A cheer rose from the Slytherin table but all Lea could see was her brother’s horrified gaze as she moved across the hall. She sat at the table and accepted the congratulations thrown her way as if on autopilot before re-focusing on the front of the Hall.

“Potter, James.”

James’s gait was slightly less confident than usual as he took his seat. The hat barely touched his head.

“Gryffindor!”

Lea’s heart sank even as the Hall erupted in applause.

or

AU in which James Potter grows up with a sister.
This is a completely self indulgent piece of writing because I had too many feelings about too many of these characters. Mostly Regulus. Oops. It's essentially me putting an OC in the middle of things to protect the precious canon characters and make them hurt less (but also things still hurt?? this is why it's self indulgent).

More tags and pairings to be added!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter One

Platform 9¾, September 1971

Charlus crouched to meet his son’s eyes. “Don’t get into too much trouble. Keep up to date with your studies. Take care of your sister.”

A few steps away Dorea was in a similar position in front of her daughter. “If you have to break some rules make sure you don’t get caught. I know you won’t let your grades suffer for anything. Watch out for your brother,” she lowered her voice, “he needs all the help he can get.”

Lea giggled and glanced over at her brother. She was practically bouncing up and down with excitement.

Next to them, James was rolling his eyes. “Yes, Dad. I’ll be good, we’ll be fine.”

The train whistle blew and the siblings boarded the train, Lea clutching onto the fabric of her brother’s sleeve. They entered into the first compartment they saw, rushing to the window to wave goodbye to their parents. As the train left the station, the two of them settled in their seats.

“I can’t wait to see the Gryffindor dormitory!” James’s glasses were sliding down his nose as he shuffled restlessly. “It’s going to be amazing!”

Lea smiled indulgently. “Red and gold has never looked as good as it will on us.”

“They’re going to have to let me play Quidditch,” James continued. “Once they see how good I am they’ll have to let me on the team.”

“I can’t wait for classes to start,” Lea said, her eyes gleaming. “Charms and Potions are going to be so interesting.”

Her brother snorted. “Forget about classes – think about the castle! There’s going to be so much to explore!”

This, Lea agreed with. “The history! There’s going to be so much to discover! I wonder if they have tombs? Definitely secret passageways.”

“It’s a good thing we have the cloak,” James grinned cheekily. “There will be no corner left unturned and no secret passage left undiscovered.”

She laughed and they continued making plans until the trolley lady came around with sweets. Lea decided to go for a walk to find a bathroom and change into her robes as her brother settled down with his food. She weaved through the train, gazing up in awe at the older students laughing with each other and catching up after a summer apart. It was on her way back that a heated argument coming from an open compartment caught her attention.

“You can’t let him get to you! He’s just a bully, Sev!” A girl’s voice flitted through the door.

“Of course he’s a bully!” A boy replied, voice laced with contempt. Lea heard a thud and poked her head through the door in time to see the boy kick the wall of the compartment. The girl had bright red hair and was hovering behind the boy nervously.

“Please, Sev! Don’t let a stupid boy ruin today!” The red-haired girl pleaded. “Today’s supposed to
be amazing! Please don’t be upset.”

The boy turned to the girl and Lea caught a glimpse of long black hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. “You’re right,” he said, running a hand down his tattered robes. The two of them had also changed into their school robes. “I’m sorry. Once we arrive he’ll see that Slytherins are superior anyway. It doesn’t matter what he thinks.”

The girl shifted uncomfortably but gratefully threw her arms around the boy anyway. As he was hugging her, the boy’s eyes landed on Lea over the girl’s shoulder. Before he could say anything, she stepped forward.

“Hi! My name’s Cecilia but you can call me Lea!” She stuck out her hand as the girl turned. “Are you guys first years too?”

The girl shook off her initial surprise and took Lea’s hand. “I’m Lily and this is Severus! Yes, we are first years.”

Lea grinned and offered her hand to Severus next. He took it, but not without suspicion.

“It’s nice to meet you both! Is it okay if I join you?”

“Of course!” Lily replied, ignoring the baleful look Severus shot her.

“Isn’t this exciting?” Lea asked, dropping down onto a seat. “I’ve heard so many wonderful things about Hogwarts, I can’t wait to see what it’s really like! What classes do you think will be best?”

“Severus always talks about Potions but I read through some of the books and Charms seems amazing – “

“Doesn’t it?” Lea exclaimed. “There’s just so much to learn – “

“Right?” Lily jumped up slightly. “Just how much you can do with magic it’s insane!”

“Magic’s always been amazing,” she agreed. “I’m just happy I have my wand now and I can learn how to do things myself.”

“Oh, so your parents were magical?” Lily asked interestedly.

Lea blinked. “Yours weren’t?”

“Oh no,” she shook her head. “They’re just normal – oh wait, um, muggles?”

Lea smiled and nodded. “Muggles. That’s so interesting! I can’t imagine how it must feel to see magic for the first time.”

Severus, who had grown slightly tense at the direction their conversation had taken, relaxed.

“I’ve been lucky,” Lily smiled. “Severus has been showing me and telling me stories for a while now, but I can’t say it’s not a little scary.”

“How do you two know each other?”

“We live close by,” Severus said curtly. Lea accepted this and decided not to push.

“So, you’re most exited for Potions then, Severus?”
He nodded. “And joining the Slytherin house. My mother has always spoken highly of it.”

Lea’s eyebrows rose and Severus bristled at her expression. She ignored his increasingly sour demeanour and shrugged. “I’m sure whichever house you get sorted into will be amazing,” she said neutrally.

“What are you hoping for?” Lily asked curiously.

“Gryffindor,” Lea smiled. “My family has a history of being in Gryffindor.”

“Yes well, it is the best house if you’d rather be brawny than brainy,” Severus sneered.

“Oh, stop it, Sev,” Lily smacked her friend’s arm. “Lea’s right – I’m sure all the houses are amazing. Besides, Mum always says people are never defined by one characteristic and it’s possible to be talented in more than one area.”

“Absolutely,” Lea agreed.

Further conversation was interrupted by an announcement being made that they would be arriving at the castle soon, and Lea excused herself to find her brother. Lea struggled to make her way through the carriage as older students rushed to put their robes on in time for the arrival, and by the time she made it to the compartment the train was already pulling into the station and her brother was no where to be seen.

Nervous, Lea made her way onto the platform by herself, following the crowd of students out of the train. She then approached the giant calling out for first years and was staring up at him in amazement when she felt an arm curl around hers.

She turned to see Lily standing next to her, a similar expression of awe on her face, and Severus right behind her. “Who is that?”

“I think that’s Hagrid,” Lea whispered to the two of them. “My Dad told me he’s the Groundskeeper of Hogwarts.”

Sure enough, Hagrid introduced themselves and before the knew it, they were being led to the edge of a lake and climbing carefully into boats. Lea was craning her neck trying to catch a glimpse her brother’s unruly black hair but the boats began to move and she became distracted by Lily’s excited gasp.

She couldn’t help but smile at the girl’s awe as she practically leaned over the front of the boat, trying to take in as much as she could. Lea turned to Severus to find he was also watching Lily with a tiny smile – perhaps the most jovial expression Lea had seen on him all evening. The only other person in their boat was a boy sitting towards the back. He was short, with light brown hair and a round face. Lea thought he looked a little terrified so she spun in her seat to face him.

“Hi! My name’s Lea.”

The boy offered her a shy smile. “Peter.”

“It’s nice to meet you! Isn’t this beautiful? I read in Hogwarts: A History the view of the castle is the best from these boats. We should see it any minute now.”

As she was speaking, she saw Peter’s gaze fall somewhere over her shoulder and his eyes widen. She turned just in time to see the castle come into sight, lit up and reflecting in the still black water of the lake.
“Woah,” she heard Peter whisper.

Similar noises of wonder were coming from the boats around them and Lea herself was sporting a wide smile, feeling her lingering nerves give way to excitement. The walk into the castle and Entrance Hall was similarly magnificent, although she felt Peter twitch slightly under Professor McGonagall’s stern gaze. As they were waiting for their cue to enter the Hall for sorting, Lea heard some shuffling and hasty apologising from behind her and turned to see her brother and two other boys making their way through the crowd.

“James!” Lea whispered, grabbing onto his sleeve again.

“Where have you been?” he whispered back.

Lea’s answer was cut off by Professor McGonagall emerging from the Great Hall and leading them into the room.

All eyes jumped to the ceiling as they entered, whispers emerging from the group at the sight of the clear, sparkling night sky.

“Lea,” James pulled his sister’s attention back to him. “This is Sirius and Remus. Guys, this is my sister Lea.”

She glanced back at the two boys following behind them with a smile. One of them had thick, slightly wavy black hair and clear grey eyes, while the other boy was slightly taller with muted blond hair and worn robes. They whispered their greetings as they approached the front of the hall and settled.

Professor McGonagall stood next to a stool, tall and proud, and began calling names. Sirius turned out to be Sirius Black and was sorted into Gryffindor, beginning the trend of unlikely sorting for the night. Lily Evans followed, much to James’s interest although Lea couldn’t understand why. When she turned to gauge Severus’s reaction, she couldn’t help but feel a pang of sympathy at his crestfallen expression.

Remus Lupin was next in Gryffindor (although his sorting took significantly longer than any of those before him) as was Peter Pettigrew, the verdict apparently surprising the small boy enough to cause him to trip slightly on his way to the table.

“Potter, Cecilia.”

James squeezed her hand once before nudging her up towards the stool. As she sat, she barely had time to glance at the crowd in the hall before the hat slipped over her eyes.

