaguely, yeah,” Sirius said between bites of egg.

“I'm not quite convinced it will work, at least not as well, so I haven't tried it, I don't want to risk it without someone around to keep an eye on me—”
“Makes sense.”

“But next full moon is over New Year's, so I'll be home for the Christmas holiday still—”

“And I'll be there to babysit you, if necessary, so you want to give this new and improved formula a run for its money?” Sirius surmised.

“Yeah.”

“Sounds good.” He moved to pour Remus a third cup of coffee, then took the refilled mug and sipped it himself. “I hope for your sake it works.”

~*~

“You can just say I came back after my rounds last night,” Draco said, leaning against the wall next to the bathroom door.

Emmet spat in the sink and challenged, “Why would you go on rounds if you were sick?”

“Because Hermione Granger is a brutal taskmaster and doesn't take excuses,” Draco said flatly, arms crossed.

“Hang on.” Emmet turned around slowly. “Did you actually have rounds last night?”

“Yes. Hermione showed up at Lupin's office just after curfew to remind me I was on the schedule.”

“So you went on rounds as a…?” Emmet gestured vaguely at roughly Labrador height.

“Yes,” Draco sighed.

“That's mental.” Emmet shook his head. “Okay, so you came back after rounds.”

Draco nodded once. He followed Emmet back into their room, wandered over to investigate a handful of small sucker-mouthed fish that had adhered themselves to the outside of the wall, then turned toward his roommate again. “The rest of the house is starting to notice, aren't they?”

Emmet paused in pulling a jumper on, let out a breath, tugged it over his head, smoothed it, crossed his arms, and shrugged. “Yes and no? Everybody's definitely noticed you've been sick the past few days, but everybody gets sick sometimes, the weather's been absolute shit, it's so close to the end of the semester we're a little bit burnt out, I really don't think most people are putting anywhere near enough thought into it to start putting two and two together. The Greengrasses are worried about you though. Daphne was saying something at dinner about how she figures you were probably particularly sick this week since you do like her mother with having trouble sleeping around the full moon and lack of sleep makes it harder to fight off illness. Would not be surprised if she and Astoria start lacing all your food with echinacea and black elderberry.”

“So, at least the two of them have picked up on the timing,” Draco muttered.

Emmet gave a sympathetic, lopsided kind of grimace. “They are both taking Astronomy, and with Lupin—having a sub, or, y'know, seeing him walking through the Great Hall as a wolf with a chicken in his mouth, it's like, 'oh, yeah, full moon.'”
Draco ran a hand over his face. “Yeah.”

~*~

Remus saw Sirius off late afternoon, just as the sun was starting to set again. They hugged tightly. Remus let go; Sirius didn't.

“Hey,” Remus murmured warmly, “I'll be home after next week.”

“I know.” Sirius reluctantly released his grip. “I just can't always shake the feeling that if I let you out of my sight, I won't see you again.”

Remus looked down and clasped Sirius's hands in his own. “I know. I feel it too. And I don't know how to make that better. But you're not going back to prison, and neither of us is dying any time soon. All we can do is get on with our lives.”

Sirius nodded. He squeezed Remus's hands. “Right.”

Not long later, Remus was maybe six steps away from getting back to his office when Hermione appeared around the next corner. She lit up and jogged the rest of the way down the corridor to meet him. “Lupin, you know how to bake, right?”

He blinked at her. “Sort of. I can't just wing it and have it turn out but I'm not half bad if I have a recipe to follow. Why?”

“I've just realized it's Hagrid's birthday tomorrow and I'd like to do something for him, and I'm sorry to be bothering you with this today, but I'm almost as useless at cooking as he is.”

Remus cringed. “I see. Can't Ginny help you? I know her mother's taught her to bake.”

“She's running quidditch practice.”

“In the snow, in the dark?” he asked incredulously.

Hermione nodded, lips pursed.

“Her competitive streak really does cancel out all her good sense, doesn't it?” He sighed. “Sure, alright, I'll help.”

“Thank you so much!” She hugged him.

Down in the kitchens, they were immediately mobbed by a group of enthusiastically helpful house elves who Hermione happily chatted with, occasionally asking them to point her toward the tools and ingredients she needed.

“You know,” Remus said slowly, “you could have just asked them to help you. You don't need me.”

The surrounding elves chorussed their agreement.
Hermione turned around and leaned on the counter, shooting the elves a knowing look. “If I asked all of you to help me bake a cake, you'd just hand me half a dozen cakes.”

The elves glanced at each other; one raised a hand in a kind of shrug. “She's not wrong.”

“Mhm, and that would feel like cheating,” she concluded shortly.

Remus mostly wound up supervising Hermione from a perch on a stool. “You have to make sure there's not still dry flour down in the bottom.”

He turned toward a gentle tug on the hem of his cardigan. One of the elves held up a large mug of hot cocoa topped with whipped cream and curls of chocolate shavings. “I know you said you don't need any, but I made you this anyway.”

“Thank you, Faelie,” Remus said with a kind of resigned, appreciative chuckle and took the hot cocoa.

“If someone tells you that they don't need you to do anything for them, then you don't have to do anything for them,” Hermione insisted.

Faelie shrugged. “I wanted to.”

Hermione sighed. Remus smirked into his mug.

The cake was completed with only one notable mishap—an explosion of confectioners sugar set off during the frosting making process. Carrying the carefully boxed up, slightly lopsided but otherwise lovely cake, Hermione went up to bed, thanking Remus for his help every few steps until their paths diverged.

The next day, they took Hagrid his cake, and were treated to grateful blubbing and bone crushing hugs for their effort. Sitting at Hagrid's table with a slice of Hermione's cake—which was solidly good, if a bit dry—chatting comfortably, Remus scritched absently behind Fang's ear while the boarhound drooled happily on his knee. He bowed out not long later, citing the need to get his things in order to resume teaching on Monday.

The week went by quickly. So close to the holidays, the students were all a bit distracted and restless, and frankly the staff were too. Holiday homework was assigned, quite a large amount of interactive and animated fireworks were set off in the Entrance Hall—most likely by Ginny, not that anyone was about to give her up—and on Friday all the students other than the dozen or so staying at school over break boarded the Hogwarts Express back to London.

Hermione and Ginny both leaned out the compartment window to wave to Hagrid and Lupin on the platform, hollering their goodbyes.

“I'll see you Sunday!” Remus called back. Ginny flashed a thumbs up and Hermione blew a kiss.

Both girls dropped back into their seats, snowflakes in their hair. Neville flicked his wand toward the window, closing it without looking up from his book.

Not long into the trip, Draco fell asleep, slumped into the corner of the seat with Crookshanks in his lap. Neville looked over at him when he started snoring quietly. “Is he okay?”

“Still pretty sure he's never been okay in his life,” Ginny muttered into the quidditch magazine she
was reading.

Hermione elbowed her. “He's fine, he just—I don't think he's gotten much rest lately, and he's been kinda stressed over some sort of internal Slytherin drama I think—which, Ginny, you shooting a roman candle off at him yesterday did not help his stress levels.”

“I didn't mean to shoot it at him,” Ginny objected. “He got in the way—but his reaction was hilarious.”

Hermione scowled.

“It was kinda funny,” Neville admitted reluctantly.

“Okay, alright, it was,” Hermione agreed, “but that's really beside the point. We can wake him up when the trolley comes, but he could use the rest.”

When the trolley made its rounds, they did nudge Draco awake. They all bought sweets and snacks, Draco and Neville both stood to offer chunks of meat from their pasties to Euphrates and Carlisle in their cages up in the luggage rack, and the train chugged on.

They reached King's Cross in the late afternoon. Neville spotted his grandmother with her horribly iconic vulture-topped hat sticking up over the crowd, waved, and went to her. Ginny and Hermione ran to where Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Harry, and Sirius were waiting for them with luggage carts; there was hugging all around. Standing alone on the platform with his trunk and his owl, Draco looked around, and realized with a sick jolt that there would be no one there waiting for him. That...had never happened before. His parents had always been there, to see him off and to welcome him back. A couple times it had been only his mother, when his father was unavailable for one reason or another, but he had always had at least one parent there to greet him when he came home.

Then again, the prospect of returning to Malfoy Manor, big and empty and probably not decorated since all the staff that weren't in custody had quit, didn't much feel like coming home.

“Master Malfoy?” a reedy voice asked, startling Draco from his quickly darkening thoughts. He turned to see Mr. Lavigne, the winery clerk, stoop shouldered and balding, looking at him expectantly.

“What are you doing here?” Draco asked, his surprise coming out as a sneer.

“Meeting you, sir,” Mr. Lavigne said, smiling with slight confusion. “Your mother brought it to my attention that neither she nor your father are in a position to see you home, and I agreed that it would be regrettable for you to have no one to welcome you for the holidays.”

“Right,” Draco said slowly with a fleeting look over at Harry stumbling slightly as Ginny hopped up on him, piggypack. “Of course. Very good.” Draco took a breath, squared his shoulders, and bespelled his trunk into the air to spare the hassle of carrying it. He gestured for Mr. Lavigne to lead the way.

“Excuse me—where the hell d'you think you're going going?” another voice barked after him.

Draco turned back. Sirius had stepped away from the group a bit and was staring accusatorially at Draco, hands on his hips.

“Home?” Draco said, glancing at Mr. Lavigne. He hadn't meant it to come out as a question.

“If you think for a second that this woman is going to let you go home alone to an empty house for
“Christmas,” Sirius said, jerking his head back toward Mrs. Weasley, who was watching the exchange with one hand on her hip, the other on Hermione's shoulder, “then you're even worse of an oblivious idiot than Harry.”

“Hey—hang on!” Harry objected.

“Mate, you really don't have a defense here,” Ron said flatly.

Harry huffed. “Like you're any better.”

Draco looked back and forth a few times. “I was under the impression that the offer for me to stay at Grimmauld Place was only good for the summer.”

Sirius shrugged. “Yeah, that was the original plan. Plan changed.”

For a long moment, Draco just stared. He shook himself, turned to Mr. Lavigne with a short, “Seems you needn't've made the trip,” and strode over to join his cousins.

Sirius clapped him on the shoulder. “Yeah, that's what I thought.”
Chapter 35

They went to Grimmauld Place for supper, largely so Sirius could show off all the home improvement he'd gotten done over the past months.

“Got the whole house rewired,” Sirius explained, showing off the new, properly grounded light switches. “Thank you for that letter, by the way, Draco—ah, dammit I meant to thank Elizabeth Lee. Slipped my mind. Anyway, Arthur helped me find some muggle-born's brother who's an electrician. Poor bloke was absolutely horrified by the state of the electrics, kept saying he has no idea how the whole place hasn't burnt down. I'm pretty sure the answer's ‘magic.’”

With help from Harry and Ron, and occasionally Fred and/or George when they had a minute, he'd painted most of the rooms upstairs—“Haven't gotten around to chipping out the plaster from my old room,” Sirius lamented. “Pretty sure that's the only way those posters are ever coming down.”—scrubbed and refinshed all the wood floors except for the stairs because that was waiting until the carpet runner had to be taken up to be replaced anyway, put up shelving and organized the larder, and, “Refinished the kitchen cabinets, put up a backsplash, learned goddamn plumbing to replace the sink, and put in a modern oven, range, and refrigerator, all of which have been working just fine despite the million warnings I got about magic and electricity not playing nicely together.” He side-eyed Mrs. Weasley rather pointedly, then added, of the fridge, “It's got an ice maker.”

“It's fantastic,” Hermione said excitedly. “I've really got to get a camera somewhere, so I can send my mum pictures—she's going to have kitchen envy.”

Sirius laughed brightly. “Good!”

Mr. Weasley, Percy, Fred, and George all joined them for dinner, then after the meal the twins and Percy returned to their respective flats, and the rest of the Weasleys, plus Harry and Hermione, went to the recently rebuilt Burrow. Draco declined Mrs. Weasley's invitation to join them, leaving him at Grimmauld Place alone with Sirius.

“You're not going with them?” Sirius asked, tapping the tip of his wand against the mouth of a wine bottle to uncork it.

Draco shook his head. “No, I don't think I ought to.”

“Mmkay,” Sirius hummed. “Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to have a drink or three, put a record on, and do some of the decorating I meant to do before you lot came home.”

After a brief moment, Draco held out a hand for the wine. “If you make me touch tinsel we're going to need another bottle.”

Sirius laughed. “I'll handle the tinsel.”

~*~

There was a lot of back and forth between Grimmauld place and the Burrow over the next few days.
for everyone except Draco. Lupin got home for the holidays that first Sunday and immediately joined the house hopping.

“What's your problem, why not?” Ginny asked Draco, arms crossed, after the blond had refused what had to have been his fifth invitation to lunch at the Burrow.

“Do you really want me in your house?” Draco asked without looking up from reading a letter he'd gotten that morning from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Ginny huffed and looked away. “Well, no.”

“That's why.”

“You think it's not good enough for you or something?” Ginny pressed.

Now Draco did look up. “No. I just told you, it's because I don't feel I'd actually be welcome there, no matter what your mother says. I'm staying in my lane. Besides, I can't today in any case; I'm going to see my own mother.”