“Oh, how interesting,” a voice murmured in her head. “This has certainly been a riveting night but never let it be said I don’t love a challenge.”

“Um, excuse me? I’m not quite sure I understand.”

“Never you mind, child, let’s have a think about where you would work. Ravenclaw, certainly, would be reasonable, and there’s not a small amount of bravery…”

“What do you mean? It’ll be Gryffindor, right? My whole family – “

“Where other members of your family have been sorted does not mean Gryffindor is where you will do best. No, no…it’s that particular strain of loyalty…that particular thirst for knowledge…yes.
“Slytherin!”

A cheer rose from the Slytherin table but all Lea could see was her brother’s horrified gaze as she moved across the hall. She sat at the table and accepted the congratulations thrown her way as if on autopilot before re-focusing on the front of the Hall.

“Potter, James.”

James’s gait was slightly less confident than usual as he took his seat. The hat barely touched his head.

“Gryffindor!”

Lea’s heart sank even as the Hall erupted in applause. She had always known her brother would be a Gryffindor and she had assumed she would follow in his steps. She hoped desperately he wouldn’t be upset.

She watched as the sorting finished, subdued, and barely managed to pull up a smile (that wasn’t returned) for Severus as he joined the table. Once Dumbledore had welcomed everyone and the food had appeared, Lea was pulled out of her stupor by other at the table.

“Daisy Parkinson,” a dark-haired girl with striking light blue eyes offered her hand to Lea.

“Lea Potter,” she smiled, taking it. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Brianna, and this is Laury,” another girl said. Brianna had unruly honey brown curls and gestured to a small dark-skinned girl with jet black hair pulled into a ponytail at the top of her head.

“I’m assuming we’re to be sharing a room,” Daisy said brightly, pouring herself pumpkin juice. At this revelation, Lea straightened in her seat and focused properly on her new classmates.

“This is all rather amazing, isn’t it?” Laury smiled. “The castle really is something to behold. My father always said there was nothing in the world like the sheer magic of Hogwarts.”

Brianna nodded in agreement and conversation turned to what the dormitory would be like, and how difficult classes would be. Lea couldn’t help but let her gaze drift across the Hall and settle on her brother’s unruly head of hair. His back was to her, but she couldn’t help but send pleading looks his way.

“Your brother, is he?” Severus asked quietly from across her, looking at her keenly with his dark eyes. “Good riddance, in my opinion. You should have heard the things he and that Black boy were saying on the train about Slytherins.”

Lea felt fear run through her but met Severus’s gaze head on. “He’s my brother,” she said firmly. “He won’t care where I’ve been sorted. We’re family.”

Severus looked doubtful but let it go anyway as he got pulled into conversation by one of the other newly sorted boys.

Lea didn’t manage to shake off the lingering feeling of dread through dinner, and when the 7th Year Prefect (Lucius Malfoy) moved to lead the first years to the dormitory, Lea grabbed onto her brother who was leaving the Hall at the same time, pulling him to the side of the corridor.

“Le! We won’t know the way to our dorms,” he hissed at her. “Let me go!”
“You aren’t upset, are you?” she blurted fearfully. “We’ll still have classes together, and I’ll see you all the time, right? This doesn’t change anything does it?”

James’s gaze softened. “Lea, it’s fine,” he told his sister softly. “We can talk soon, okay? But we have to go right now.”

“Promise you aren’t mad?”

He smiled. “Promise, Le. I’ll see you soon.”

Reassured, Lea rushed to follow her housemates down into the dungeons. She made sure to note the password (Black Lake) and prayed that she would remember which wall hid the entrance (she probably wouldn’t), before stepping into a stone room.

It was lit with green lamps, made warm by a massive fireplace, and decorated with intricate carvings and tapestries. There were desks scatter around the room, all adorned with heavy, high-backed chairs that almost looked like thrones. Surrounding the fireplace was long green sofas scattered with numerous pillows and throw blankets. The glass of the windows exposed a view straight into what must have been the Black Lake with strands of seaweed swaying leisurely with the current and the occasional fish swimming past. Lea wondered if this was what being in love felt like.

"Respect that the Common Room is a shared space," Lucius informed the group. "Make sure you clean up after yourselves – or rather, make sure the house elves clean up after you. Curfew for those under thirteen is 10pm, do not lose us house points by getting caught out after this time. Girls dorms are to the left, boys are to the right. Your names will be engraved on the doors.

“Take care that you make your house proud. Do right by us and you will have our loyalty. Cross us, and you’ll be lucky to set foot anywhere near the dungeons for your remaining school career.”

Lucius paused to run his silver eyes over the crowd watching him with rapt attention. He smirked.

“Welcome to Slytherin.”
The week that followed the student’s arrival at Hogwarts was horrifying. The castle was insanely difficult to navigate and, despite having read the majority of the books on the reading list, Lea felt like she was going to fail every class. Her confidence only fell further when her brother repeatedly brushed her off in classes to spend time with his new friends and dorm mates, all of whom seemed nice enough but equally uninterested in spending time with her.

It was on Wednesday morning that she received mail from her parents – another thing she had been dreading. What had her especially nervous was the fact that she received a letter from the family owl, Herbert, but another one seconds later from an owl she didn’t recognise. Nevertheless, she patted and fed the owls before watching them fly out of the Hall and turning to her letters.

Deciding to open the one Herbert had brought first, she calmed slightly as she let her parents’ words of comfort wash over her. They assured her the sorting didn’t matter to them, and that her brother would come around eventually if she remained patient. As she read the final words of love, Lea felt some of her nerves settle for the first time all week. They weren’t upset.

The second letter undid the work of the first.

*Dearest Lea,*

*I’m sending you this letter separately only because your father and I disagree on whether or not you should be informed of this at this time. I, however, believe the consequence of not knowing will be far more harmful than those of perhaps knowing too soon.*

*Rest assured, my darling, that neither of us are upset with your sorting and your brother will come to his senses as well, but there are some things you need to be aware of.*

*You may remember that my family before marriage was one that came from a long line of Slytherins, and had I not studied at Durmstrang I would have likely been sorted into Slytherin as well. This is how I have personal experience with the type of people that are known to give your house a bad reputation – a reputation of discrimination and intolerance.*

*You know that us families that have had magic running through our veins for generations before us have traditions that are not necessarily followed by those without completely magical heritage. Some of the families that follow those traditions call themselves ‘pure-blood’ and are of the belief that they are somehow more powerful or worthier of magic because of their lineage. They are sometimes known to look down upon those with a different heritage in a derogatory manner that is completely unacceptable.*

*Your father and I have worked hard to keep terms such as ‘pure-blood’ out of our home because those born with magic, no matter who their parents may be, are just as worthy of their magic as the rest of us and do not, by any means, deserve to be disrespected on that account.*

*I’m telling you this now because you may hear some of this language from older students in your house and I want you to not only understand what they’re saying, but also recognise that they are misguided and do not truly understand the gift of our power. You may hear them disrespecting other students because of their lineage and I want you to be extremely careful if you choose to intervene. Remember to always think about the consequence of your actions and make decisions accordingly.*
I believe in you, my clever girl, and do not be afraid because of what I have told you. It is extremely likely you will not hear anything of the sort, but I wanted you to be prepared just in case you did. Be proud of who you are. Be kind to others. Remember that some people have just not been taught otherwise.

Congratulations on your sorting. You’re going to be just fine, darling.

Lots of Love,

Mum.

Lea couldn’t help but run her gaze over the older students sitting at the table as she folded her letter precisely and tucked it into her pocket. She couldn’t understand how anyone could possibly doubt the strength of another person’s magic. She had known from a young age that the power of one’s magic was largely dependent on how connected they were with it, how precisely they channelled it, and the breadth of their knowledge. It might have a little to do with genetic predisposition but the impact of genes compared to the person’s skill was miniscule.

She wasn’t sure what to do with her newfound knowledge. The thought that the people she shared a living space with might be the prejudiced people her mother mentioned made her feel sick and while she disagreed with the sentiment, she didn’t have a clue how to begin disagreeing with them.

“All right, Lea?” Bri’s voice shook her out of her thoughts.

She nodded. “Just missing my parents. It’s good to hear from them.”

Daisy snickered. “At least you didn’t hear from them like Sirius Black heard from his mother.”

Lea frowned.

Blood traitor is what Walburga Black had labelled her son. Just because he had been sorted into Gryffindor. She felt a pang of sympathy for him – in another world, that could have been her.

“It’s a little horrifying,” Laury said quietly, “that where you’re sorted means so much.”

Daisy shrugged. “It says a lot about character.”

Lea remembered what Lily had said back on the train. “People can be more than one thing.”


No one had anything to say to that because, evidently, it did.

So, it was with her mother’s words lingering in the back of her mind that Lea proceeded with her year. As she gained more even footing, she found herself settling into a routine – one which barely involved her brother and largely involved her new dorm and house mates. This included (a very reluctant) Severus who, once he got over Lea’s relation to his new personal tormentor, was the best study partner she could have asked for.

Christmas holidays arrived and Lea returned home with her brother. The dinner she had with her family that night was probably the longest conversation she had had with her brother since term had begun and, while the loss of their friendship was still fresh, she couldn’t help but be hopeful things would be better once he saw she hadn’t changed.

The same could not be said about James. He remained the loud, confident, excitable person he had always been, but everything seemed to have been dialled to eleven. More than once, she noticed her
mother shooting her concerned glances across the table as James prattled on about his new friends and this awesome prank they were coming up and the funny thing Remus had said the other night and how he couldn’t wait to have them over in the Easter or Summer holidays and show them his broom.