“Fair,” Ginny admitted sourly then strode out of the room, calling over her shoulder to Harry who was reading in the corner, “We're heading over in about fifteen.”

Once she was out the door and well down the hallway, Draco turned to Harry, “Do you know your girlfriend's completely mad?”

“I'm not answering that.”

“I'm taking that as a yes.”

Harry sighed, shook his head, and turned the page of the enormous old Hermione-like book in his lap. “Though, if you're ever really bored and feel like going somewhere you're not welcome with limited consequences if you raise hell, I think I might like to watch my aunt and uncle implode with cognitive dissonance when faced with you. You're exactly the sort of prissy elite they strive to emulate, but you're a wizard so you're a symbol of everything they hate.”

Draco scrunched his eyebrows and tilted his head. “I'll...let you know.”
The safehouse Narcissa had been moved to was just as fortified and imposing as her previous accommodations, but on the inside it was much warmer and more comfortable. Draco shed his coat and green knit hat, then was let in by a guard after being checked against the visitor list and having a couple anti-deception spells put on him just in case. Narcissa met him in the kind of secondary foyer past the security point, looking much more herself than when he'd last seen her. She still had no makeup, and her hair was pulled back simply, but the dress was recognizably hers, and she was smiling.

“Draco, dear,” she said softly, pulling him into careful a hug which he returned stiffly, then held him at arms length to look at him and brushed his hair out of his face. “How are you?”

“I'm well, Mother.”

She squeezed his shoulder and lead him up to her room, asking along the way, “Mr. Lavigne met you at the station?”

“Yes,” Draco confirmed quickly, hesitated, then added, “thank you for sending him.”

She shook her head slightly as she opened her door. “I hated the thought of you coming home all alone, no one to meet you with your father and I...indisposed.” She closed the door behind them but didn't lock it—there didn't seem to be a lock—and gestured for him to take the armchair in the corner next to the dresser while she turned out the desk chair for herself. “I hope it's not too dreary at home?”

“I...haven't been to the manor,” Draco admitted cautiously.

His mother blinked. “Oh.”

“I've been staying with our cousin again.”

“I thought that arrangement was just for the summer,” she said slowly.

“So did I.” Draco took a breath and settled a bit into the chair. “I was about to leave Kings Cross with Mr. Lavigne, but Sirius insisted I spend the holidays. He had the same thought as you, I think. About not wanting me going home alone....”

Narcissa smiled—it touched her eyes, but not in a way that was simply happy. “That's very good of him. I'll have to thank him.” She paused. “How is he?”

Draco started to give a polite non-answer, stopped, took a breath, and almost laughed a little. “A bit mad, to be honest.”

For a fleeting second Narcissa looked concerned, or maybe confused, but then she pursed her lips in just-restrained amusement. “The papers had that right all along, then?”

“Oh, yes,” Draco agreed, feeling himself start to grin. “He roped me into helping him decorate. There's three Christmas trees up, he's got ribbons and bobbles all over the place, tinsel along all the crown molding and draped on every lamp. Hermione's cat is losing its mind.”
“Oh no,” she laughed softly into her hand. “That's far too much tinsel.”

“It's insane. And horribly tacky.”

“I suppose he loves it?”

“Positively delights in it.”

“That sounds like Sirius.” She let out a breath and folded her hands in her lap. “I wish I could come home with you and decorate our house, too.”

Draco set his jaw and glanced away.

She noticed. “Draco? Is something wrong?”

It took him a long moment to answer. “I don't want to go back to the manor.”

Her face fell, but she didn't say anything, so he continued.

“By now it's not crawling aurors, but that just means if I went it would be empty and I know—I know—I wouldn't see home, all I'd see is Luna and Dean locked up in our basement, Hermione being tortured on our dining room floor—they're my friends. They weren't then but they are now, to varying degrees, and I hate that they've suffered in my house. I've suffered there too—there's still bloodstains in the cellar, my blood, and claw marks in the stone behind the grate. I don't want—I can't live there, mother.” He grimaced. “The whole house feels tainted.”

She nodded slowly. “I can understand that. But, then, I have to ask: what will you do? I don't imagine you want to live with our cousin forever.”

“I don't know,” Draco shrugged, “I could get a flat somewhere. Or,” he paused, “or I could remodel the house.”

“Remodel it?”

“Sirius has redone almost his entire house at this point—it's hardly recognizable just from when I first went there this past summer. I doubt you'd know the place at all.” Draco sat forward. “Really, that's what I want when it comes to the manor—to not recognize it. Not look around and see, see what's happened there. Gut the whole place and start over.”

Narcissa shook her head. “It's a historic building, there are laws—”

“They're muggle laws,” Draco scoffed. “Who's going to check? Other than Hermione, she might, but given the bit about her being tortured on our dining room floor by my aunt, I somehow doubt she'd object. It's my house.” He straightened up and squared his shoulders. “While my father is in prison, I am head of the Malfoy family. Everything that is ours—the house, the business, all the land, the place in government—are mine if I want them. And, let's be realistic, it's very possible Father will spend the rest of his life in Azkaban. He was second in command for years, he has crimes he will be made to answer for, turncoat or not. You and I aren't rotting in there beside him on technicalities only; you know it as well as I do. But he's in prison, and I'm not, and the family charter only passes anything to wives if there are no sons of age, so it's my house. It should feel like it belongs to be, not like I'm trapped there. If it takes stripping the building to its bones to make that happen, then that's what I'll have to do.”

Narcissa was quiet. She chewed her lip slightly. “I can't say for sure when I'll be able to leave here. They don't want me staying on my own, I don't have anyone to stay with, and I frankly don't know
if they'd trust you to keep an eye on me, but maybe, next summer, when you've finished with your schooling, I can come home and help you with redoing the house. It is quite old, and I don't think much of anything has been changed even since your father was a boy. It's probably time some things were updated.” She gave a tight little smile. “At the very least, I've always hated that chandelier on the second floor.”

“The one with the snakes that I refused to walk under until I was eight?” Draco snorted. “That'll be one of the first things gone. Right after the dining room floor, and all the furniture in the drawing room.”

“I think that's...reasonable.”

An increasingly uncomfortable silence stretched between them. Narcissa cleared her throat. “So, you've been at Grimmauld place with, with your friends. What have you been up to, other than decorating?”

“Homework, mostly. A lot of the time it's really just me there—everyone else has been off to the Weasleys' place a lot—so I've been taking advantage of the quiet to get my reading and essays out of the way. I don't have much left to do, and I'll probably need Hermione to help with one of the essays. Did I tell you I'm taking Muggle Studies...?”

“No, you didn't.”

“Well, I am,” Draco said shortly. “I try not to ask Hermione much about it but she is...useful to have on hand.”

“It's good of her to be willing to help,” Narcissa said carefully. “Have you been to see your father?”

“No,” Draco said sharply, “and I don't intend to.”

“Draco, it's Christmas——”

“I don't care! I don't want to see him, I don't want to talk to him, I don't want anything to do with him. He's as bad as the house and there's no remodeling him.”

“He misses you,” she insisted softly.

“How do you know?” Draco scoffed.

“Because he is my husband and I know him,” she shot back. “And, unlike you, I have been making an effort to keep in touch with my family. With how the rules are now, he isn't allowed to send letters unsolicited, but he is allowed to write back, so I've heard from him. He misses you terribly. He misses both of us.”

“So he says,” Draco muttered. He shook his head. “It doesn't matter, anyway. I don't miss him, and I don't want to see him.”

“Draco,” Narcissa said frustratedly.

“Why did you marry him?” Draco cut in.

Taken aback, she blinked at him. “I'm sorry?”

She sighed, leaned back in her chair, and looked at him. “He was a good match, from a good family. He was interested, my parents approved. We'd known each other in school and always got on well enough. He was charming and handsome and a little bit mysterious. He was interesting. He brought me gifts, and it was always things I actually liked, which was better than could be said for anyone else in the habit of giving me things. He made me feel like a queen, like I was the only woman in the world worth anything, which meant a lot after having grown up behind beautiful, talented, beguiling Bellatrix.” Narcissa lay her hand on her desk and looked out the window behind it, through the rippled glass to the country lane beyond. “Things weren't always so….” She shook her head. “He made some bad decisions, we both did, and the obligations he made did get in the way of our family. You're right that Lucius can be cold, and he's not very good at showing his affection—he was better about it when you were a baby, less self conscious about it, I think—but he does love us. Everything he's done since you were born has been to try to give you the best of everything.”

“How exactly,” Draco asked sourly, “is getting me made into a monster 'giving me the best'?”

“He didn't do that to you.”

“No, but he caused it.” Draco crossed his arms. “He created the circumstances for it to happen, then put me in them.”

Narcissa bowed her head. “I said he tried.”

“You know what, I'm not interested in listening to you defend him.” Draco got to his feet and she did the same, reaching for him, but he stepped away. “It was good to see you,” he said, not sure if he meant it. “I'll send you something for Christmas.” With that, he saw himself out.

Chapter End Notes

Draco talking to his mom wasn't supposed to take up the whole chapter but it did.
Chapter 37

The house was empty when Draco got back to Grimmauld place, but he hadn't been there long when Lupin and Sirius returned from some outing, both damp with snow, Lupin cursing most creatively until Sirius threw a bag of brightly wrapped festive bonbons at him and told him, “Have some chocolate and warm up, you'll feel better.”

“Where were you?” Draco asked.

“A walk,” Remus said grumpily, “which was very nice until someone decided it was a good idea to knock a whole eave's worth of snow onto his companion.” He unwrapped a bonbon and ate it.

Sirius just laughed and shooed him up the stairs. “I got snow all over myself, too. Go shower.” As Remus trudged on up, Sirius turned to Draco, “Bill and Fleur are back in town and they wanna see the work I've done on the house, so dinner is here tonight. Then I think people are planning on Christmas shopping tomorrow.”

“Alright.”

“How was seeing your mum?”

Draco shrugged one shoulder and looked away.

“Yeah,” Sirius sighed, “I get that.”

Much of the conversation at dinner was plan-making for Christmas shopping the next day, which seemed rather superfluous to Draco since it all boiled down to “We're going to Diagon Alley” one way or another. And that's what they did.

They arrived in one big group—all ten of them—and began to break up into smaller shopping parties. Ginny immediately split off, walking backwards away from the group along the cobblestones, saying, “I'm going alone, no one is coming with me. No one gets to know what I'm getting them. If you figure out what your gift is, I'm sending it back.”

With that threat, she flashed a double thumbs up and did a little skip-pirouette to turn herself around and kept walking forwards.

“'Ow dramatic,” Fleur snickered softly.

“Five galleons says she gets Harry something quidditch related,” Ron said almost boredly, “me and Malfoy both gag gifts from the twins' place, Hermione a book, Fleur jewelry or perfume, Bill something dangerous, like a knife or a new earring, chocolate for Lupin, something muggle for Sirius, and something cute and practical for mum, like, I dunno, another apron.”

Most everyone nodded. “Yeah,” Harry sighed, “that checks out.”

Harry and Ron went off together. Hermione, Molly, and Fleur grouped up—as soon as Fleur was out of earshot, Bill turned to Sirius, “You know about leather jackets and stuff, right?”

“Yup.” Sirius clapped his shoulder and steered him around toward the Leaky Caldron. “C'mon, that's a Muggle London purchase.”
As they walked away, Draco let out a breath and glanced at Lupin. “I guess that leaves us.”

“I guess so,” Lupin agreed.

Draco made a sweeping gesture. “Lead the way.”

“It's so weird to not be on such a tight budget,” Ron mused as he and Harry browsed opposite sides of the same shelf. “Like, it's fantastic, but also very weird.”

Harry snorted understandingly. “When Hagrid took me school shopping for my first year at Hogwarts, that was the first time in my life I'd ever had any money at all. It took him, two clerks, and a passing witch to talk me out of getting several things in solid gold just because I could. I get it.”

Ron chuckled and picked up a pack of enchanted polaroid film. “Hey, didn't Hermione say something about wanting a camera?”

“Yeah,” Harry paused, “yeah I think so.”

Ginny ducked stealthily into her brothers' store along with another group so the bell and sparkle cannon rigged to the door only went off once, then she slipped in behind a display of carefully shrink-wrapped, tasteful holiday soaps that produced unending mountains of foam the moment they touched water. Seamus was restocking nearby and she hissed to get his attention.

He looked up. “Gin—?”

She put a finger to her lips, glaring to silence him, then beckoned him over.

He looked around, confused, then abandoned his stocking to surreptitiously straighten the soaps. “What are you doing?” he asked the display in a whisper.

“I need you to get me these,” Ginny answered, passing him a neatly folded note, which he palmed from her. “Don't tell my brothers I'm here. Don't tell anyone I'm here.”

“You owe me,” Seamus said by way of agreement.

“Cash in a favour whenever you need, Finnegan.”

“I have no idea where she gets it from,” Molly said of her daughter as she, Fleur, and Hermione filed into their second shop, Flourish and Blotts. “I've never been one for the idea that presents have to be a surprise—I've given everyone effectively the same thing for Christmas every year for, oh goodness, how old is Bill now?”

“Twenty-eight,” Fleur provided.

“Right, of course. About thirty-two, or thirty-three years I've been making everyone jumpers. And Arthur is terrible at keeping secrets if anything less than death is on the line. He gets excited and can't help but hint at it, whatever it is.”

“Maybe that's why Ginny likes to make a big deal out of her presents being a surprise,” Hermione
suggested. “To balance things out, in a way?”

“That makes sense, actually.” Fleur observed. A book caught her eye, she picked it up and turned to show it to Molly and Hermione with a wicked grin. “Does this make anyone else think of Sirius?”

Molly started laughing and nodded. Hermione took a deep breath and gave an emphatic, “Yes.”

Bill glanced around the muggle leatherwear shop and said under his breath, “I don't think I have ever looked less out of place, but how the hell did you know this was here?”

“It's been here since the seventies.” Sirius poked Bill towards the end of the wall of jackets where the ladies' jackets were. “I'm pretty sure the closest Remus ever came to killing me was when I bought him a collar from here.”

Bill snorted, reaching out to touch the soft leather of the nearest jacket. “Please never tell Fleur about that.”

Sirius grinned. “Scared of her getting ideas?”

“Maybe.”

Draco shrugged—his conversation with Remus paused while Remus paid for his purchase. Remus thanked the clerk, took his bag, and resumed the conversation. “What does 'shrug' mean?”

“I've never really Christmas shopped,” Draco explained. “The only people I ever gave anything was my parents, I usually got them the same sort of thing every year for Christmas and for their birthdays, and I always just went with my mother to get something for my father and vice versa.”

Remus held open the door as they left the shop. “Well, you could send people cards even if you're not comfortable trying to work out gifts.”

Draco frowned thoughtfully. “I could do that.”

“Let's go look at cards, then.” Remus headed for the stationary store.

Ginny was about to go into the bookshop, saw her mother, Hermione, and Fleur about to come out, and pretty much dived behind the caramel apple cart nearby, clutching her schoolbag full of purchases to her chest. The vender gave her a curious look and she whispered, “Christmas shopping. Trying to keep things a surprise.”

“Ah.” The vender looked away and whistled a couple verses of the Carol of the Bells, then nudged Ginny with a cellophane-wrapped apple on a stick. “You're clear.” He turned the apple to offer her the stick. “Happy holidays.”

“Thank you.” She stood, accepted the apple, and went into the shop.

“I actually want to go to some muggle shops,” Hermione hedged, as she, Fleur, and Molly left the
bookshop.

“Let's go,” Fleur said, tucking an escaping bit of hair back up into her hat. “I'm running out of ideas here.”

“I don't think I'll come along for that,” Molly said. “I'll catch up with some of the others, you two go on.”

The two younger women waved to the elder as they parted ways. Fleur looped her arm through Hermione's as they walked and Hermione leaned into to say, “Now I don't have to find a way to hide her gift from her!”

Fleur laughed.

Harry and Ron had also left Diagon Alley for muggle London. Ron looked around warily as they entered a bigbox store decorated with even more tinsel and bobbles than Grimmauld Place was. “You're going to have to help me in here.”

“Yeah, other than that trip to Costco with your mum, I haven't really been shopping like this since I was ten,” Harry said. “We'll manage.”

“Yeah. Yeah, absolutely,” Ron agreed. “Think we should get things for, like, Neville and Seamus and Luna and all them?”

“Yeah.” Harry shrugged and picked up a snowman shaped flowerpot from a seasonal display in the middle of the main aisle. “At least something little.”

Bill and Sirius came back to Diagon Alley, each carrying a bag from the leather shop, Sirius carrying a couple other bags as well, and promptly spotted Molly walking toward them.

“Mum,” Bill called brightly, “did the girls abandon you?”

Molly shook her head. “They wanted to go to some muggle shops and I bowed out.” She sighed a little wistfully. “I'm not quite sure why I came along—I don't have any shopping to do and I'm really not needed as a chaperone anymore, am I?”

“Well, no, but you are great company,” Bill assured his mother, taking her hand.

She smiled at him fondly, then nodded toward his and Sirius's bags. “Where have you two been off to?”

“Muggle shops,” Sirius and Bill said as one.

“Ah,” Molly said. “Of course.”

“I think,” Sirius said, gesturing toward the next shop he and Bill were wanting to hit and starting that way, “this is part of how things are now, since the war's over. We're all...rejecting the rejection of all things muggle.”

“That sounds right,” Bill agreed.
After Draco bought a sizable stack of Christmas cards at the stationary store, he excused himself to go get a warm drink while Lupin left to finish his shopping in muggle London. He was about halfway through his mug of butterbeer when Ginny came over to his corner table, dropped her overfull schoolbag with a resounding thud, and flopped into a chair across from him. She looked him up and down. “Are you done?”

“Yes,” he answered a bit sharply. “You?”

She patted her bag. “Yes. No peaking.”

“I really don't care to.”

She rolled her eyes then got up to get herself a butterbeer, too.

Not long later, Sirius, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley joined them. Then Lupin returned and gently but pointed shoved off Sirius when he tried to peer into the shopping bags hanging from his elbow. Hermione and Fleur found them, having acquired fancy coffees from somewhere that Tom the proprietor was giving them slightly sour looks for. Finally, Ron and Harry came in, Harry with a roll of wrapping paper sticking out of one of his shopping bags that was printed with big fluffy black cartoon dogs in Santa hats. He slipped the roll of paper out of the bag and lightly bopped Sirius in the chest with it. “Happy Christmas, Sirius.”

“We figure you needed that,” Ron added.

“You are absolutely right,” Sirius laughed, taking the paper.
Chapter 38

The next few days were largely taken up by present wrapping and a certain amount of trying and mostly failing to coax wrapping paper into behaving neatly by magic. Bright, multicolored parcels were slowly piling up under all three of Number Twelve's Christmas trees, some brought by owls and even a couple of parrots. By all accounts, there were even more under the tree at the Burrow, not that Draco had been there to see it.

Draco had been steadily working his way through writing a couple dozen Christmas cards—slow going because he only had half a clue what one was supposed to put in these things—and was just finishing up the last few on the evening of the twenty-first, sitting at a desk in the drawing room with Euphrates perched on the corner, hooting softly at irregular intervals. He set aside his quill, picked up the card he'd just finished, and fanned it to dry the ink so he could close it without it smudging.

“There you are,” a voice said warmly from the hall and Mrs. Weasley stepped in, carrying two mugs of hot chocolate, one of which she set on the desk in front of Euphrates. “It'll be dinner in about twenty, I think.”

“Alright.” Draco folded the card and tucked it into its champaign-gold envelope. “Thank you.”

“I've just been talking with Sirius and Remus and Bill and Fleur,” Mrs. Weasley continued as she gently poked Euphrates to keep him from sticking his foot in the hot chocolate then petted him and took a sip from her own mug. “We've decided the best way to go about things is for everyone to come to the Burrow Christmas Eve—including you—have dinner, stay the night, and open presents in the morning. Then a bit later we can all come here, open the rest of the presents, and have lunch.”

Draco gave a sort of half cough that stuck in his throat, then cleared it while he sealed the envelope with a little blob of green wax and the signet ring Sirius had sent him back in October. “That's alright, I can just—”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Weasley cut him off sternly. “We are not leaving you here, alone, in a big old empty house on Christmas Eve. I won't hear of it. You're coming over with everyone else Christmas Eve.”

Draco shut his mouth, nodded slightly, and set the now-sealed envelope aside. “I suppose I am, then.”

She looked him over, pursed her lips, then pulled another chair around and sat, holding her mug to her chest. “What's going on with you?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” Draco opened his second-to-last card on the desk in front of him and stared blankly at the smiling watercolour snowman inside.

“You've been in a state all break, hardly spending time with anyone, even Hermione, and you've been worse since you went to visit your mother. Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” Draco insisted. He took a breath and dipped his quill to start writing in the card to his mother. “It's just family, and holidays, and homework. I'm fine.” He paused. “Thank you for the coco.”

“You're welcome,” she said softly, then stood, lay a hand on his shoulder for a moment, then left
the room. Euphrates hooted after her and promptly grabbed the edge of Draco's mug with his talons.

"Don't you dare," Draco said sharply. The owl relinquished the mug and puffed himself up with an indignant little trill.

Draco finished up the note to his mother—decidedly sugar coated in holiday sentiment but not exactly untrue—sealed it in its red and white striped envelope, looked at his one remaining card, and sighed. He'd gotten a card for his father, but he didn't really want to send a card to his father, especially since receiving something from Draco would give Lucius permission to write back. If he didn't send a card to his father, though, his mother would be hurt. He could always just burn anything he received in return.

There was a pre-written holiday greeting printed inside the card. Draco chewed on his lip, penned “1998” in the upper corner, wrote “Father” above the printed message and “Your Son, Draco” below it, then sealed it up, not bothering to be sure the ink wouldn't smudge.

He gave his mother's card to Euphrates, held his arm out for the owl to step onto, and pressed his face briefly into the bird's feathers before letting him out the window. He'd take the rest of the cards that needed to be sent out to the post office in the morning.

~*~

Cooking for Christmas Eve dinner started before lunch. Remus and Ron had volunteered to help Molly and Fleur in the well appointed, recently-rebuilt, but still cozy kitchen with Hermione and the twins nearby to be extra hands when needed. Remus suspected that a significant part of why Ron had decided to cook was Harry and Ginny being a lot more conspicuous than they thought they were about cuddling up in a blanket in a corner in the sitting room, snogging over a copy of Quidditch Quarterly. Eventually, Remus was sure, Ron would actually get used to his best mate dating his sister. Eventually, Harry and Ginny would grow into being a little less obnoxious.

“Oh, Mum,” George said from the other side of the new breakfast counter that separated the kitchen proper from the dining area, his gaze sliding over to his twin with a wicked grin, “I don't think Fred's told you—”

“You shut up,” Fred interrupted, clearly knowing where he brother was going.

“Hasn't told me what?” Molly asked, elbow deep in a turkey.

“Nothing!” Fred said, but George talked over him: “That he's got a girlfriend.”

“I have not got a girlfriend,” Fred objected. Molly arched an inquisitive eyebrow at him and he wilted a little. “I don't, I'm not—we're not dating, I just, I met someone….”

“Met her,” George said, “then went on three dates with her.”

“It was one date.”

George crossed his arms. “Then what was that lunch you had with her, then going for coffee?”

“It was lunch and coffee!” Fred insisted.
“They were dates,” George hissed to his mother.

“What's her name?” Molly asked with well-practiced faux casualness.

Fred dropped his head in resignation onto his forearms on the counter, and answered, half-muffled, “Tesni, goes by Tes.”

“She's Welsh?” Remus asked.

“Yes,” both twins said, Fred still muffled by the counter.

Percy and Bill were on the couch, having an intense discussion about international wizarding law and how it interacts with local law—both magic and muggle—and with international muggle law and how much of a pain the arse that all was for both of their jobs.

Draco had wound up standing on the threshold between the kitchen and sitting room, half listening to the legal bitching, half watching the cooking, holding both Crookshanks and Ginny's lanky kitten, Byrd, because both cats would start to scream if he put either of them down.

Sirius and Arthur were out in the garage, hood up on the mid-60s Vauxhall Viva Molly had begrudgingly allowed Arthur to buy off a colleague who's muggle mother-in-law had recently passed, as long as he promised to not make it fly. He'd agreed, but there was still the matter of making it run after having sat neglected and undriven for over a decade.

Lunch was pasta fried with eggs and cheese, eaten wherever there was room, which did not include the dining table as it was piled on one end with dinner prep, and on the other by Hermione's potion making. Just as everyone was finishing up eating and going back to whatever they were doing—except for Draco, who had fled the cats favor of “doing research for class” out in the garage—there was a loud pop in the garden, and Charlie let himself in through the kitchen door, pushing back the hood on his coat as he did, a large bag thrown over his shoulder like Father Christmas.

“I promised I'd make it home, and I did!” he announced, beaming as the twins and Ron more or less tackled him against the wall by the door.

“What happened to your hair?” Molly asked, shoving a pie in the oven that didn't contain the turkey. She tossed aside her oven mitt and went to hug her son.

Charlie shrugged and scratched at the shaved side of his head. “My friend Manx calls it a wolftail, but Bridget says the top's still too short for that so it's just an undercut.”

Molly rolled her eyes and tutted and pulled him into a warm hug. “It's good to have you home, dear.”

“I think it looks cool,” Ron said, earning more tutting and a sigh from Molly.

“Charlie,” Remus said, handing Fleur the bowl of potatoes he'd just peeled, “do me a favour and don't tell Sirius what Manx calls your haircut or he'll start threatening to shave my head in my sleep.”

Charlie snorted. “Okay, I won't tell him. But I can't speak for them.” He jerked a thumb at the twins without so much as turning to see the conspiratorial look that had passed between them at
“A wolftail?” Sirius laughed. “Is that what it's called? Moony, you should cut your hair like that.”