Her parents indulged her brother for most of the night and when James disappeared to his bedroom after dinner to write to his friends, Lea curled up between her mother and father in front of the fire and tried to trample the jealousy swirling inside her. James had always had a dominant personality but he was usually careful to make some room for her in conversation.

“How are classes for you, darling?” Dorea asked gently, running a hand through her long black hair.

“Good,” Lea smiled. “I tell you about them all the time in letters, Mum.”

“Letters do not convey tone, sweetheart,” her father chided her gently. “It’s much nicer to hear about them in person. How are your friends?”

“Amazing,” Lea admitted. “They’re all so smart and I have no idea how but Severus brews every potion perfectly. Bri, Laury, and Daisy are so kind and funny I didn’t think I would like everyone.”

Her parents laughed. “Yes, darling, people can be interesting sometimes,” Dorea smiled down at her. “I’m happy you’ve made such good friends. Perhaps you can invite them over during the summer holidays while Jamie has his friends over too.”

Lea hesitated. “Maybe I can go visit them instead?” she asked quietly.

“Sweetheart,” Charlus looked at her with concern, “is Jamie still not being nice to you?”

Lea was shaking her head before he had finished. “He’s not mean, I promise, it’s just I don’t know if everyone would get along and I’d rather not make anything worse.”

Her father frowned, sharing a look with her mother over her head. She didn’t know what else to say and it was true – Jamie and his friends had taken to the house rivalry very quickly and very seriously, and she didn’t want to put her friends in their path considering they had managed to avoid it thus far.

“Of course, darling,” Dorea assured her. “We’ll figure something out.”

Lea felt a wave of gratefulness wash through her only to be dampened by her brother rushing down the stairs. As he began to speak, Lea settled against her mother’s side and focused on the comfort of her hold.

Things took a turn a few weeks into term. Lea was in the middle of cursing Bri for making her late to Potions and forcing the two of them to take the only empty seats towards the front of the classroom. It wasn’t that big of a deal, really, except Lea had gotten into the habit of glancing over at Severus and Lily’s work on the table next to hers and now they were a few rows behind her.

It turns out she had been upset for nothing because Professor Slughorn had strolled into the room, jovial as always, and announced he would be pairing up students for the preparation and brewing of their first proper potion – the Cure for Boils.

Bri and Lea barely had half a second to share a horrified look before Slughorn pulled out his list.
“Brianna Hale with Marlene McKinnon, if you will. Severus, my boy, with Remus Lupin, please. Ms Kama with Mr Black – “

Laury looked pleadingly at her friends, but all Lea could do was shrug helplessly, more worried about herself.

“…Peter Pettigrew with Mr Nott. Mary MacDonald with Daisy Parkinson…”

With every name that was called, dread grew in Lea. By the time Lily was paired with Olivia Rivers, she had resigned herself to her fate.

“And last but certainly not least, James and Cecilia Potter.”

She distantly registered some teasing coming from what she assumed was Sirius’s table as she waited for James to join her at the front.

“Hey,” he whispered, settling next to her. Surprised at his kindness, the smile she offered in response probably came out a little bit too excited.

“Hi,” she whispered back.

As Slughorn began his lecture Lea tried her best to concentrate, not wanting to mess anything up for her brother as well as herself. Once they’d gathered their ingredients, Lea lined them up on the bench in the order they were to be added into the cauldron and began carefully crushing the snake fangs.

“Will you set up the cauldron?” she asked her brother who was still scanning the ingredients in his book.

“Sure.”

The silence that fell between them was uncomfortable. “So…,” James began. “How’ve you been?”

Lea shot him an incredulous look. “Fine. What about you?”

His response was cut off when she caught a glimpse of how high the flame under the cauldron was. “James!” she exclaimed, slapping him on the shoulder before rushing to lower the flame. “It’s supposed to be at 250 not 350, you idiot!”

“Ow!” James jumped back. “I’m sorry! I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“I don’t care! You need to pay attention to what you’re doing! This could have ruined everything before we even started!”

He hit her back. “Calm down! It was a mistake but it’s fine!”

She shoved him, making him stumble backwards a little. “Don’t yell at me and don’t tell me to calm down!”

“Now, now, there’s no need to get so upset,” Professor Slughorn approached them. “I’m sure both of you remember the safety measures to be taken in this classroom and physical violence was definitely not deemed appropriate.”

As the siblings focused on their teacher, they realised the class had fallen silent around them.

“It’s not my fault she’s got her panties in a twist,” James muttered next to her.
Lea spun to face him, grabbing her wand from the table. “What did you just say?”

“That’s enough!”

Lea jumped. She had never seen Slughorn be in anything except a pleasant mood and the disappointment present on his face now made her back down immediately. She never could stand getting in trouble.

“Now,” he continued, “I’m sorry to say I can’t excuse this kind of behaviour. Please meet me in my office after dinner tonight for detention. I trust the two of you will behave yourselves for the rest of the lesson.” He looked at the rest of the class. “Back to work!”

Shooting a dirty look at her brother – which was reciprocated – Lea aggressively resumed crushing the snake fangs.

“Good one,” she hissed at her brother.

“You’re the one who started yelling like a crazy person over the temperature!” he whispered back, looking over her shoulder to make sure Slughorn wasn’t near.

“It could have ruined everything! I’m not going to fail this potion because you’re incapable of setting the right temperature.”

“Fine! Then do it yourself!”

“Fine!”

“Good!” James slouched in his seat, crossing his arms. Lea angrily threw the contents of her mortar into the cauldron, counted to ten, and waved her wand. She grabbed her notebook and began making notes so forcefully, the quill tore her page.

Making a noise of frustration, she ripped the page out of her book and threw it at the table.

“Merlin, stop throwing a tantrum!” James exclaimed.

“Says the one sulking in the corner,” she retorted.

“Just – stop!” James exhaled. “I’m sorry, okay? Don’t be upset.”

She narrowed her eyes at his pleading expression. Sensing his sincerity, she nodded, loosening her grip on the quill. “I’m sorry, too.”

James broke into a smile. “This is the first time we’ve worked together in class like we said we always would.”

Lea stopped herself from pointing out that it was him that was always too busy for her. Instead, she returned his smile. “And look at how it went.”

He leaned forward, shaking off his sullen posture. “I always knew you were too serious – you need to stop being so stressed.”

Lea scowled. “It’s not a choice. It’s just how I feel, okay? Leave me alone.”

“Okay, okay!” He raised his hands in defeat. He glanced into the cauldron. “So. Observations?”

Lea nodded, and the rest of the lesson went relatively smoothly, leaving Lea with a tentative sense
of hope that her brother was finally beginning to think about her again. This tentative hope followed her for the rest of the day, right up until about halfway through their detention that evening.

They were sitting a few spaces away from each other, writing lines. Slughorn had left them alone about ten minutes into the detention when he realised they weren’t about to start fighting again and, aside from sharing a few giggles and comparing the letters they had been sent from their parents that morning, they had been writing their lines in comfortable silence.

Lea was glancing at the clock on the wall for the seventh time in ten minutes, silently praying for the hands to move faster, when James spoke.

“Hey, Le?”

“Yeah, Jamie?”

“You aren’t really friends with that Snape boy, are you?”

Lea stiffened, meeting her brother’s eyes incredulously. “So, what if I am?”

“But you aren’t, are you? He’s just a mean, greasy git– “

“You’re the one sounding mean right now, Jamie,” she cut him off. “I know he’s a little bit odd but he’s actually very smart and not mean at all once you get to know him– “

“Le, you should have heard the things he was saying on the train about Slytherins being superior when everyone knows Slytherins are just a bunch of snobby twats– “

Lea felt the tiny sliver of hope in her heart fall away. “I’m a Slytherin, Jamie,” she said quietly.

His face fell. “You know I don’t mean you- “

“But why shouldn’t you? I’m just as much of a Slytherin as the rest of them. I was sorted into the house just like everyone else. They’re my friends and they’ve been good to me.”

“But you’re not like them! You’re not a greasy snob who thinks they’re better than everyone else because they come from some ancient, magical house– “

Lea’s eyes widened in shock. “What do you know about that?”

“Sirius told me his family have all been sorted into Slytherin and they’re all evil and think they’re better than everyone else because they’re pure-bloods.”

“Not everyone is like that!” she said, somewhat desperately. “James, these people are my friends, they’re not evil – “

“But Snivellus – “

Lea frowned. “What?”

“That’s the hour!” Slughorn announced, strolling back into the room. “I hope the two of you have learned your lesson. I expect nothing less than your best behaviour from now on.”

Lea rushed to her feet, handing her parchment to Slughorn as she left the room.

“Lea!” James caught up to her, grabbing her arm to stop her.
“I think,” Lea said quietly, still not meeting her brother’s eyes, “this is something we should just not talk about.”

“No, James, there’s no way I’m going to think my house mates – my friends – are all horrible people, okay? I think we should just stop talking about this because one of us is going to get upset if we don’t.”

James looked like he wanted to argue but something on her face must have stopped him because he nodded and let go of her arm.

“Okay,” Lea nodded in return. “I’ll see you in class, Jamie.”

James still looked like he wanted to protest but instead pulled her into a quick hug. “Yeah, Le, see you in class.”

She had barely returned the hug before he had let go and began walking in the direction of his dorm. Lea felt like her heart was actually breaking into two, her chest aching as her brother walked away. They had made so many plans for Hogwarts and every single one of them had been forgotten the moment the sorting hat placed her in the wrong house.