Between the dining table and the breakfast counter, they'd managed to fit everyone into one room for dinner. Every horizontal surface other than the floor that wasn't accommodating either someone's butt or their plate was laden with serving dishes, and the cats and all the owls and Charlie's four triwizard minidragons had all squeezed themselves in, too.

“Not on your life, Pads,” Remus objected. “I am too old.”

“You're not even forty,” Arthur pointed out.

Remus shook his head. “I am a grey and grumpy old man. I feel about—what's thirty-five times seven?”

“Two-hundred and forty-five,” Draco said over his goblet of spiced wine before Hermione had finished inhaling. She nodded a confirmation.

“I feel about two-hundred and forty-eight, then,” Remus concluded.

“Odd, I would've put you at about twenty this morning,” Sirius said with a grin. Remus elbowed him, which made him laugh again, which almost made him choke on his mashed potatoes.

The conversation turned through what Percy was doing at work, to Arthur's new car—he and Sirius were going to have to go buy a part—to the emancipation of the Hogwart's house elves set to go into effect on the new year thanks to Hermione, to one of Charlie's friends almost getting eaten not by a dragon but by a mountain lion, to Ginny refusing to discuss quidditch because “The enemy is at the table, Bill!” to—

“Fred has a girlfriend?” Charlie spluttered, nearly spitting his wine.

“First of all, no, I don't, not yet,” Fred said. “Second, why the hell do you sound so surprised?”

Charlie held a hand up in dismissive defense while he wiped his mouth.

“Watch out, George,” Bill said, tossing half a green bean across the table at his brother, “Freddie might be giving you a run for your money on next one to get married.”

“Nah, that's gonna be Ron,” Charlie said matter of factly.

“Absolutely not,” Ron said, horrified, at the same time Hermione scoffed, “I don't think so.”

Hermione paused and frowned intensely at her boyfriend, “What do you mean, 'absolutely not’?”

“Whoa, hang on.” Ron twisted in his seat. “Why are you mad? You said no, too!”

“I'm not mad,” Hermione said sharply.

“My money's on Ginny next, actually,” Percy added placidly. A blob of cranberry hit him in the face.

“Stop throwing food, all of you!” Molly ordered with a pointed glare at Bill and Ginny, who both mumbled apologies.
“Anyway,” George said slowly, “Bill, Fleur, when's Mum getting grandkids?”

Fleur smiled at him with a kind of threatening sweetness. “Zat really is the kind of conversation you should have with Angelina in private, don't you think?”

George turned red while most of the rest of the table howled with laughter. Bill kissed his wife on the cheek and murmured something to her in French that made her laugh, too.

After dinner and dessert with many pies and puddings and biscuits to choose from, hot chocolate and eggnog and a couple glasses of brandy for Sirius and Fleur, it was off to bed with everyone. In being rebuilt, the Burrow had gone from six bedrooms to seven, but that still only left one room free with each of the couples and the twins paired up, and since that room was technically Percy's, he claimed it, leaving Charlie and Draco.

“I don't know about you,” Charlie said, walking past Draco to where he'd dumped his things on the couch, “but I don't want to share with Percy.”

“I don't know him well enough for that,” Draco agreed.

Charlie snorted. “I know him too well for that—he snores.”

“I do not snore!” Percy objected from partway up the stairs.

The entire rest of the family called, “Yes, you do,” flatly from all over the house.

Percy huffed and continued up to his room, ignoring Charlie sticking his tongue out at his back. When Percy disappeared from sight, Charlie went back to his bag and pulled out a set of dragon-print pajamas then resumed his conversation with Draco. “Mum can dig out some blankets and you and I can sleep down here. Besides, sleeping in the same room as the tree, we'll hardly have to move for presents. Might even catch a glimpse of Saint Nick,” he added with a playful wink.

Draco eyed him and his pajamas. “How old are you again?”

“Just turned twenty-six.”

“Right.”

Blankets and pillows materialized from somewhere and a bed was made up for Draco on the couch with Charlie on the floor between the Christmas tree and the fire.

“Mum, Mum, Mum,” he said, trying to get a word in between his mother's fretting over him sleeping on the floor. “Mum, I regularly sleep outside on the ground. This is fine. And my presence is your present so really it's only right that I be under the tree in the morning.” He grinned.

“Alright,” Mrs. Weasley agreed reluctantly. She ruffled her son's hair before he enveloped himself in blankets entirely. “Goodnight, and happy Christmas, Charlie.”

“Happy Christmas, Mum,” Charlie echoed from within his blanket cocoon.

Mrs. Weasley paused at the foot of the stairs. “Happy Christmas and goodnight to you, too, Draco.”

“Goodnight,” Draco mumbled back, feeling faintly sick in a way that had nothing to do with how much he'd eaten.
The lights went out, leaving the sitting room lit dimly by the low-burnt fire and the multicolored glowing bobbles on the tree, which together resolved to cast the room slightly pink.

Draco closed his eyes.
Chapter Notes

I missed my last usual posting day because I was cramping to finish a cosplay before a con, but I'm back and as a reward for everyone's patience you get the longest chapter I've posted in quite a while!
Enjoy!

Remus scrunched his eyes and rolled away from Sirius whispering in his ear to wake up.

“Moonyyy,” Sirius songsonged a little louder, propping himself partway up on one elbow and poking Remus's cheek. “Moony, wake up, it's Christmas.”

Remus grumbled, pulled the pillow out from under his own head, and smacked Sirius with it. “You are a child,” he muttered sleepily while Sirius laughed. “What time is it?”

“Bit before nine.”

“Okay,” Remus exhaled. “Coffee, then presents.”

They got up, stuck their feet in house shoes, and went downstairs. The lump of blankets wedged in next to the Christmas tree was snoring slightly, and Draco, face down on the couch, had acquired another layer of covers during the night made up of cats and owls. In the kitchen, Molly was already up, making coffee in careful quiet. She looked up at them as they entered and held a finger to her lips before pushing the coffee pot towards them and magicking a pair of mismatched mugs down from the hooks above the sink. They poured themselves coffee, making as little noise as possible, while she retrieved a heavy skillet from the cabinet with remarkable stealth. Skillet held up in one hand, she locked eyes with them, grinned mischievously, and set it on the stove with a heavy clang. In an instant, a door banged open upstairs, followed by footsteps on the stairs, the thunk of someone tripping and catching themself, George saying, “Fred!” and Fred cursing. Another door opened, then another, Ginny's bewildered voice asked, “Did your leg just fall off?” The cats yowled, the owls hooted indignantly, the tree jangled, a score of feet came pounding and padding down toward the ground floor.

“Like clockwork,” Molly said, reaching for the eggs on the counter. Sirius laughed loudly. Remus chuckled into his mug.

“Happy Christmas!” the twins boomed, Fred holding his leg aloft and leaning heavily on George, the two of them first to the bottom of the stairs despite everything.

Half sitting up, Draco stared at them blearily, then nearly fell off the couch when George shoved his shoulder with an order to “Move,” so Fred could sit and put his prosthetic back on.

The rest of the family, plus Harry and Hermione, followed, all in pajamas, some in dressing gowns, with Mr. Weasley bringing up the rear in a tasseled night cap.

Sirius and Lupin came in from the kitchen with mugs and a coffee pot and Lupin saying, “There's
also cocoa if anyone wants it.”

Hermione scooped Crookshanks out from behind Draco and perched herself on the arm of the couch next to him while Byrd climbed to Fred’s shoulder, hopped to the back of the couch, then leapt into Ginny’s arms.

Mrs. Weasley stationed herself in the doorway, wand out, so she was there with everyone else in the sitting room but could still tend breakfast by magic from afar.

Charlie, having emerged from his blanket cocoon, grabbed the nearest parcel from under the tree, flipped it over to read the tag, said, “Ron,” then chucked it at his youngest brother, smacking him in the face.

“You're lucky this is my jumper from Mum,” Ron said sourly as he ripped open the paper.

“Why do you think I aimed for your face?” Charlie grinned angelically, then threw the next three presents at Percy, Lupin, and Hermione, the last one of which sent Crookshanks running for cover.

Charlie, be careful,” Mrs. Weasley admonished.

“I am being careful,” Charlie assured her, tossing a small, flat, newspaper wrapped box to Ginny, who caught it easily.

Lupin pulled his own Christmas jumper on over his pajamas and leaned into Mrs. Weasley to thank her. Hermione got open her giftbox from Ginny only to find another box inside. Percy finished unwrapping his present from his sister, frowned at the bottle of Spell-Right Ink, and looked over at her. “Is this some sort of commentary?”

She shrugged. “Your spelling goes to shit when you're tired and I don't think you've slept in, like, four years. Thought it would be useful.”

“Ginny! How many boxes—?” Hermione exclaimed as she opened the fourth layer of giftbox to finally pull out, “A bookmark?”

“Oh, that's one of ours!” Fred said.

“It yells at you if it stays on the same page too long,” George added.

Hermione rolled her eyes and lightly kicked Ginny's shoulder. Ginny stuck her tongue out, then opened her own present: a framed coloured pencil sketch of a falcon holding a snitch in its beak. She looked up at her brother. “Charlie, did you draw this? It's so cute.”

“Yeah.” He tossed the twins the distinctly squishy packages that were their jumpers. “Manx got me a coloured pencil set for my birthday and I hadn't gotten anyone presents yet, so I just did drawings.”

“Charlie,” Bill said slowly, “your birthday was a week ago.”

“Two weeks!” Charlie corrected, punctuating the statement by spiking Bill's jumper at him, but Bill caught it, rather ruining the effect.

“Wait,” Fleur asked, “when's your birthday?”

“The twelfth,” Charlie provided, lobbing his sister-in-law her jumper much more gently.

Fleur smacked her husband in the arm. “If ’e started right after getting the pencils—”
“I did.”

“—then ’e was working on presents before we were! We didn't go shopping until the eighteenth.” She tore open her new lilac jumper and hugged it. “Molly, this is so, so—I forgot the word.” She looked to Bill. “Douillet?”

He shook his head blankly. “I have no idea what that means.”

“Isn't that 'soft?’” Lupin asked.

“Yes,” Fleur said reluctantly, “but I don't mean soft.”

“Comfy?” Sirius suggested.


“I'm glad you like it, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said then ducked into the kitchen to do something more hands on with breakfast.

“This is taking forever,” Ginny complained, crawling forward to grab her and Harry's jumpers from the pile under the tree.

“Ah, to be young and think a few minutes is forever,” Sirius said mock-wistfully. Lupin elbowed him lightly.

Mr. Weasley dug around back of the tree and stood up with a box cradled in one arm from which he passed out sachets of foil-wrapped chocolate galleons to everyone in the room. Fred levered himself down to the floor next to Charlie and grabbed at a couple more of the little newspaper wrapped parcels. “I wanna see more of these drawings. Perce, George, ah, here's mine.”

Charlie had drawn them a bespectacled squirrel clutching a dripping quill, a red fox munching a turkey leg, and a raccoon examining half a sandwich, respectively.

Ginny tossed the remaining jumpers to their recipients: “Hermione, Percy, Charlie, Dad, Sirius, and look, Malfoy, even you get one.”

“Of course he gets one,” Mrs. Weasley huffed as she returned to her post in the doorway. “Everyone gets one.”

Draco quietly opened then put on his light grey jumper while Fleur opened the white and blue motorcycle jacket Bill had gotten her and kissed him for it, and Hermione explained the rolodex she had gotten for Percy to him.

Percy had gotten everyone sweets, mostly chocolate Santas, but not all. Sour lollies for Ginny, gummy dragons for Charlie, a single ordinary candy cane for Draco.

“Where did you find these?” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed excitedly, having just torn the paper off Percy's gift to her: a half dozen brightly coloured little sandwich biscuits stacked neatly in a clear lace-patterned box.

“A cafe near work.” Percy straightened up proudly. “I remembered you'd had them on holiday when we went to Egypt and loved them, then couldn't find them or remember what they're called, so when I saw them I knew I get to get them for you.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Weasley said earnestly.
“They're macarons!” Fleur noted. “They're French. Bill, 'elp me remember to get my grandmother's recipe when we visit my family.”

“Isn't your grandmother a veela?” Harry asked through a mouth full of chocolate.

She glared at him. “I mean my father's mother, though my mother's mother was also a plenty good cook. She didn't much bake, though.”

“Right.” Harry ducked his head.

Ron cocked his head at his best friend. “Did you forget for a second there that people have two sets of grandparents?”

“Yes,” Harry admitted. “In my defense, I never met any of my grandparents.”

“Damn shame, too,” Sirius said. “If they'd lived, Euphemia and Camellia would have gotten competitive with the grandmotherly doting, I'm sure of it.”

A sudden and unexpected knock at the front door prompted everyone to look around. Ron was the first to have the good sense to go to the door. He leaned against it to look out the peep hole, stepped back, and opened it. “Luna?”

“Good morning, Ron,” she said with particularly cheery dreaminess, a blue knit hat pulled lopsidedly over her hair, her arms full of a rather tottery pile of presents all wrapped in plain brown paper, stamped by hand with multicolored snowflakes to make it festive. “Happy Christmas, I hope I'm not interrupting.”

“Of course not, dear,” Mrs. Weasley assured her. “Ron, let her in out of the cold. Come on.”

Ron moved out of the way to let Luna in then closed the door behind her. George and Harry helped her put down her armload of presents and hugs went around.

“Thank you for the hat,” she said as she hugged Mrs. Weasley back.

“You're very welcome.” Mrs. Weasley smiled warmly. “Would you like a hot cocoa or anything? We'll have breakfast in just a moment.”

Luna shook her head. “Thank you, I already ate, and I'm about to go into London. I'm going with Neville to visit his parents.” She glanced down almost shyly. “I hope they like me.”

A few people—Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Lupin and Sirius—exchanged looks.

“Luna...” Harry began but trailed off without finishing his sentence.

Lupin stepped forward and asked gently, “Luna, you know, don't know, why the Longbottoms are at St. Mungo's?”

She nodded again, eyes dark. “I know.” She smiled. “But they're still his parents, and I still hope they like me.”

“Of course they'll like you,” Sirius said gruffly.

“You're extremely likable,” Hermione added, reaching out to rub Luna's shoulder.

“Weirdly likable,” Draco agreed.
Luna ducked her head appreciatively, gave a few more hugs, and went on her way, calling another “Happy Christmas” over her shoulder.

Draco was keenly aware that he was missing something about the condition on Neville's parents, but he had enough of an idea, knowing the history there, to know better than to ask. Instead he dug through the pile of presents Luna had brought, tossing them to their recipients, until he found his own and opened it, relieved and grateful that it was there. It was a metal pen case lined with velvet.

Mrs. Weasley brought out a plate of breakfast sandwiches while everyone else opened their gifts from Luna.

“Mum,” Ginny said, nodding towards a parcel balanced on the arm of the couch while fastened a knew lacy choker necklace with a rose cameo pendant around her own neck, “that one's for you from Luna. And there's more for you over here.”

“Yes, alright.” Mrs. Weasley found a seat, opened the parcel from Luna, which turned out to be a tin of homemade biscuits, and went through her other gifts. Charlie had drawn her a mama dragon curled protectively around a clutch of seven eggs. She got a nice knife set and an enchanted sharpener from Ron and Harry, a fancy handsoap in a yarnball-shaped bottle from Ginny, an actual enormous ball of incredibly soft exotic yarn from Bill, an elegant sewing basket with a pincushion top from Fleur.

“This one's from us,” Fred said, hauling a fairly large odd-shaped gift out from under the tree.

Mrs. Weasley carefully pulled the paper off to reveal a brass contraption made up of stakes and fine chains with Anti-Gnome-Inator engraved in big block letters on the globe-like finial of the largest, central stake.

“No more gnomes in the garden,” George told her.

She hugged them both, thanking them genuinely.

Arthur had gotten her a stand mixer, which prompted a brief squabble over electrics, but the twins interrupted by laughing their heads off over their gifts from Ginny: a single festive sock for Fred, and one gaudy gold clip on earring for George.

Fred pulled his sister into a sideways hug, ruffling her hair aggressively. “You are horrible!”

“She's brilliant, that's what she is,” George corrected, clipping his earring on, then joining the hugging and hair ruffling while Ginny squirmed, failing to escape.

“You look like Bill,” Percy noted of George. George threw a present at him.

“Ow!” Percy rubbed at the spot the present had hit him. “What is this? It's heavy!”

“Well, it's basically a block of glass,” Bill said while Percy unwrapped the tortoise shaped magnifying glass.

Lupin gave Mr. and Mrs. Weasley a pair of mirrors they could talk to each other through while Mr. Weasley was at work. Percy got more desk supplies: a self sorting mail tray from Harry, a stapler from Ron, a ridiculously massive set of gel pens and a glittery purple desk organizer from the twins that had Percy muttering he was gonna need the espresso Luna had gotten him. Sirius handed him a mug of cocoa instead.

The rest of Charlie's drawings emerged from their multilingual newspaper wrappings one by one: a
small owl that was definitely Pigwidgeon eating a candycane for Ron, a duck with a rubber ducky for Mr. Weasley, a ballerina dancing on a crescent moon for Fleur along with an apology from Charlie that, “I’m better with animals than people,” a baby dragon chewing on a boot for Bill, a puppy sitting in a motorcycle helmet for Sirius, a hare standing up on a large chocolate bar for Lupin, a hedgehog curled around a snitch for Draco, a cat sprawled across an open book for Hermione, and a baby Hungarian Horntail snapping at a snitch flying around its head for Harry.

The gifts for Charlie had a fairly predictable theme: dragon print boxers from George, dragon pint socks from Fred, a book on Comparative Dragon Physiognomy from Bill, a dragon plushy from Hermione, a dragon keychain from Harry, and a formal invitation from Luna and her father to write a feature story about dragons for the Quibbler. Ron broke the pattern slightly with a book on dinosaurs, saying, “They're like dragons, but they're all extinct, and none of them breathed fire.”

“As far as we know,” Harry said.

“As far as we know,” Ron agreed.


Ginny had gotten him a knickknack box decorated with a fake dragon scale. She shrugged. “I figure you can replace it with a real one when you get back.”

“Actually…” Charlie dug into the bottom of his bag and pulled out a handful of scales, holding them up to see which would fit best. “You have owls, you get feathers everywhere; cats, you get fur; dragons you get scales.”

“Do you have any idea how much we're paying to buy dragon scales for our products?” George asked, affronted.

“I didn't know you were using them. You shoulda told me, I'll send you a box next time I clean stuff out.”

There were a few gifts from Neville that had arrived by post over the previous few days: a nice card for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley that they put up on the mantel next to the one from Draco, a bunch of quidditch themed cat toys for Ginny and Byrd, a chocolate frog card album for Ron, grape flavoured apples for George, and apple flavoured grapes for Fred.

Fleur got a beaded necklace from Luna, which went quite well with the dagger and hip sheath she'd gotten from Ginny. The twins got her a vase and a bouquet of silk flowers that change color depending on the weather. They got Bill a tin of ginseng tea and a book of baby names. Bill smacked Fred with the book.

Ginny got Bill a necklace with a pendant on it that was identical to Sirius's compass rose tattoo for direction. He'd gotten a sunstone pendant from Luna that served as a torch if you squeezed it, and he strung it onto the necklace next to the compass rose.

When they'd finally gotten through all the gifts, cleaned up the wrapping paper and ribbons much to the irritation of the cats, and put away what made sense to put away—in particular Mr. Weasley's new toolset from Harry and Sirius out in the garage with the Vauxhall Viva, his leather driving gloves from Fleur in the glovebox—everyone got themselves together to go to Grimmauld Place for lunch.
Chapter 40

Everyone crowded around the kitchen table in Grimmauld Place, all in their new jumpers, Molly in the cardigan Hermione had monogrammed for her and the plush houseslippers she’d been given by Sirius while she, Harry, and Remus cooked. At the table, Ron and Ginny were playing wizard’s chess with the new glass set he’d gotten from Luna. Ginny kept fiddling with her new jangly charm bracelet from Bill and Ron was intermittently petting the carved stone lizard Bill had gotten him as though it were a real, living animal. There was a good chance he was petting the lizard as a way to mourn the patchy beard he’d been talked into shaving off before they left the Burrow to try out the nice shaving set his sister had gotten him.

Next to them, the twins had their heads bowed over the sets of puzzles Bill had given them—a metal set for Fred, wooden for George. Fred had a pair of puffy earmuffs down around his neck and Fred was wearing a matching puffy hat, both from Luna.

Arthur was at least as engaged in his gifts as the kids were. He’d worn the waterproof cloak he’d gotten from his eldest son for the three steps from the courtyard into the house and only reluctantly hung it up when Molly chastised him to not wear it inside. He’d voraciously read the introduction to the children's science encyclopedia Ron had gotten him, made a few paper airplanes following the book of paper plane designs from Fred using the pack of patterned paper from George, and was now grinning delightedly down at the electronic Tamagotchi pet Hermione had given him while one of the paper planes swooped around the room, having been bespelled by Charlie. Luna had given him an enchanted spoon that kept warm drinks warm and it was sitting in his mug of cocoa, his shiny new spork from Ginny laying on the table next to the mug, waiting for him to eat his lunch with it.

Sirius came trotting back downstairs from putting up the doxy-repelling talisman he’d gotten from Luna and the drawing from Charlie, hugged Remus from behind and kissed his cheek. “Anyway I can help? Maybe, speed things along?”

“Food cooks at the speed it cooks,” Molly told him.

“You just wanna eat so we can go open more presents,” Harry said, then flinched back as the pan he was stirring spat at him.

“Yeah,” Sirius admitted freely. “Don't you?”

“Go sit.” Remus gave Sirius a gentle shove toward the table. Sirius kissed him again and went.

“Where are the blonds?” Sirius asked as he dropped into a chair. “And Hermione?”

“To get wine,” Bill said flatly. He was reading Luna's Christmas gift to Hermione, a copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them annotated by the author and his son.

Sirius arched an eyebrow curiously.

“Right after you went upstairs,” George said without looking up from the puzzle in his hands, “Hermione and Draco somehow got into an argument about wizarding vs. muggle wine.”

“Fleur suggested a taste test to settle it,” Fred continued. “So Draco went to raid the Malfoy Manor wine cellar and Fleur went with Hermione to find a store that both sells wine and is open Christmas day.”
“That should be fun,” Sirius said and pulled Arthur's paper airplane book over to him to flip through it.

Ginny won the game of chess, Harry sat down to play winner, and Ron got up to help finish making lunch. Draco returned just after food was ready with a crate of six bottles of different varieties of Malfoy Apothecary wine. He pulled out one of the bottles and held it out to Remus bottle-mouth first. “Look familiar?”

Remus looked, then laughed because there, branded onto the cork, was the mark of the very same curse Draco had broken in class two months before. “I’ll show you how to actually dispel that curse before you crack into those.”

Hermione and Fleur returned shortly thereafter, their arms full of plain brown paper bags.

“We're having a party later,” Fleur announced as she set down her burden and sat down to eat. “The cashier asked if we were, I said yes, and I will not be made a liar.”

“A party it is, then,” Bill agreed, kissing her sweetly.

After lunch, they settled into the music room where the largest of the Christmas trees was, summoned the parcels from under the other trees, and started in on presents again.

There was more candy: a chocolate dragon egg from Remus to Charlie, muggle chocolates from Hermione to Remus, a Hunnydukes bar for Percy from Remus, a box of chocolates for Remus from Harry, and finally a break in the Remus-and-chocolate pattern with a bag of simple but unusually flavoured hard candies for Harry from Fleur.

Fleur unwrapped Harry's gift to her, frowned at it a moment, then burst out laughing—it was a plain white mug printed with an adorable, neon, multicolored mermaid. Fleur wiped the corner of her eye. “Arroy, you—” She shook her head. “You're ridiculous.”

“But you think it's funny, too!” he responded, reaching for another gift of his own.

She nodded. “I think all fantasies of classical, beautiful mermaids are hilarious in their wrongness.”

“Exactly!” Harry pulled the ribbon off his sizable, orange-papered package then tore it open. Inside he found a soft cozy dressing gown and a mug of his own with a carton of hot cocoa mix stuffed inside. He looked up at the twins. “Thank you.”

“Combine that with the cone-of-silence hat Luna got you and take a damn break sometime, okay?” George said.

“You need it,” Fred added.

“You're not wrong…” Harry admitted with a sigh.

Hermione picked up a stack of festive envelopes and handed out the Christmas cards—most of them were from Draco, one for everyone there, then two from Neville for Remus and Sirius, and one more in a particularly plain envelope for Sirius.

“I cannot imagine you actually saying any of this,” Ron said, reading his card from Draco.

Draco plucked the card from Ron's grasp, cleared his throat, then looked straight at him and
monotoned, “Here's hoping your holidays are full of light and warmth. Happy Christmas.”

He handed the card back. Ron took it, frowning placatedly. “Okay, tone makes a difference.”

“I think what he really meant is he can't imagine you being cheery,” Sirius snickered, refolding his third, plainest card and tucking it into a pocket.

Draco scowled briefly, took a breath, broke into a broad smile and threw an arm affectionately around Ron's shoulders. “Here's hoping your holidays are full of light and warmth,” he said brightly. “Happy Christmas, Ron.”

“That's worse!” Ron laughed, slipping out from under Draco's arm. “That's so much worse.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and tore into the next of her gifts. She held up the striking, elegant batwing-sleeved jacket and looked at Fleur fondly. “You get me.”

Fleur patted the dagger strapped to her hip. “C'est mutuel.”

It turned out that Fleur was an exceptionally on-point gift giver. Black pearl cufflinks for Draco that were very much his style. Iridescent sealing wax for Charlie with a signet stamp of a dragon twined through his initials.

Sirius laughed so hard when he opened his gift from her that he couldn't speak and had to hold it up for everyone else to see it—a children's book titled Uncle Max Ate My Homework!, apparently about animagi, with a cover illustration of a big mostly black dog winking and wagging his tail with a roll of parchment in his mouth—and everyone else had a good laugh too.