The worst part was that she couldn’t even bring herself to resent the decision – she felt at home in the warm dorms under the lake. Her friends were so nice and none of them were anywhere close to being evil, but she had no idea how to change her brother’s mind other than somehow forcing him to spend time with the Slytherins.

She felt like her fears from the night of the Welcome Feast had been confirmed – James was upset about her sorting, and even though she was proud of her house, she felt like she had betrayed him.

It was with this in mind that Lea tried her hardest to avoid her brother unless interaction was absolutely necessary. Given that he was generally occupied with his friends and – hilariously – trying to gain Lily Evans’ attention, this wasn’t very difficult. The remaining Potions lessons were uneventful save for one lesson when James had engaged Lea in a Pungous Onion slicing competition that had escalated to a general ‘who had better knife wielding skills’ competition. This resulted in a shocking amount of finely diced potion ingredients, a tiny fire that Lea would swear she didn’t start, a few bleeding fingers, and a severely unimpressed Slughorn.

Lea and James, however, had giggled through the blood, managed to keep their potion on the right track, and high-fived each other as they left the classroom with another detention.

So, while the distance between them had reduced, they were still nowhere near as close as they had been before Hogwarts, but Lea found herself growing used to their new relationship as the year progressed and she forged closer friendships with her housemates.

It was towards the end of the year, when exam season was well underway and Lea had pressured Severus into helping her start a study group with all the first years in her house, that she made perhaps the most surprising acquaintance thus far.

Lea had been sitting at a table by herself, her friends having long gone to bed as their final exam was to take place the next morning, gradually spiralling deeper and deeper into panic over her History of Magic notes.

She hadn’t realised someone was standing over her until they cleared their throat pointedly.
Looking up, she was met with someone who had to have been the prettiest person she had seen since her own mother. The girl had icy blonde hair that was neatly rolled into a bun, sharp grey eyes, and flawless pale skin.

“Are you well, child? It’s quite late,” the girl asked, her voice lacking genuine warmth.

Lea, who was exhausted and stressed, only managed to wrinkle her nose in distaste. “I’m not a child.”

The girl’s lips twitched. “You should head to bed. You’ve been looking at the same two pages for half an hour.”

Lea frowned. “I can’t. I can’t remember any of these dates and I need them for the exam tomorrow otherwise I’m going to fail –”

“You won’t fail, child.” The girl rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen you studying here for weeks, believe me, if there’s something you don’t know by now you won’t learn it by staring at the pages mere hours before you have to sit the exam.”

Lea felt tears welling up and she rubbed at her eyes, feeling helpless. “They’re going to send me home,” she panicked, “I’m going to fail and they’re going to send me home. They only let me enter early because I promised I’d get high grades but it’s all for nothing –”

Lea didn’t see it, but the girl visibly floundered at the sight of tears before awkwardly crouching in front of the chair and reaching out a hand to pat Lea’s arm awkwardly. “Don’t cry,” she said in a tone attempting to be soothing but only managing slightly desperate.

Lea sniffled, rubbing her eyes once more before blinking furiously and taking a deep breath.

The girl smiled. “Good. Okay. Do you know who I am?”

Lea shook her head.

“My name is Narcissa and I have the highest grades in my year. Did you know that?”

Lea blinked once more, looking at the girl in surprise. “No,” she said in a small voice.

“Well, it’s true. And you should listen to me if I say you’re going to be just fine, okay? I’m not in the habit of pointlessly coddling crying children so you know that I’m telling the truth.” Narcissa offered her a wry smile. “Besides, Slytherins do not cry, do not show weakness, and certainly do not fail. It’s not in our nature.”

Lea gave the older girl a tiny smile, one that was returned.

“Oh, then.” Narcissa stood. “Off to bed then. First rule of doing well on exams is getting enough sleep so you manage to stay awake for the damn thing.”

“Okay,” Lea whispered, feeling exhaustion in her bones as she packed up the notes that were spread out on the table.

“Good.” Narcissa walked with her to the entrance to the girl’s dormitories.

Before she disappeared up the stairs to her room, Lea offered her a quiet, “Thank you.”

As she was halfway up the stairs, she didn’t see the soft smile grace Narcissa’s beautiful face. “You’re welcome, child.”
Sure enough, once the questions were in front of her Lea found she *did* remember the dates and the feeling of elation that settled inside her and her friends as they exited the exam was unlike anything they had felt before.

“Oh my *Gods*, thank Merlin that’s over,” Bri was saying as they made their way to the Great Hall for lunch. “I’m going to burn all my notes when we get back to the Common Room.”

“They’ll probably be helpful for next year if we have to remember stuff from this year,” Lea said thoughtfully. “I’m going to put together folders.”

The other girls giggled. “What?” Lea said defensively, though she was fighting a smile herself. “I’m just trying to be prepared!”

They had just stepped into the Entrance Hall when they heard a shrill, “Leave him alone!”

The four girls rushed forward to find a small crowd had formed near the door to the Great Hall. Pushing their way to the front, they saw a furious looking Severus, adorned with pink hair and bright gold robes, drawing his wand and training it on none other than James and Sirius. Lily was stood protectively in between them, face flushed with anger and hands on her hips. The two boys were doubled over in laughter (as was most of the crowd), and Remus and Peter could be seen a few steps behind in a similar state.

“Ease off, Evans,” Sirius managed through is laughter. “It’s not our fault Snivellus was stupid enough to touch something that wasn’t his.”

Lea felt dread run through her. *Snivellus*.

Before she realised what she was doing, she had walked right up to James and grabbed his arm, shaking it to make sure she had his attention.

“James, stop it,” she begged.

He looked surprised to see her and his smile fell slightly. “Le – “

“Stay out of it, baby Potter,” Sirius interrupted. “Like I said, this has nothing to do with us.”

Lea ignored him, shaking James’s arm again. “*Jamie.*”

“What is happening here?” Professor McGonagall rushed down the corridor. “All of you, into the hall! Not you, Potter, Black, Snape, Evans.” She settled an appraising gaze on Lea. “You stay too, Potter.”

Bri squeezed Lea’s hand as she passed, and she gave her friend a reassuring smile. McGonagall returned Severus to normal with a single flick of her wand and led the group to her office.

“Miss Evans,” she began from the seat behind her desk. “Would you care to explain what happened?”

“Potter – uh, James, that is – and Black charmed Severus’s bag to rip and when he went to pick up his books, contact with one of them changed the colour of his hair and robes, Professor. I tried to intervene before anything went further.”

Lily’s eyes were worriedly fixed on Severus, who in turn was fixated on a spot behind McGonagall’s head.
“Miss Potter.” Lea met the Professor’s eyes. “Do you corroborate this?”

“I arrived seconds before you, Professor,” she said quietly.

“I see.” Professor McGonagall directed her gaze to James and Sirius who were both standing proudly, refusing to look even slightly bashful. “The two of you disrespect your house. You lack the honour and integrity that is expected of a Gryffindor. Fifty points.”

At that, James deflated.

“Fifty points!” Sirius exclaimed. “It was only a basic colour changing charm!”

McGonagall’s nose twitched. “It was the intention behind it. Be grateful it’s not fifty points each. I expect more from the two of you next year – hopefully you learn how to make your house proud. Dismissed.”

Severus was the first out the door, Lily and Lea close behind. Lea didn’t bother chasing after Severus – she knew he was as likely to be civil right now as the Giant Squid was to join Filch for tea – but hurriedly made her way to the Great Hall.

“Lea!”

James had rushed and managed to catch her just as she turned into the Entrance Hall. Sirius was sulking a few steps behind, a pout fixed on his handsome face.

“Yes, James?” she asked him, trying her hardest to channel the calm her mother always projected.

He faltered a little in the face of her neutrality. “It really was harmless,” he tried, but Lea was shaking her head before he had finished.

“I thought we had agreed to not talk about this,” she said quietly.

“I don’t want you to be upset with me,” his voice came out timid, a tone she rarely heard from her brother.

“I’m never going to be okay with this,” she said evenly, turning into the Great Hall.

“But please don’t be upset!” he pleaded.

“Merlin, who cares if she’s upset?” Sirius drawled from over James’s shoulder. “If she wants to support the losing side then it’s her loss.”

“There shouldn’t be sides!” she hissed at him, her patience dissipating in the face of his smug expression.

“Sirius! James!” The interruption came in the form of Peter Pettigrew, rushing to his friends and tripping at least twice on what appeared to be nothing.

Lea took advantage of the boys’ attention being diverted and swiftly located her friends at the Slytherin table.

“What did McGonagall say?” Bri asked before Lea had managed to sit down.

“Nothing. Just chewed out James and Sirius. It was pretty anti-climactic.”

Bri looked disappointed at the absence of gossip.
“They really are horrible to Severus,” Laury said thoughtfully. “They don’t even get caught half the time but everyone knows it’s the four of them.”

Lea blinked. “What? How often does this happen?”

It was Laury’s turn to look surprised. “Have you really never heard about this before? They generally keep it out of class but they’re always doing petty things like tripping him in the hall or knocking his books over. One day, Sev’s gonna lose it and murder them.”

“I can’t wait,” Bri said with a wide smile.

“Give him some credit,” Daisy added. “Sev doesn’t just take it quietly but he’s outnumbered and that Evans girl he cries over always makes him hold back. He’d be better off without her, in my opinion. It’s not done to just let people walk all over you like those boys do to him.”

“Did literally everyone know about this except me? How have I never seen this happen before?” Lea could feel anger rising in her again and she tried her hardest to push it back down. Narcissa’s words echoed in the back of her mind, reminding her to hold her weaknesses close to her chest.