Sirius wound up laughing again at Fleur's gift to Remus: an assortment of fancy dried sausages. Remus looked to the ceiling. “There's two things he could be laughing about.”

“It's both,” Sirius chuckled.

Remus shook his head. “In any case, thank you.”

Fleur giggled and nodded to her husband. “He gave me the idea.”

She'd gotten Bill an incredibly soft fluffy blanket which he immediately wrapped them both in. Percy was quite taken with the leather briefcase she'd given him and how authoritative it looked. Ron excitedly went through the entire deck of Chudley Cannons playing cards she'd given him, thrilled to find that every card was different.

When Hermione opened the jeweled hair brooch Fleur had given her, she made a soft sound of appreciative surprise. “It's big enough it won't just get lost!”

“I figured you have that problem too!” Fleur laughed. “Even worse than me, too, because of the curls.”

Hermione nodded intensely as she pinned her hair up with the brooch.

Fleur gave the twins both monogramed ascots, each embellished in the base colour of the other. Bill glanced at her sideway. “You know they're just going to wear each other's, don't you?”

“No, we won't,” the twins objected, tying one another's new ascots.

“We're too easy to tell apart now,” Fred continued.
George shrugged and finished the thought, “So it isn't much fun anymore.”

“But have you considered,” Remus began thoughtfully, “that now if you switch people may end up tripping over themselves, thinking they'd mixed up which of you had lost what body part and had been calling you both the wrong name for ages.”

The twins looked at him, then looked at each other, then quickly swapped ascots. Remus grinned playfully while Sirius hugged him and kissed his cheek and the rest of Weasleys sighed or dropped their faces into their hands—other than Ginny, who was positively cackling.

All the gifts from Sirius were easy to identify since he'd wrapped everything with the dogs-in-Santa-hats paper Harry and Ron had picked up. He'd gotten both of them buttonfront shirts, saying, “It's generally a good idea to dress like you're qualified for your jobs.”

Harry arched an eyebrow at him. “Have you ever actually had a job?”

“I am a substitute teacher,” Sirius scoffed.

“And he looks very professional at work,” Hermione noted.

“Thank you, Herm—”

“Even if he doesn't act it,” she added.

“Hey!”

At that, it was Remus's turn to laugh.

Sirius had gotten Hermione a book of Norse mythology with beautiful moving illustrations, a set of exercise weights for Ginny that would get functionally heavier as their user got stronger, a giant rawhide candycane for Draco that earned him a snort and an eyeroll—“You'll thank me on New Years!”—and another giant rawhide candycane and a pack of festively printed boxers for Remus that earned him an exasperated but fond shove. His gift to Charlie was a fire extinguisher, which was initially met with confusion, then with appreciation, amusement, and a certain degree of fascination once the more muggle-literate in the room explained what it was. The set of sticky notes he gave Percy received a similar series of reactions. He got Bill a sturdy backpack and Fleur a whole stack of trashy romance novels.

Draco eyed one of the books, frowning. “I think my roommate was reading this a few weeks ago.”

“Exavior has good taste,” Sirius concluded brightly.

Sirius and Remus had a joint gift to both the twins: a tabletop mini pinball machine and a book about pinball.

“I guess the two of you support the idea of us starting an arcade, huh?” George asked while Fred looked through the book.

“We think the endeavor suits you,” Remus said.

Harry and Hermione were on the same page as Remus and Sirius with getting the twins potentially inspirational playthings. Harry got them each a Nerf dart tag set, and Hermione got a Rubix cube for Fred and a Bop It for George. Ron, on the other hand, had keyed in on his brothers' recent avian interests and gave George a book on exotic birds, and Fred an absolutely hideous plushy parrot.
“I love him,” Fred said decisively, holding the plushy at arms length, then hugging it and getting up to set it on the edge of the bookshelf next to the knitted grindilow Remus had gotten from Luna.

From the twins, Ron got a set of brand new dress robes, which were very nice, but, “Purple?”

“You look good in purple,” Fred said.

“We all look good in purple,” George added, gesturing broadly around at the Weasleys as a group.

“It's the hair,” they finished together.

Ron looked back down at the robes. “Yeah, fair point.”

Fred gave Hermione a sharp corduroy waistcoat. George gave her a smaller matching waistcoat for Crookshanks. Amazingly, she got Crookshanks into his new duds without getting scratched, but the cat was less than thrilled about being dressed. He didn't seem to want to move.

They gave Ginny a sizable bag of prank supplies, which worried Remus a bit as to what she'd get up to once term started back, but he didn't voice his concerns. For Draco they'd gotten a nutcracker that managed to be both functional and decorative and a sack of mixed in-shell nuts. They gave Sirius a bottle of mead and a set of crystal and silver goblets etched with the Canis Major constellation. For Remus, they'd gotten a pair of cookbooks, one entirely focused on chocolate, the other a “doggie and me” cookbook full of canine safe but still humanly appetizing recipes, “So you and Sirius can eat together!”

That was met with laughter and Sirius shaking his head. “You know I don't actually have canine dietary restrictions, right?”

George shrugged while Fred grinned and said, “Who cares?”

There were a handful more presents from Neville: a set of personal library stickers for Hermione, a stressball for Harry that switched between the various quidditch balls every time you squeezed it, and for Draco a clear resin spire as long as his hand with a sprig of bright yellow flowers inside along with a note that read I had hoped to find a flower with “draco” or “draconus” in its name, but I couldn't track any down, so you get these Snap Dragons instead.

There were also a couple presents for Draco from his parents. The smaller of them was a stationary set from his mother, a not so subtle hint that he should write to her more. The other was an enormous bottle of fire whiskey.

“Why?” Draco asked no one in particular, staring at the bottle. “Why does he think I—or anyone—want or need a jeroboam of fire whiskey.” He looked around at Sirius. “How did he even send this? He's in prison.”

Sirius shrugged. “He must have had someone send it on his behalf. As for why…. Well, I don't think anyone here would accuse your father of good decision making.”

“You're sharing that, right?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Draco drawled facetiously, “I'm going to drink the whole thing in one sitting by myself and die. Of course I'm sharing it.”

Hermione added to the growing collection of books at Fleur’s feet with a set of Agatha Christie books to do with archaeology. She'd gotten Bill a comprehensive boxed set of foreign language phrase books—the French one was redundant but there wasn't a set that omitted it. There was a
planner for Draco that conveniently had the moon phases printed up in the corner along with the date. For Ginny there was a pair of quidditch gloves that Hermione had embroidered with G. Weasley in script around the wrists.

“I'm sorry it's so uneven,” Hermione lamented. “I don't have much practice with embroidery.”

“Are you kidding?” Ginny scoffed, coming around to hug her. “They're perfect.”

Ron unwrapped the book of muggle card games Hermione had gotten him, looked up and gestured between her and Fleur. “The two of you are in cahoots.”

“Yup!” they agreed cheerfully.

Sirius's gift from Hermione took the form of a note written in festive green ink, informing him that he now had a PO box and a year's subscription to a home improvement and DIY magazine, with instructions on how to access the PO box.

Her gift to Harry was also in a small, unassuming envelope. He eyed her as he opened it. “Do I have a magazine subscription, too?”

She grinned. “No.”

He pulled the slip of cardstock out. It was a voucher from a local optometrist for an eye exam and discount on frames.

“My glasses are fine, Hermione. Sure, I break them—kind of a lot—but I fix them! We have magic!”

“Yes,” she crossed her arms, “but when's the last time you got your prescription updated?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it and frowned. “That's what I thought.”

Harry's gift to her was a very nice glass dip pen. He got Ron a thermos for his “ever increasing coffee habit.” He gave Ginny a peridot necklace that she kissed him for then put on alongside her cameo choker. His present for Sirius was a large hardbound book on motorcycles with lots of full-page photos that bordered on pornographic even without showing a single person. He'd gotten Draco a pair of candycane striped knee high socks.

Draco stared at him, socks in hand. “I am never going to wear these.”

Harry shrugged. “To be honest, I didn't really expect you would. They are soft, though.”

“They are…” Draco admitted reluctantly.

The Indiana Jones lunchbox Harry'd gotten for Bill took some explaining, but the more Harry and Hermione described, the more confused pretty much everyone else looked. Finally, Harry sighed, “He's the muggle version of you, just fictional. But his job, is the muggle version of your job. I'll figure out how to make you watch the movie some time; I think you'll enjoy it.”

Ron had gotten Harry a tin of looseleaf jasmine tea, “Since,” he shrugged, “y'know, in hindsight, the whole reading tea leaves thing might not be a total crock of shit.”

Hermione snorted derisively.
“We're shit at it,” Ron said, indicating himself and Harry, “but Trelawney saw a grim, right? And once she said it, yeah, the sludge was dog-shaped. It was right!” He jerked a thumb at Sirius, who was on his back on the floor as a dog, testing out one of the new tennis balls Ron had given him. “It was just way more literal that that woman is capable of being.”

Harry nodded in agreement while Sirius rolled over into the pile of discarded wrapping paper.

Ron gave Ginny a pair of high end, sporty trainers. He gave Bill a set of troll dolls—muggle toys everyone agreed were cute, but outrageously inaccurate. He'd gotten a snowflake necklace for Fleur, a tweed jacket with elbow patches for Remus, and a plushy ferret for Draco.

“I hate you so much,” Draco said with barely a trace of malice.

Ron shrugged. “You hate me less than you used to.”

“If anything I hate you more,” Draco corrected, starting to grin despite his words. “It used to be on principle because I'm a jerk, now it's personal because you're a jerk.”

“This is never going to stop being weird,” Harry muttered.

“Never,” Draco agreed, and tossed the ferret across the room to Crookshanks and Byrd who showed absolutely no interest.

Hermione immediately took to the camera Ron had gotten her and proceeded to snap photos of everyone as they continued to open their presents.

Ginny had gotten Draco a copy of The Witless Wizard's Guide to: Self Help, which prompted him to conclude, “You're all jerks.”

She'd gotten Harry fireproof boots. He face-palmed and thanked her. For Remus, she had two pairs of socks, both color changing, one pair between usual tasteful sock colours like black and navy and grey, the other between the most garish clashing patterns and colours imaginable. She gave Sirius a battery powered, motion activated, singing, dancing Christmas tree which he loved but which sent both cats sprinting from the room in disgruntled terror.

Bill gave Hermione yet another book, this one on wizard currency from around the world, complete with magically self-updating conversion tables. He'd gotten Harry a hunk of twisting, fractal glass formed by lightning striking sand. Harry turned it over in his hands. “This is so cool.”

“I'm glad you like it,” Bill said. “It seemed fitting, but not too...obvious.”

Harry chuckled. “Definitely.”

In a similar vein, Bill gave Sirius a little dog figurine carved from onyx—black volcanic glass. He gave Remus a tie printed with teacups, some full, some empty, some spilling dramatically. For Draco he'd gotten a tiny carved wooden snake.

Draco held it in his palm and said, with evident surprise, “This is...cute.”

“I thought you didn't like snakes?” Hermione asked.

“You don't?” Bill asked. “I'm sorry, I just thought, Slytherin, and—”

“No, no, I don't like real snakes,” Draco cut in, “or particularly realistic fake ones. Stylized is fine. And this one is actually cute.”
“Oh, good,” Bill sighed, relieved.

Remus gave Bill a world map that folded out to show individual regions in finer detail and had a bright red dot that moved to always show the user's position.

“You made this, didn't you?” Fred asked, somehow managing to sound both accusatory and awed at once, while Bill and everyone around him poured over the map with interest.

“With some help, yes,” Remus said, looking pointedly at Sirius. “I'm not much of an artist.”

He'd gotten a scarf for Ginny with a moving pattern of snitches, a pocket multitool for Ron, a whole slew of organizational tools for Hermione from ring binders to colour-coding tabs, a barbook for Draco, a perfectly resealing wine stopper for Fleur, and an at home spa kit for Sirius.

“You gonna use this with me?” Sirius asked while he unstopped a vial of bubble bath to sniff it, earning himself an eye roll from Remus. “This smells exactly like one of the taps in the prefect's bathroom.”

“You weren't a prefect, were you?” Percy asked, sounding slightly suspicious.

“No, but I dated one,” Sirius said brightly. “I was also best friends with the quidditch captain. I usually had the password.”

As Harry started to unwrap his present from Remus, Remus told him. “Lift that straight out of its box, don't let it tip much.”

“Uh, okay...?” Harry agreed warily. He pulled out a rather plain goblet, unremarkable but for a catseye marble set into its stem.

Sirius made a quickly stifled sound of surprise. Remus ignored him, reached across to tap the tip of his wand against the rim of the goblet murmuring “Aguamenti” under his breath to fill it partway with water, then said, “Go ahead, take a sip.”

“This is not gonna go well,” Harry muttered, but he did as told. As he tipped the goblet to drink from it, the wall of the cup vanished, dumping water all down his front to uproarious laughter. Harry spluttered, magicked himself dry, and demanded, “What's that for??!”

“Your father made it,” Remus told him, chuckling. “You've just been introduced to it the same way I was.”

Harry paused, demeanor changing quickly from irritated to pensive. He picked the goblet back up and tipped it experimentally, watching the cup wall disappear and reappear smoothly with the motion. “He made this?”