“If Evans reigns Sev in, it’s you that reigns Potter in,” Daisy said matter-of-factly.

Lea shook her head. “James doesn’t care about what I think that much. I’ve told him before I disagree with his hatred for Sev and it didn’t change his mind at all, even though I didn’t know it was this bad.”

Daisy shrugged. “It is what it is. You saw how James stopped laughing the moment he saw you.”

“He doesn’t care,” she insisted. “He’s disappointed about my sorting and nothing I say seems to change his mind.”

“Your first mistake is accepting defeat,” Daisy informed her, pointing her fork at Lea. “Mother always says ‘if you act like something is going to happen, it will’.”

“I don’t think it works quite like that,” Laury said, furrowing her brow at her friend. Daisy shrugged.

“It’s worked well enough for me this far.”

“You’re eleven.”

“Whatever it is,” Lea interrupted. “I’m not going to agree with James on this and he doesn’t seem like he’s going to agree with me so let’s just leave it.”

“For now,” Daisy relented, noting the sadness marking her friend’s face. “Now, who’s house are we meeting at over hols?”

It was with this final incident their first year of schooling ended. The summer was peaceful enough since Lea and James both managed to avoid controversial topics, but James sulked intensely when Lea went to spend a weekend at the Parkinson’s to meet up with the girls. He and his friends hadn’t managed to organise a place to meet up – apparently Remus tended to fall ill at inopportune moments and Sirius’s parents refused to let him associate with ‘blood traitors’ on their watch.

Lea spent the break feeling as if she was regaining her footing after being off-balance for a long time. She and James properly talked about classes, teachers, and secret discoveries they had made (neither had found secret passages but James had stumbled upon an old music classroom that
wasn’t used anymore but still equipped with various instruments). They discussed their friendships, James declared that he was going to marry Lily Evans one day, and Lea managed to explain her friendships without anything more than James’s eye twitching.

She asked her mother to teach her more about the traditions some magical families followed, and spent many days curled up in the Potter Manor’s library with her, flipping through ancient books. She was fascinated by the sheer history behind these families and the evolution the traditions had undergone. She learnt about what societal status meant to many of these old families and was enamoured with the history and status of her own family.

The Potter’s, though pure-blooded for the most part, had been welcomed in society for years until one of Lea’s ancestors had vocally disagreed with anti-Muggle legislation that was presented to the Wizengamot. Now, they hadn’t been completely shunned and still wielded considerable status, but it wasn’t recognised with as much respect from the other families as it once was.

It was with this knowledge, the sombre understanding that her brother was going to return to ignoring her, and her mother’s warm words of goodbye that she entered her second year at Hogwarts.
Chapter Three

September, 1972

The second year, James didn’t even wait to wave goodbye to their parents with Lea before rushing through the train to find his friends. It was only after the lingering image of her parents gave way to countryside that Lea went to do the same – finding her friends already settled in a compartment, gossiping about the Defence professor that had apparently been fired by Headmaster Dumbledore but refused to leave without a duel.

Lea let the familiar voice of her friends wash over her as she settled against Brianna, resting her head on her shoulder, and smiled through the lingering sadness of parting with her family. They took carriages to the castle this year, ones that seemed to be pulled by nothing. The girls spent the entire ride in awe of their surroundings – Lea whispering stories of ghosts and creatures that were probably hidden in the darkness behind the trees.

Laury was in the middle of hitting Lea on the arm, cursing the girl for putting such horrid ideas in her mind when the castle came into view and every girl let out a dreamy sigh, all monsters forgotten.

The sorting was spent whispering frantically, fantasising about what the new Defence professor would be like – she was a tiny Asian lady with white hair that was mercilessly pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her dark eyes scanned the crowd and Lea felt as if the lady could see right into her soul in the split second they landed on her.

It was only when Daisy hushed the rest of them that they looked up to find a boy with familiar black hair and grey eyes approaching the stool. Regulus Black was slighter than his brother but his gaze and gait held the same arrogance Lea saw in Sirius.

The hat barely tousled Regulus’s wavy locks before announcing, “Slytherin!”

The Slytherin table erupted in cheers, and polite applause was given from the rest of the hall as the boy made his way to the end of the table. He was the first of the night to be sorted into the house but he sat tall with pride and confidence as if this was exactly where he was meant to be.

Lea couldn’t help but glance over to the Gryffindor table where James was sat with a scowling Sirius, disappointment etched in his features.

“At least we won’t have to sit through another howler,” Daisy whispered.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Bri whispered back. “Howlers are the foundation for any and all gossip to follow in the year.”

“Shhh.” Daisy waved her hand at her friend. “I’m trying to listen.”

“The bloody hat shouts everything, it’s not exactly difficult to hear,” Bri muttered, sharing a look with Laury.

Despite Regulus not showing any outward indication that he was even remotely upset, Lea couldn’t shake the lingering image of Sirius’s disappointment and how much it reminded her of the same look James had directed at her this time last year. It was because of this that when she saw Regulus reading alone in the Common Room the next week, she approached.
“Hi,” she said, struggling to balance her books in one arm to offer him her hand. She had been on her way back from the library where she had perhaps picked up too many books on Charms, but she was determined to stay on top of all her classes if it was the last thing she did. Failing miserably, she dropped the books onto the floor with a huff and stuck out her right hand. “I’m Lea.”

Lea thought she could see amusement in Regulus’s face but she found it difficult to be sure in the face of his perfectly arched eyebrow that radiated disinterest.

“I know,” he replied flatly, though he did take her hand.

Latchng onto the tiny opening he gave her, she continued, “I thought I should introduce myself given how close our siblings are – “

“You think because our brothers are best friends, we’re going to be as well?” he said incredulously.

Lea smiled wryly. “Not quite. I was thinking more along the lines of just letting you know I understand what it feels like to be a severe disappointment to your brother because of where you were sorted.”

He scoffed. “Unlike you, I have brought honour to my family through my sorting – “

Lea snorted, “Family has nothing to do with it, my parents don’t care about the colour of my robes – I’m talking about brothers specifically. And I’m not looking for anything like revenge or retaliation, okay? I just thought I’d let you know I feel the same way.”

Regulus calmed slightly, though suspicion was still present in his eyes. “I don’t care what my brother thinks of me. He brings shame to the Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

“Yikes,” Lea said lightly, picking up her fallen books. “That sounds heavy. Well, I’ve said my piece. I’ll just be off now.”

She returned to her dorm, slightly upset when he didn’t say anything more. She tried to remain positive for the most part, although their paths rarely crossed and Regulus never made an effort to speak to her, but eventually resigned herself to the fact that he probably didn’t care that much about what his brother thought.

It was just as she resolved to let it go that he approached her.

It wasn’t anything major – Lea was studying with a group of her friends in the Common Room in preparation for the Potions quiz they had the following week when Regulus took an empty seat next to Severus, two spaces down from Lea.

Looking over Sev’s books at the questions Lea was working through, he read through her incomplete list of the side effects of a Sleeping Draught.

“Temporary narcolepsy?” he offered with a tiny smile.

The one Lea gave him return was way too excited for finishing a single Potions question, and Severus shot her a confused look as she scribbled down the answer.

It was from that moment that Regulus began to acknowledge her in the halls or the Common Room, giving her no more than a stiff nod in greeting but pleasing Lea nonetheless. They occasionally conversed more thoroughly over school work after Lea noticed Regulus becoming more and more frustrated over his History of Magic notes and refused to leave him alone until she
It was when Regulus returned from the Christmas break that he first approached Lea with genuine fear written into his features. She was sitting in a window seat situated in a dim corner of the Common Room, already penning a letter to her parents despite having only left them the day before, when she noticed Regulus hovering restlessly a few steps away from her.

Blinking up at him, she stood immediately when she noticed his eyes glistening and his jaw clenching painfully.

“Regulus?” She reached a hand out to touch him but let it drop when she noticed him looking at it with barely contained fear. Changing tactics, she dropped back onto one side of the window seat, clearing her parchment and quill from the other side. “Sit with me.”

It was a testament to how upset he was that he didn’t protest at all and took his seat silently, pulling his knees to his chest and curling his arms around his legs.

“What happened?” Lea prompted softly after a few seconds of silence.

“It’s more than just disappointment,” he said quietly, voice wavering. “He’s never going to speak to me again.”

Lea’s heart sank. “You mean Sirius?”

He nodded. “It’s not – it’s not that I was sorted here. It’s my mother.” He was speaking so quietly now she had to lean closer to hear him properly.

“She was never happy with his sorting but now that I’ve been sorted ‘correctly’, he said with not a little bitterness, “she has no use for him anymore. She’s so horrible to him and it’s my fault – now that I’ve proven myself a suitable heir she doesn’t care about him at all.”

Lea was still reeling slightly from his words. It was no secret that Walburga Black was less than pleased with her eldest son’s sorting but Lea had never thought it would have mattered enough to still be relevant, so long after it had happened. And the words Regulus was using – ‘no use for him’ – she was struggling to understand how anyone’s mother could think like that about their child.

“It’s not your fault,” she said firmly, reaching out to place a hand on his knee. “It’s not your fault your mother is happier with your sorting than your brother’s – you have to know that her opinions have nothing to do with you and it’s not your fault you happen to fit her expectations more than Sirius.”

“She hates him,” Regulus admitted, meeting Lea’s eyes. “And I try to tell him not to make her angry but he never listens and she just gets more and more upset. I don’t know how to convince him to stop making it worse.”