“Mhm.” Remus nodded. “When he was just about a year younger than you are now.”

“Did you steal it back from Filch?” Sirius asked with admiration.

“I did not steal it,” Remus said firmly. “I asked him if I could look through his backlog of confiscated items for anything I could use for some lessons and he told me to take whatever I wanted.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. He started to say something else, stopped, swallowed, and just said, “Thank you,” again.
Chapter 41

After all the presents were opened and the scattered wrapping detritus cleared away, goblets and wine were gathered for the taste test party. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley excused themselves, neither of them wanting to drink.

“I'll go ahead and get started on dinner,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Do you need help?” Ron offered.

“I have help.” She smiled, patted her husband on the shoulder, and headed downstairs with him.

“Okay,” Hermione said, looking at the dozen bottles of wine lined up on the piano with dog-print wrapping paper under them to protect the instrument, “for this to be fair, we can't know which is the wizarding wine and which is the muggle when we're tasting it, but someone has to pour it—but if no one knows which is which, we'd have no way to know which we've voted better, would we?”

“I'll pour,” Charlie volunteered. He had a bow from off one of the presents stuck in his hair. “I have legendarily unrefined taste in wine, I probably won't be able to tell the difference anyway.”

“I still don't understand,” Bill said, “how it is that you think wine tastes like vinegar and still like wine.”

“I've seen him drink actual vinegar,” Percy said flatly.

“Apple cider vinegar!” Charlie clarified, accepting a corkscrew from Sirius and twirling it between his fingers. “Diluted apple cider vinegar. It's tangy.”

“And people say we're odd,” the twins teased.

“Oh, shut up and sit,” Charlie ordered.

Shortly, everyone but Charlie was arranged on the couches and chairs, all pulled into a circle around the coffee table, with pairs of full goblets color-coded with ribbons Charlie had tied around the stems so he could keep track of which glasses of chardonnay were which. They all took up their glasses to drink, but Draco paused. “Hey, Lupin…?”

“Hm?”

“What do we know about how alcohol interacts with wolfsbane potion?”

“It doesn't. But on the full moon, if you're drunk, you'll still be drunk as a wolf, which is an experience I can't recommend.”

Draco shrugged and drank.

Hermione glanced at Lupin while he sipped his wine. “I'm slightly concerned by how quickly and certainly you answered that.”

“Frankly, it ought to be more surprising, given everything, that I don't have a drinking problem than that I have thorough first hand knowledge of how alcohol effects my condition and its treatment.” He and Sirius traded goblets.
Once they'd all tried both wines a few times, going back and forth to compare, they recorded their preferences—red ribbon or green ribbon—and the red ribbon chardonnay had been voted superior by the majority with only Ginny and Percy dissenting, and Charlie, who wasn't really voting anyway, unable to tell them apart.

“Well, that's one win for wizarding wine,” Charlie announced, conjuring a blackboard to tally on.

“I told you,” Draco said to Hermione.

“It's only been one out of six,” she pointed out haughtily. “It's far from decided.”

“We didn't think this through very well,” Fleur noted, frowning. “We really ought to have pallet cleansers between the wines—cheese or something.”

She was right, so the entire operation stalled for a minute while she and Charlie went downstairs to get appropriate snacks.

“Mum's worried we'll ruin our dinner,” Charlie informed the group upon his return, rolling his eyes. “You'd think she'd never seen any of us eat.”

The next round of wine, pinot noir, unanimously went to the green ribbon, which was the wizarding wine this time, much to Draco's vindication and Hermione's ire.

The round after that was not champaign.

“What do you mean, it's not champaign?” Harry scoffed.

“It's got bubbles,” Ron pointed out, backing Harry up.

“Yes, it's got bubbles,” Draco agreed exasperatedly. “It's a sparkling wine. Champaign is a particular sparkling wine, but not all sparkling wine is champaign.”

“If it does not come from the Champaign region of France, it is not champaign,” Fleur explained easily.

Harry's forehead crinkled. Ron muttered, “Whatever….”

They all drank. It went to green again by a slight majority, making for the first tick on the muggle side of the scoreboard, prompting a triumphant “Aha!” from Hermione.

Halfway through the taste test with each of them roughly three glasses deep, they broke for dinner, during which they finished off what little was left in the two bottles sparkling wine they'd already opened along with another two bottles Sirius had stashed away for the holiday. Draco grimaced through his first goblet of potion for the month. Lupin sniffed at his curiously—it was Ramsey's allegedly improved recipe—but still shuddered a bit as he downed it.

“Is it any better?” Sirius asked.

“It's, uh, different,” Lupin hedged. “Maybe a little less bitter?” He paused a moment and ran his tongue around inside his mouth. “Doesn't linger as bad, I'll give it that.”

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley went home to the Burrow. Everyone else returned to the music room to continue their wine tasting. Charlie poured and distributed glasses of merlot. After much hemming and hawing the votes were cast, bringing another win for muggle wine.

Next up was a cabernet sauvignon. Charlie frowned into his goblet.
“Whacha think, Charles?” Percy asked, holding out his glass to swap with his brother since they had opposite ribbons.

Charlie sipped and shook his head. “Not only can I not tell these apart, and I can't tel the difference between this one and the last one.”

“You're hurting me,” Fleur said, hand to heart, but the offended look on her face broke into a grin after about a second and she curled in on herself giggling.

“Honestly, though.” Charlie gave the goblet back and picked up a pair of muggle bottles, both down to dregs, and read the labels. “They're both red wine. This one claims it tastes like cherries, and this one thinks it tastes like currants, but there's not cherries or currants in either of 'em, it's all just grapes that've gone off! They've gone off in a very particular way, but they're still all just rotten grapes.”

“You're not wrong,” Draco admitted. “You're showing the extent to which you grew up uncultured, but you're not wrong.”

“Draco,” Lupin said warningly at the same time Hermione and Ron smacked his arm.

They voted and the wizarding wine won. Charlie marked the tally on the balckboard and poured the next, last round of wine, this one port.

“Holy crap, I think I can tell these apart,” Charlie noted excitedly as he tried a second glass.

“They're different varieties, so there's more to differenciate them than the others have had,” Draco said, staring into his glass like he could read the future in it and the future was bleak. “I know which one I brought and,” he sighed, “Hermione, the muggle one is better.”

Draco cast his vote last, since he'd give away which was which otherwise, but sure enough the muggle wine won.

“After all that fuss, it's a tie,” Sirius laughed.

“So, we were both right,” Draco said.

“I'd say we were both wrong,” Hermione huffed.

“No—”

“You were both right and wrong,” Lupin interrupted.

“Right on some, wrong on others!” Harry said.

Lupin chuckled. “Exactly.”

“Hey are we going to break into that fire whiskey?” George asked.

“I am going to bed,” Percy announced. He stood, wobbled, and slowly looked over at Charlie.

“How much wine have we all just had?”

“Including dinner…” Charlie glanced at the array of empty bottles on the piano next to him. “We're all at about seven glasses.”

“That's a little more than a bottle each,” Draco clarified.
Percy nodded a little and let out a breath. “I'm gonna get some water then go to bed.”

“Water is a good idea,” Lupin said. “We should all drink something that isn't alcohol.”

“There's some sparkly fancing water—” Ron stopped, frowning. “Fancy sparkling water downstairs.”

“That is a bad idea.” Draco leaned forward on his knees. “The bubbles make you get drunker faster. That's why you have to be carful with champaign and other sparkling wines.”

“We'll go get water for everyone,” Fleur said, patting Bill on the thigh and standing. “Then we should go to bed, too, or we will not enjoy visiting my family tomorrow.”

“Right,” Bill agreed and left the room with her and Percy.

“I'm also gonna go to bed.” Charlie vanished his chalkboard. “Whiskey really isn't my thing.”

By the time Bill stopped back through to drop off the three pitchers of water that, even levitating them by magic, he was sloshing just a little, Draco had the jeroboam of fire whiskey on the floor between his feet so he could open it without anyone having to lift it. The twins double teamed bottle-lifting duty to pour it.

“We should not be condoning this,” Lupin sighed as Sirius held out a goblet to be served.

“I'll just have one glass,” Sirius said, “then you and I can go to bed, and you can chide them all very sternly not to drink the whole thing while I drag you upstairs.”

Lupin rolled his eyes.

“Hey, before you do that though,” Fred began, then paused because it was too much to keep talking while he and George passed the torso-sized bottle to Harry and Ron so they could pour for the twins. Fred took a swig, coughed a little, then picked up his train of thought. “Ack, did not swallow that well, anyway, Sirius, I've been thinking, and you're the second best person to ask and I really don't want to ask McGonagall, but, if an animagus became an amputee and was using a prosthetic, or if someone who's an amputee who uses a prosthetic, y'know, someone like me, became an animagus, what would happen when that person transformed?”

“Are you thinking about becoming an animagus?” Ginny asked, gaping at her brother.

“Maybe,” both twins shot back.

Sirius let out a long breath and leaned back against Lupin, swirling his whiskey. “That's a good question, actually. I don't know. I don't know anyone who—”

“Yes, we do,” Lupin cut in. “Peter.”

“Right. With the...finger.” Sirius wiggled his own. “But—”

“And he was still missing it as a rat,” Ron said.

Draco looked over at him. “You know, I had forgotten Pettigrew was your pet, and fuck you very much for reminding me.”

Ron threw a wine cork at him. Draco caught it then fumbled and dropped it.

“I wasn't thinking about that because Peter never had a prosthetic finger,” Sirius said.
“He did get a whole hand, though,” Harry pointed out.

“Did anyone see him as a rat after that, though?” Hermione asked.

Everyone looked at each other, mostly shaking their heads no. Then they all looked around at Draco.

“He was at your house post-dehandication,” George said, stumbling slightly on his made-up word.

“I never saw him as a rat that whole time. I know he'd go around like that to spy and shit but I never saw.”

“At least we know you're still missing whatever you're missing,” Sirius said.

“Thinking about it another way, though,” Lupin said slowly, “what is a prosthetic? It's something you wear constantly. McGonagall wears glasses, she wears them constantly, as a cat, she has markings that emulate them.”

Sirius nodded. “And Prongs had those dark rings around his eyes.”

“Exactly,” Lupin agreed.

“Rita Skeeter had markings like her glasses as a beetle, too!” Hermione exclaimed.

“Hang on, what?” Draco asked.

“Rita Skeeter is an unregistered animagus,” Harry said. “Hermione's been blackmailing her with the threat of reporting her for years.”

Draco considered Hermione appraisingly for a moment, impressed. “Hm.” He looked around at Sirius. “Does anyone actually register?”

“If they take a course to become an animagus, or use the ability at work, yeah.” Sirius shrugged. “Otherwise, not really, no.”

“But Sirius is going to,” Lupin said firmly, “because he has a job now and does not want to get arrested again.”

“Right….” Sirius looked askance and drank his whiskey. “Anyway, Fred, sounds like if you became an animagus, you'd have one leg with weird markings, and, I dunno, maybe looked a bit...not-fleshy. Assuming, of course, that you became something with legs.”

“How do you know what you'd become?” Ginny asked.

“You don't.” Sirius finished his drink, put his goblet down, and stood up.

Harry frowned. “I thought it was the same as your patronus.”

“Often, but not always,” Lupin said, standing as well. “For one thing, the form of a person's patronus may change, but their animagus form won't. They don't have to match in the first place.”

Sirius nodded along as Lupin talked, then shrugged. “For instance, mine's a wolf.”

Lupin looked at him. “Since when?”

“Right, we haven't had that conversation yet.”
“No, we haven’t.”

“Okay, bedtime!” Sirius turned Lupin by the shoulders and prodded him toward the door. “Night, kiddos, have fun, don’t give yourselves alcohol poisoning!”

Everyone bid them goodnight, variously confused or trying to stifle laughter.

Draco finished off his glass of whiskey, glared at the bottle for a moment, then pulled his wand and magically levitated a very wobbly orb of whiskey out of the bottle and into his goblet.

“Ooh, smart,” George breathed appreciatively.

“I know, I’m brilliant.” Draco pushed his hair out of his face. It was starting to get long enough he needed to either cut it or start slicking it back again. “Hermione, what’s this about you blackmailing Rita Skeeter?”

“Well,” she began, and set off explaining how she'd discovered Rita's beetle form and used the threat of reporting her to make Rita interview Harry for the Quibbler without her usual embellishments.

“That makes a lot more sense than her suddenly having a change of heart,” Draco noted. He looked around. “Anything else I should be filled in on?” He waited a moment, then when no one said anything, he asked, “Hagrid did have a dragon, didn't he? And you snuck it out of Hogwarts, somehow, I know you did.”

“Yeah,” Ron admitted. “Charlie helped with that.”

“Of course he did.” Draco rolled his eyes.

As they finished their whiskeys, everyone followed Draco's example and gave themselves refills via levitation.

“I think you know about most of the rest of that year already,” Harry said, pushing up his glasses to rub at one eye.

“Several full accounts of the whole thing with you and Quirrell and Voldy went around,” Fred said.