Lea’s hear clenched painfully. “I don’t know what you can do either,” she said, upset that she couldn’t help in any way that mattered. “But you can’t stop trying.”

“So course I won’t stop trying,” Reg said dryly, sounding more like his stoic self before sobering once more and adding softly, “I just didn’t realise how bad it would become. I’d hoped she’d just ignore him if I did everything she wanted.”

“Damn it all,” Lea announced, sliding next to Regulus and wrapping him up in a tight hug. He made a noise of protest but didn’t push her away so she smiled into his shoulder and hoped she could bring some level of comfort to her friend.
They’d gone to bed soon after, Lea distracted with this new information and debating whether or not to speak to her mother about it, and Regulus slightly embarrassed for blurting out everything despite Lea assuring him he was being stupid.

It was after that night that Lea found herself looking at Sirius as more than just someone who had stolen her brother from her and couldn’t help but wonder how much James knew about his friend’s situation. When she had presented this question to Regulus he looked at her like she was stupid for asking (which she shoved him for) and informed her slowly that there was no way his brother would have managed to keep this from James.

It was after that conversation that she felt herself truly let go of the hurt that still lingered from her brother’s obsession with his friends and disinterest in her.

Her worry for her friend was slowly overtaken by happiness as Regulus began to spend more time with her and her friends, even if it was just studying in the Common Room. It helped make her feel as if she was helping him feel a little bit better and gave her hope that she could still find ways to help him.

Classes after the Easter holidays brought with them exam preparation and, despite Bri’s insistence that Lea relax, she could feel herself getting more overwhelmed by the second. Every time a Professor mentioned a topic was examinable, Lea could feel her anxiety rise another notch and Laury began to pull out oddly shaped crystals to place around the dorm room, claiming her mother had told her they would soak up negative energy and leave only positivity.

The week before exams found Lea holed up in the Common Room, tucked into the corner of the couch in front of the fire and barely visible under a thick green blanket. She was staring into the fire, willing sleep to take her, when a shockingly familiar figure gracefully settled on the other end of the couch.

“Is this going to happen every exam period, child?”

Lea had seen Narcissa around the castle all year but, when she received no acknowledgement, assumed she had completely imagined that night before her History of Magic exam. So, it was with a not insignificant amount of surprise that Lea jumped, letting out a tiny squeal.

Narcissa’s mouth twitched. “Well?”

“It’s just hard to get to sleep,” Lea mumbled, her mouth half covered by the edge of her blanket.

The older girl sighed, looking balefully at Lea. “Remember that you have sat these exams before and, I’m assuming since you’re sitting here right now, that you passed them well enough. You are more than capable of doing it again.”

Lea looked at her with wide eyes, remembering that Narcissa was one of the smartest people in sixth year, and nodded slightly.

Narcissa turned to face Lea completely, leaning against the arm of the couch and pulling her legs onto the seat, letting her bare feet stretch out until they tuck themselves under Lea’s blanket.

“I’ve noticed you’ve befriended my little cousin,” she said, steely eyes boring into Lea’s brown ones as the younger girl frowned in confusion before understanding dawned.

“Regulus.”
“Indeed.”

“He’s very smart.”

Narcissa smiled at that, a genuine smile laced with affection. “That he is.”

“I don’t always think he likes me,” Lea admitted.

Narcissa’s quiet laugh was probably the prettiest thing Lea had ever heard. “He’s a Black. We don’t like anyone.”

“Sirius likes James.”

“Sirius is an outlier,” Narcissa said primly, amusement falling from her face. “Besides, Regulus likes you well enough.”

Lea, tired and still not completely convinced this conversation was real, simply shrugged in response.

“No,” Narcissa said more firmly. “He does like you. And he needs to make friends. Even within the family we recognise dear Aunt Walburga is a little…excited…and Regulus needs support from people completely separate from us.”

Lea shrugged again. “We are friends. I’ll do whatever I can to help him.”

Narcissa’s gaze softened. “I know you will, child.”

“I’m not a child,” she protested weakly.

“Of course not.”

Lea managed a weak scowl, feeling her eyes begin to droop. She felt Narcissa move away and forced herself to open her eyes.

“Wait,” she reached a hand out, latching onto one of Narcissa’s. “Don’t ignore me anymore.”

The older girl looked at her in surprise before gently prying her hand out of her grasp. “Sleep well, child,” she said quietly, and the last thing Lea remembered was the gentle swish of Narcissa’s nightgown as her body gave way to exhaustion.

When she awoke to the sound of students emerging from their dorms the only thing on her mind was finding Narcissa and proving she wasn’t stress hallucinating entire conversations. Dodging her friends and dressing hurriedly, she was still attempting to do up her tie as she ran through the Common Room and didn’t notice when someone stepped into her path.

“Oh!” Lea huffed, righting herself. “I’m so sorry!”

She looked up to find none other than Narcissa herself, gazing at her with vague disappointment as ran her hands down the length of her robes to rid them of creases.

“Narcissa!” Lea exclaimed before abruptly throwing her arms around the older girl. Narcissa made a noise of surprise, her hands hovering awkwardly in the air.

“Sorry, sorry!” Lea apologised, stepping away. “I was just so sure I was having stress-induced hallucinations although Merlin knows why my subconscious would think you up to give me pep
talks – not that you aren’t amazing! It’s just that we’ve never spoken before and I was just so –”

Narcissa threw a hand up to silence her and Lea shut her mouth with an audible click. “You’ve not been hallucinating.” Was Lea sleep deprived or did Narcissa sound amused? “I’m real. I’m here. And I give amazing pep talks. Do you remember what we spoke of last night?”

Lea nodded.

“Good. Now leave. And don’t hug me again.” The displeased arch of her brow reminded Lea strikingly of Regulus and she decided then and there she *would* hug her again, damn everything else. With this resolve, she made her way to the Great Hall with wide smile.
Chapter Four

The summer holiday that followed Lea’s second year was host to an extravagant party at the Parkinson estate in honour of Daisy’s birthday. All of the Potters had been invited but James had refused to go – that is, until he discovered the infamous Ancient and Noble House of Black were to attend as well. After exchanging frequent letters with Narcissa and Regulus, Lea managed to put together a vague idea of who was to be attending, and who to stay away from. Narcissa had suggested she stick close to her parents to stave off any unwanted attention and accidental betrothals which had made Lea laugh until Narcissa had provided her with a list of people that had been tricked into verbal betrothal contracts. It wasn’t short. Regulus had additionally tasked her with keeping her brother in check, stressing how important it was that Sirius not cause trouble in public.

Despite the warnings delivered by the two of them, Lea couldn’t help but feel ecstatic about her friend’s birthday party. As the Parkinsons generally stayed out of politics, Bri was to be attending as well as Laury and the rest of the Kama family, and Lea was beyond excited to see them. The excitement only grew with the dress her mother had bought for her – knee-length, emerald green, and very sparkly – and it reached its peak as she was brushing her hair in preparation for the evening.

Her mother knocked on the door. “Almost ready?”

Lea put her brush down on the dresser. “Ready.”

Coming to stand in front of her daughter, Dorea appraised her daughter with a critical eye before smiling widely. “You look beautiful. You’re just missing one final thing.”

Holding out a petite red box, she gestured for Lea to open it. She lifted the lid to reveal a long, slim gold chain adorned with shimmering emeralds, each set in the middle of a circle of tiny diamonds. Her eyes lit up, enamoured.

“It’s to celebrate your introduction to society,” Dorea explained, taking it out of the box and gently handing it over to Lea. “You can wear it as a bracelet if you’d like but I rather thought it would look lovely as an anklet.”

Lea knelt, carefully wrapping the chain around her ankle twice before clasping it.

“Now you look perfect, my love.” Dorea matched the wide smile on her daughter’s face before leading her down the staircase to the front room where they were to floo to the Parkinson’s.

“Charlus! James!” Dorea called out. “You’re late!” When she received no response, she exchanged an exasperated look with Lea. “Twitchy!”

The house elf appeared immediately. “Yes, Mistress?”

“Please inform my husband and son we’re waiting for them and will leave without them if they aren’t here in two minutes.”


“Yes, Mum!” Lea interrupted, rolling her eyes. “I remember everything! I promise to behave.”
Dorea frowned. “Do not interrupt.”

“We’re ready!” James shouted, bounding down the stairs dressed in black trousers and a deep red sweater. Charlus followed at a more sedate pace, his dress robes billowing elegantly in his wake.

“You look beautiful, Lea,” her father smiled down at her.

“James,” Dorea groaned. “Did you even try to brush your hair? Come here.”

“Mum, noooo, leave it! Ow! You’re pulling too hard!”

Ignoring the familiar argument, Charlus offered his arm to Lea, dark eyes crinkling as he grinned. “Shall we?”

Looping her arm through his, she nodded firmly, flipping her hair back over her shoulder. “We shall.”

The two of them stepped through the floo first – leaving James and Dorea to follow a second later – and into a room that must have been the study. They were greeted by a house elf and directed into what could only be described as a ballroom, decorated in pink and gold with round tables arranged in a manner that left an open space in the centre of the room. Many people were already there, some of them dancing in the centre, and others chatting at the tables but most of them gathered loosely around what seemed to be a bar with a huge banner reading “Happy 13th Daisy!” hanging across its length.

Spotting Daisy’s dark hair on the dancefloor surrounded by the familiar figures of Bri and Laury, Lea rushed forward, hugging Daisy fiercely as her friends laughed.

“Happy birthday!” she squealed, pulling away only to grasp her friend’s hands in her own. “I know I already gave you a present but mother found the most gorgeous shoes and I knew you would love them –”

Daisy laughed. “You know you didn’t have to, but thank you.” She pulled Lea into another quick hug before stepping back to greet Charlus, Dorea, and James (who was a few steps behind, eagerly scanning the crowd).

“They’re not here yet,” Laury whispered in Lea’s ear, nodded towards James. “Everyone’s been on high alert for the Blacks to arrive, you’ll know when they do.”

Lea nodded, squeezing Laury’s hand in appreciation before moving to her brother’s side. “He’s not here yet, Jamie,” she relayed the message quietly. “But promise me you won’t do anything silly – you know you’ll only get him into trouble.”

James looked at her with surprise but nodded quickly before Charlus and Dorea pulled the two of them away from the other girls in order to greet the elder Parkinsons properly. It was while making small talk with Daisy’s parents that Lea spotted Narcissa at a table in the corner sitting with Lucius Malfoy and her interest was piqued – she had heard rumours of the two but as far as she knew nothing had been confirmed.

Making sure to stay by James’s side, Lea forced him to follow their parents dutifully, politely greeting all the adults knowing that making a positive first impression could make all the difference in the future. James did what was expected, albeit more restlessly than her, and it wasn’t far into their round that the Blacks walked through the study door.

Walburga Black, dressed from head to toe in - shockingly - black, entered the room on the arm of
Orion Black, a tall, broad man that stood proudly as he led his family to greet the Parkinsons. Regulus and Sirius followed closely, both dressed in the same colour as their parents, hair slicked away from their faces, expressions stoic, and looking more like brothers than Lea had ever seen before.

She yanked James back as he automatically moved towards his friend, making brief but significant eye contact with Regulus as he passed them. Distracted by the arrivals, Lea hadn’t notice Dorea step up beside them, place a hand on both her and James’s shoulders and silently direct them towards the Blacks as they finished greeting the Parkinsons.

“Orion, Walburga,” Dorea said warmly. “It’s been a while.”

“Indeed, it has,” Walburga said, looking at Dorea down the length of her nose.

“I don’t believe you’ve had the pleasure of meeting our son, Regulus,” Orion continued, prompting Reg to step forward and offer a hand to Dorea.

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Regulus said with a tiny smile, looking up to meet Dorea’s eyes.

Lea could see her mother soften in the face of the young boy and the smile she gave him was genuine. “The pleasure is all mine, darling. I’m sure you’ve seen my children James and Lea around school?”

“Indeed,” Reg said, nodding curtly at the two of them.

“And I’ve heard you’ve already met Sirius,” Walburga said, tone laced with disapproval.

“I have,” Dorea agreed, meeting Walburga’s pointed gaze evenly. “It’s lovely to see you again, Sirius.”

“You too, Mrs Potter,” Sirius’s stoic mask gave way to a sincere grin.

“Now, I do believe we should let the children enjoy the party, no?” Dorea said in a tone that implied it wasn’t really a question. “We have a lot of catching up to do.”

James didn’t wait a moment longer, moving to Sirius’s side to grab his arm and pull him towards one of the empty tables. Lea and Reg shared a panicked look, but Dorea seemed to be doing a thorough job of occupying Walburga and Orion’s attention.

“Let’s go to Narcissa,” Lea whispered to Reg, inclining her head towards the table but letting her eyes fall longingly onto her friends in the middle of the dance floor.

Reg looked at her with surprise. “I didn’t know you were friends with Cissa.”

Lea grinned, leading the way. “She’s helped me out a few times but don’t tell anyone – I don’t think anyone’s supposed to know she likes me.”

“She and Lucius are going to be engaged, did you know?” Reg whispered as they neared the table. “They’re just waiting for Cissa to turn 17 until they announce it but I think she actually likes him.”

“Really?” Lea asked, fascinated by the idea that someone she knew could be getting married in a few years.

“Hello, children,” Narcissa said primly, turning towards them as they arrived. “You both look lovely.”
“Stop calling me a child,” Reg grumbled, sitting in a chair.

“She does that you too?” Lea exclaimed, taking a seat as well. “But thank you, Narcissa, you look lovely as well.”

Cissa eyed her consideringly before nodding. “I believe the two of you know Lucius?”

Lea nodded. “You were the prefect that gave the big speech about being loyal to your house.”

Lucius smirked, pale blue eyes shining in the light of the ballroom. “Indeed. How have your studies been going, Miss Potter?”

“Well.” She smiled politely, deciding to not mention the panic that had a tendency to hit her every exam period. “I’ve been lucky enough to find something that holds my attention in every subject so far so it makes studying a lot easier.”

He inclined his head. “And you, Regulus? How have you been faring without having experienced my inspirational prefect speeches?”

Reg smirked. “Perfectly fine. It’s such a shame I’ll never get to sit through them.”

“Oh, I could always give you one right now,” Lucius offered, eyes wide and innocent. “I wouldn’t want to deprive anyone of the sheer experience.”

Narcissa scoffed. “I’m sure Reggie will survive just fine without your dramatics, Lucius. Besides, he has little Lea here to look out for him.”

Regulus scowled. “I don’t need anyone to look out for me.”

“Of course you don’t,” Lucius agreed. “That’s just what girls say when they want you to know they’re onto you. Remain alert, young Regulus, otherwise Miss Potter might pull something over you.”

“I wouldn’t waste my time trying to trick Regulus to get something when I know just telling him what I want would be more beneficial – we make a good team and he’s smart enough to know I’m always right,” Lea said matter-of-factly.

Lucius outright laughed at this and even Narcissa didn’t bother trying to hide her smile. “Smart boy, indeed,” Lucius said, slapping a hand onto Reg’s shoulder.

“Is this excellent teamwork why your brothers have not been in the room for the past three minutes?” Narcissa added calmly. Lea and Reg both turned to where they had last seen James and Sirius. Sure enough, they were no longer there and Lea was horrified to see Walburga scanning the room expectantly from where she was stood with Orion and Mr Rosier.

Lea and Reg turned back to each other. “You distract your mother, I’ll find the idiot brothers?” Lea suggested, standing quickly.

Regulus nodded. “So sorry to leave like this,” he added blandly to Narcissa and Lucius who were both smirking at the younger pair.

“They went onto the balcony,” Narcissa offered, and Lea shot her a grateful smile before rushing towards the grand doors that separated the terrace from the ballroom. The terrace was almost the size of the ballroom itself, set up with more tables and bustling with guests. The railing of the balcony was decorated with tiny fairy lights and potted plants had been arranged artfully across the
At first, Lea couldn’t see either of them but as she moved to the corners of the area, she spotted two familiar figures. Sure enough, huddled in darkness by the railing were James and Sirius, hunched over something that looked like a piece of paper in James’s hand.

“Are you sure this is the best way?” Sirius was whispering doubtfully. “Don’t you think we should be focusing on a cure?”

“Trust me, this is the answer,” James replied firmly. “Finding a cure is almost completely hopeless and will definitely take us longer than this will and we can always come back to looking for a cure, anyway. At least we know this will make things easier until then, right?”

Lea could just make out the wide smile that emerged on Sirius’s face. “We’ve got some research to do, then.”

“Oi,” she interrupted, rushing to them.

“Lea,” James said in surprised, fumbling to tuck the paper into the pocket of his pants.

She rolled her eyes. “The two of you need to get back inside, people are starting to notice your absence.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. “What people?”


“Come on, mate,” James said, nudging his friend back towards the ballroom. “We’re good anyway.”

With a final disbelieving look in Lea’s direction, Sirius followed James. Lea re-entered the ballroom a few seconds later, letting out a relieved sigh when she saw them seated at a table with her parents, and Regulus managing to hold his mother’s attention.

“Lea!” Before she could respond, Bri had grabbed her hand and led her to the dance floor. “We haven’t seen you all night! No more hiding, okay?”

Lea barely managed a smile and nod before she was enveloped by the rest of her friends and lost the next few hours to the music. It was after a vivacious rendition of ‘happy birthday’ and the cutting of a tall, four-tier cake, the four girls huddled around a table, eating their cake and teasing Daisy about the tearful speech her father had made.

“He’s just always so dramatic,” Daisy groaned, “I’m only thirteen, it’s not even like I’m of age or anything!”

“I think it’s sweet,” Laury countered. “They’ve put so much effort into this beautiful party and it’s obvious they love you.”

Blushing, Daisy relented. “True enough.” Then she smirked. “It is a great party, isn’t it?”

“Except for how Lea spent the beginning being shady,” Bri said pointedly. “Gossip?”

“It’s nothing,” Lea said, making a quick decision to keep the conversation she had heard between James and Sirius to herself. She would have to look into that some more before sharing. “Just trying to make good impressions. Mum gave me a whole speech about how she and Dad had made
a point to keep James and I out of the politics but she’d rather me make the right moves now than have to figure it out later.”

“That’s heavy,” Bri said, crinkling her nose. “I’m glad I don’t have to worry about that kind of stuff.”

“My parents have never said anything like that to me,” Laury pondered thoughtfully. “Although I did hear them speaking to Mr and Mrs Nott about how it was about time the Potters introduced their children to society – I guess since Daisy and I have known all these people forever it’s probably not as important for us to say the right things.”

Lea shrugged. “At least it’s over now and we’ve officially broken into the party scene.”

The proud smile that broke out onto Daisy’s face was mirrored by the other girls, and the four of them ended the night feeling victorious.

When Lea entered the Manor’s library the week before they were to leave for Hogwarts to find James poring over yet another stack of books, she decided to take action.