George gestured with his goblet. “Dunno how accurate they were but…."

“Yeah, I’ve got the gist of that, at least.” Draco sipped his drink. “And everyone knows what happened the next year.” He snoted and nearly spat a dribble of fire whiskey onto his shirt. “It was a little hard to miss Little Miss Brainwashed, here, graffiti-ing the school in her own blood. At least, I guess it's nice to know being the Dark Lord's little bitch doesn't just run in my family—then again, we are related.”

The next moment, something hard slammed into Draco's face and white-hot pain bloomed behind his eyes. Ginny had punched him—launched herself at him, really—knocked him off the couch onto his back on the floor. Arms at his sides, Draco laughed manically as she landed two more blows. He coughed on blood. Her fingernails scrabbled at his throat as she was dragged off of him. Someone—Hermione based on the mass of hair in his peripheral vision—hauled him to sit up. Blood ran down his face to stain his shirt. He poked gingerly at his nose. “That is definitely broken.” He giggled. “I shouldn't know what that feels like, but I do. Because quidditch. And my family is fucking mental.” He giggled again.

Looking at him with a kind of wary horror, Hermione drew her wand, pointed it at his nose, and
said, “Episkey.”

“Let him bleed,” Ginny spat, wriggling against the restraining grip the twins had on her.

“Okay, time for bed,” Fred announced, dragging his sister toward the stairs. “Party's over. We are clearly too drunk to play nice.”

Hermione smacked Draco's shoulder. “What is wrong with you?”

“What's wrong with me?” Draco echoed. “What's wrong with her?”

Hermione made a sound in her throat. “Go to bed, you twat.”

Draco sat on the floor, fiddling with his shirtcuff until the others had all left, then he staggered to his feet, put out the light, and made his way upstairs to his room—mostly on all fours after stumbling on the first landing.
Remus let Sirius steer him out of the music room and up the stairs—he waited until the first landing to ask, “So, since when can you produce a corporeal patronus?”

“Since May,” Sirius sighed and poked Remus to keep walking. “I've only managed it the once, during the battle, and right after, with everything going on, I just forgot to mention it I guess, then it hasn't come up since. By now it's old news to me, I didn't remember that it'd still be news to you.”

They reached their room and closed the door behind them. Sirius sank onto the bed with a groan, cracked his knuckles, and punched his pillow a couple times, eliciting little puffs of tiny down feathers.

“It was you,” he continued lowly. “Looked just like you as a wolf, scars and all, just with a tail. Now, I don't know what to make of that, but that's what it was.”

Remus sat next to him, tucked one curl behind his ear, and gently but curiously asked, “What memory did you use?”

Sirius snorted. “I didn't.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn't thinking of a memory. I was thinking of this.” He caressed Remus's cheek, then gestured around the room. “I was thinking of being free, really free, being with you, being safe for the first time in, maybe ever. Thinking that if we could just win one last time, if I could live to see it—” his voice broke, he cleared his throat, and looked down at where Remus had taken his hand. “I wasn't remembering anything, there's too much dark caught up in my entire life, so I imagined happiness for myself instead.”

Remus kissed him, warm and sweet and slow. “I am so sorry,” he whispered, “that you can't find happiness in your past, but so glad to be part of your future happiness. And,” he grinned, cupping Sirius's jaw in both hands, “I am so proud of you for managing a patronus, but how dare you successfully employ an unprecedented cognitive magic technique and not tell me!”

“We were busy!” Sirius laughed. “You'd just killed a man!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Remus kissed him again the stood up to change. “C'mon, bed.”

~*~

Remus woke before Sirius. He had a bit of a headache, but mostly, he just desperately needed to pee. Extricating himself from Sirius didn't wake him, and Sirius was snoring lightly when Remus got back from the bathroom, so Remus left him to go see what the status of breakfast was.
“Lupin.” George caught him by the out in the hallway. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Remus looked George up and down then frowned. “Are you feeling alright? You look terrible.”

“I am very hungover but that's beside the point.” George pushed open the door to the room he and Fred were sharing. “Talking, in room that is less bright than hallway.”

“Alright.” Remus followed him in and let the door fall closed behind them. Fred seemed to have already gone downstairs.

George sat on the edge of his bed and took a breath. “Malfoy self harms but he uses other people to do it.”

“What do you mean?” Remus sat next to him, forehead crinkling.

“Last night, you know we all made the horrible decision to drink that fire whiskey on top of...several bottles of wine, so Ginny was sloshed and Malfoy was knackered—”

“Is that distinction prudent?”

“No, not really. Anyway, he said something making light of what happened to her in the Chamber of Secrets so she decked him. Broke his nose. And he just laughed.” George put his hands together as though praying. “I’m telling you, he wanted her to hurt him. There's no way he didn't expect her to react like that—especially since she's a kinda scary drunk—he was baiting her on purpose. He'd been baiting people all night—Charlie, and all of us really, about being uncultured, that thing later with Ron about Pettigrew. That one coulda gone bad, but it didn't, Ron juts threw a cork at him and the conversation moved on. But he—Draco, I mean—kept doing it, saying shit on touchier and touchier subjects until somebody snapped.”

“And this isn't the first time he's done something like that,” Remus concluded quietly.

“Right like fifth year, uh, their third, when Hermione punched him—I know you've heard that story.”

“Only about a thousand times.”

“He was goading her about Buckbeak. He wanted her to hit him. And not in a kinky way.”

“You didn't have to make that distinction,” Remus sighed.

“I felt like I did. What I'm saying is—”

“He picks fights.”

“Yes. But only with people who already think he's a tit.”

“He's not just habitually a jerk, he's being self destructive.”

“Right.”

“Well, shit.” Remus ran a hand over his face. He saw George wobble. With a sigh he stood and dragged the redhead to his feet. “Go down and get coffee.”

“Yessir.” George mock-saluted.

“Palm faces out. You look like an American.”
George chuckled, fixed his salute, and slipped out the door. Remus followed him down to breakfast where Fred was already nursing a very large mug of coffee. Ron was slowly nibbling at a piece of bacon while he stared at the far wall, Harry was rubbing his forehead and muttering something about whiskey being worse than the Dark Lord, Hermione was contemplating a piece of toast with undue intensity, Ginny had her head on her arms and an empty mug beside her, Draco was intermittently sticking his finger in his coffee rather than drinking it, and they all looked like shit. Remus seated himself across from Draco. “Too hot to drink?”

“But not hot enough to burn,” Draco muttered in agreement.

Remus grabbed himself a muffin, took a bite, and settled in to studying Draco, who was either ignoring him or oblivious. Either way, it allowed Remus to consider him without interruption. His nose had clearly been mended—it definitely wasn't broken now—but he still had dark shadows under his eyes, though those may have just been from exhaustion and hangover.

While he chewed his muffin, Remus thought of all he'd seen and heard of Draco's behavior over the years. The time Ron made himself puke slugs, he'd been trying to hex Draco who'd provoked him by insulting Hermione. It had been Draco who'd made up the “Weasley is Our King” song that had nearly spurred every school aged member of that family to violence. He directly insulted a hypogriff after having been told not to, that it was dangerous to. Draco wasn't stupid, he was an attentive and quick learner, Remus knew. So, at least on some level, he must have known that calling Buckbeak stupid would get him attacked. Just like George had said Draco had to have known Ginny was going to attack him last night. Remus sighed. Well, shit, he thought, George is right.

Remus spent the day formulating how to broach the subject of Draco's self-destructive behavior with him—he had to talk to him about it, though it was likely to be an unpleasant conversation. After dinner, laden tray balanced in the crook of his elbow, he knocked on Draco's door. “Can I talk to you, Draco? I've brought tea.”

A moment passed. Draco opened the door dressed in dark blue satin pajamas. He eyed the tea tray with a distrusting sneer. “That is the exact opposite of comforting.” He glanced up at Remus. “Is this about last night?”

“Indirectly. May I come in?”

Draco rolled his eyes and stepped back into his room to return to the six or seven feet of parchment curling along his desk, but he didn't shut his door. Remus took that as enough invitation, set the tray on Draco's dresser, poured two cups, and held one out to Draco. “You're not here to talk about my homework.”

“No, I'm not.” Remus flicked his wand at the door to close it, pocketed his wand again, and sat on the edge of Draco's mattress. Draco turned his desk chair to face him. Remus tapped a fingertip
against his teacup. “So, I've been told Ginny broke your nose last night.”

“Yeah. So what?” Draco shrugged. “No big deal, Hermione fixed it. It's not like I've never taken a bludger to the face before; I'd had worse.”

“I don't doubt that, and given you lack of grotesque bruising Hermione seems to have fixed you up quite well. But I'm less concerned by the fact that you got your nose broken as I am that you provoked her into breaking it.”

“It's no secret I'm an arsehole.” Draco leaned back in his chair. “I say shit when I'm sober, let alone when I'm legless. I apologized to her earlier and she spat at me. Can't say I blame her but there's not much more I can do.”

“You can be quite charming—and, to be frank, quite manipulative—when you want to be.”

“You point?” Draco sounded bored.

“I think you could get her to forgive you, if you wanted to. But I don't think you want her to forgive you.”

“Why wouldn't I want her to?”

“Same reason you wanted her to hit you in the first place.”

“And why would I want that? I'm not stupid.”

“No, you're not. But you are self destructive. Which is why you wanted her to hit you and have a history of goading people—and hypogriffs—into physically attacking or hexing you.”

“Oh, come off it—”

“In short, you, consciously or otherwise, manufacture ways for the world to punish you because you think you deserve it,” Remus finished sharply.

Draco glowered at him and snorted but didn't speak. Remus sipped his tea without looking away from him. Draco crossed his arms. “If—if—you're right—which you aren't—what then? Believe me, I'm not a masochist. I don't get off on getting punched and clawed.”

“That's not what I'm saying.” Remus sighed. “You don't have to like it to hurt yourself. In fact, liking it is sort of against the point of self harm. Which is what you're doing, essentially: assisted self harm. And that's worrying.”

“I'm not hurting myself!” Draco shouted. “Who are you to care—?”

“Your teacher and a friend—”

“What do you even know about this shit?”

“Quite a lot,” Remus snapped.

“Yes, right.” Draco sneered.

“Have you noticed that I never wear short sleeves? Have you ever wondered why?”

“We live in England where it's always wet, cold, or wet and cold.”
“You know that's a stereotype and generally untrue.”

Draco arched an eyebrow and gestured at the window, outside of which it was sleeting.

“It's Winter. We do in fact get sun in Summer, though I suspect you just burn, pale as you are. In any case, no, that's not why.” Remus pulled his jumper over his head, then undid and shrugged out of his button up, leaving himself in his undershirt. “These are why,” He gestured at the layers upon layers of thin, overlapping scars that arched over his shoulders and ran down his outer arms to his elbows. “I'd scratch myself. Not because I liked the pain, but because I thought I deserved to hurt. And at some point it became habit. More than habit. I'd do it without thinking about it. I'd do it even when I didn't want to because I had do.”

Draco looked away.

“You didn't bait Ginny because you wanted to,” Remus said lowly. “You had to, didn't you?”

“I just say shit,” Draco spat at the far corner of room.

“Because you think it's a good idea?”

“I just say it! I don't think about it.”

“You can be so calculating and controlled, does it not strike you as strange that you can't seem to help but say things that common sense says will bring you harm?” Remus leaned his elbows on his knees.

“Yes! It does!” Draco stood, nearly knocking over his chair. “I guess self preservation—” he snatched the inkwell off his desk “—is just one more thing I'm shit at.” He threw the well across the room. It shattered against the wall, leaving a dark plume dripping down the papering.

“It's not an issue of self preservation,” Remus said calmly. “You never goaded any Death Eaters—your parents and Severus notwithstanding—into attacking you or you'd be dead already.”

“If it's not that, then what is wrong with me?” Draco demanded.

“You need therapy, but that's not news. We've already had the conversation about how everyone we know is at least a little screwed up.” Remus leaned his elbows on his knees. “Stop talking about yourself like you're defective. You're not. You're just hurt. In here.” He poked Draco on the forehead. “And I'd rather that translate itself into physical injury as little as possible.”

“Don't treat me like a child,” Draco sneered.

Remus gestured at the ink splatter on the wall, one eyebrow raised. “Don't act like one.”

Draco snorted and flicked his wand, quickly clearing the mess and mending the ink bottle. He snatched it up and put it back on his desk.

“I need to finish this,” he said shortly, smoothing out his essay.

“Alright.” Remus put his mug back on the tray. “Just, be aware of yourself, and know that you can talk to me about however you're feeling. You're far from the first person to have an uneasy relationship with themself.” He took up the tray, made to leave, then turned back. “And if you ever need to talk to someone about dealing with growing up in an elitist pureblood family and everything that comes with that, you know where to find Sirius.”
So, this chapter has been a long time coming--I wrote almost all of this chapter more than two years ago now, going on three. I'm very glad to have caught up with it, but this also means I am not past the point where I have clear plans for this fic. Because I need to work that out, and have a lot of real life stuff I need to deal with, I may take the next posting day or two off. I appreciate everyone's patience and support!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!