“What are you planning?” she asked, gleefully watching her brother hurriedly try to cover up what he was looking at. He really did need to learn to be more subtle.

“Nothing! Merlin, Lea, don’t sneak up on me like that!”

“You’ve been secretive all summer, Jamie,” she said, approaching her brother but making a point to keep her eyes away from his books. “Maybe I can help with something?”

“Believe me, Le,” James shook his head, picking up his stack of books, “this is not something you want to get involved with.”

Despite not really believing he would tell her what the secret was Lea still felt a pang of hurt that he wouldn’t trust her with whatever he was hiding. Irritated, she let him leave before making rounds through the library to find which books were missing. They were all on transfiguration.

Frowning thoughtfully, Lea contemplated how likely it was James was just getting in some extra reading before class. Knowing rationally that, though her brother wasn’t stupid by any means, he had nowhere near enough interest in class work to put in extra work, she came to the conclusion that he was probably planning some sort of prank that required elaborate transfiguration.

James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter had established a pattern of causing disruption in the school. It was in small ways – generally just questioning teachers, being loud, and occasionally mock duelling each other in the halls – but Lea didn’t think they were above escalating it and, if they were to do so, she had no doubt her housemates would bear the brunt of it. It was with this thought in mind that she resolved to figure out what her brother was hiding.

**September, 1973**

Her plans were put on hold when, a few weeks into their third year at Hogwarts, James made the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He was bouncing off the walls in every class they shared, managing to somehow bring up Quidditch no matter the subject of the conversation, and Lea forgot about whatever secret he was hiding in the face of his excitement. Every time she heard him talking about how he was going to be the best Chaser Gryffindor had ever seen she had vivid flashbacks to their younger years, racing on training brooms in the Manor’s garden and pretending to score goals.
through the gaps between their mother’s rose bushes.

Her heart was full of pride for her brother, and she told him as much.

“Congratulations, Jamie,” Lea said as she hugged him tightly. She had rushed to catch him as he entered the Great Hall for breakfast and was slightly surprised (grateful) to find him alone. Pulling away, she cleared her throat. “Hope you have fun losing to Slytherin. It should be a familiar feeling after all these years of losing to me.”

He beamed at her. “I’m going to single-handedly win Gryffindor the Quidditch Cup.”

Laughing, Lea shoved him in the shoulder before turning to head back to the Slytherin table. “You wish.”

“Sometimes, it’s difficult for me to see you as James Potter’s sister,” Daisy said as Lea settled and poured herself some tea.

“Really?” Laury said. “I see it all the time – both of them are extra, both are total rich kids, and not to mention they have literally the same hair except Le’s is longer.”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “Obviously they look like they’re related its just – James can be so… aggressive? Extroverted? Physical?”

Bri snorted. “ Didn’t you see Lea post-Divination that first lesson? She’s aggressive.”

“And I can be extroverted,” Lea said. “But unlike him, I feel there’s a time and a place to be extra. Also, it’s exhausting and I can’t do it all day, I just don’t have the energy.”

“Physical, then,” Daisy said.

“That I can’t argue with,” Lea shrugged. “I quite enjoy sitting in one place. Also – do I have to be exactly like James to be related to him? I’m very much still my own person, thanks ever so.”

“Point taken,” she acquiesced. “Don’t get upset, you know I’m with your independent feminist agenda, not against it.”

“Trelawney’s quivering with all these progressive women around,” Bri snickered. She adopted a dreamy expression, hunching over slightly and raising one finger at Lea. “You, child! You…you are in grave danger! I see a baby…a baby but no wedding! Oh, how could you raise a child outside the sanctity of marriage!”

The girl’s burst into giggles and Lea scowled. “Even if I believed in the institution of marriage it has nothing to do with raising a child. Not that I’m going to do that, either.”

“Oh, darling, never say never,” Daisy sighed, throwing an arm around Lea’s shoulders. “Who knows, one day you might end up married and pregnant!”

Lea shuddered. “Heavens forbid.”

Years later, if Lea was to be asked about James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter’s pranking legacy she would say it really began the night after the first Quidditch game of their third year. The Saturday was clear and crisp, slightly cloudy but not too dark, cold but not cold enough that you couldn’t quite feel your nose. Perfect Quidditch conditions.

Gryffindor played Hufflepuff.
Gryffindor won.

James had thrown 140 of the 180 points the Gryffindor chasers had scored.

He was elated.

The victory party that was held in the Gryffindor Common Room had dubbed James the guest of honour and though no other house attended, it was all anyone was talking about for days afterwards. This was largely because it resulted in an actual, living, breathing lion prowling the castle by morning.

An actual lion.

Rumour had it, Joseph Brocklehurst had awoken bright and early on Sunday morning, far before the rest of the castle, and walked into the Great Hall to find a fully-grown lion lounging atop the Headmaster’s pedestal. Joseph Brocklehurst would deny this with his dying breath but it was said the force of his scream had awoken Professor Dumbledore himself and caused the Headmaster to rush into the Hall just in time to put himself between a quivering Joseph and a roaring lion.

There were a few descriptions of what happened from there. Leo Khanna would say Dumbledore just stood in front of the lion and the cat, recognising the alpha, skidded to a halt mid-hunt before rolling onto its back in submission. Olivia Rivers would tell you Dumbledore flat out levelled an AK at the lion and then vanished the body. There were a few renditions of intense wrestling matches between man and lion, and one or two about Dumbledore being a lion whisperer who just whispered words of comfort into the animal’s ear until it walked itself out of the castle.

Joseph Brocklehurst, however, would tell the few that bothered asking how Dumbledore simply transfigured the lion into the bouquet of flower it had – apparently – been to begin with.

When presented with the choice of revealing themselves or losing essentially all the house points Gryffindor had accumulated thus far, an entirely unapologetic James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter stepped forward.

“George needed to be free,” were Sirius’s exact words, “we weren’t about to cage a cat that just wanted a stroll.”

And thus, the self-proclaimed Marauders were born in November of 1973.

It was only a few months later when, during the Easter Holidays spent at Hogwarts, the girls similarly made a name for themselves.

It was no secret to the girls that one Daisy Parkinson was hopelessly infatuated with fifth-year Ravenclaw Kevin Davies. The mystery was how she managed to get his attention – which she did – because interaction with the older years outside one’s house was minimal given the nature of student’s schedules and activities. Nevertheless, there was a solid week during the hols when Daisy and Kevin were inseparable. Short-lived though it was, their relationship was to go down in history as the catalyst that brought out the wrathful nature of four teenage girls.

It was nearing curfew on the Sunday before classes were to resume for the third term when Daisy rushed into girls’ dorm, cheeks stained with tears and eyes rimmed red.

Bri, Laury, and Lea who were all already in bed, though still chatting, jumped up immediately to rush to their friend’s side. After a particularly snotty explanation with many sobbing breaks, it was determined that Kevin Davies was to be eviscerated. Not only was he guilty of attempting to
pressure his underage girlfriend to engage in certain sexual acts, he had the audacity to get upset with her when she refused.

“All men do is lie,” Bri declared, rubbing Daisy’s back soothingly and sharing furious looks with Lea and Laury. “He’s not going to survive the term.”

Their plan was complex and gradual – they were going to ruin this boy. After engaging in a brief but educating conversation with Narcissa Black (who was grateful for this entertaining distraction from her impending NEWTS), they had established multiple steps to slowly work up to the ultimate and final reputation-ending blow.

It began with little things to psych him out – Bri took to shoulder checking him in the halls, apologising profusely each time, and Laury once ‘accidently’ poured a glass of pumpkin juice she was holding into his lap while passing the Ravenclaw table in the Great Hall – but the next level required a little more work.

Lea had to wrangle a few favours from some Ravenclaws she had studied with to figure out how to get into their Common Room (“A riddle? Really? That’s fucked up.”), and then ask her brother for the Invisibility Cloak. This proved to be slightly more problematic because it was a rare occasion her brother was seen without at least one of his three shadows and Merlin knew _they_ would have more to say about her borrowing the cloak than he did.

Lea chose to make her move during Charms, the location making it significantly more difficult for James to escape should he try. Earning herself a dirty look from Sirius, she slid into the vacant seat next to James seconds before him, forcing him to take a seat in the row in front. Peter was sat on James’s other side, Remus next to him, and though surprised at Lea’s presence, neither seemed inclined to comment.

“Uh…hey,” James said, narrowing his eyes at her. “All right?”

“Yeah, Jamie,” Lea said distractedly, pulling her books out and focusing on Flitwick. “Shhh, I’m trying to pay attention.”

She couldn’t help but let him sweat a little.

As they were set to practice _Lumos Duo_, Lea leisurely cast the charm, leaning back in her chair and turning the beam of light on and off lazily with flicks of her wand as James watched her with increasing impatience. She pointed her beam at the back of Sirius’s head, snickering as the force of her charm made his hair move slightly, causing him to rub the back of his head in irritation and turn to glare at her.

“What _is_ it?” James blurted, slapping her wand hand down.

Frowning, she pulled her hand away from him before relenting, letting her chair fall back onto four legs. “I want to borrow the cloak.”

“Um, I think the fuck not!” Sirius protested, twisting in his seat.

“Mr Black, focus, please!” Flitwick squeaked from the front of the room.

“Yeah, Black, focus,” Lea taunted, smirking as he scowled and turned back around.

Intrigued, James leaned towards Lea. “What are you planning?” he asked quietly.

Pleased that he was hearing her out, she smiled. “Revenge. Nothing to do with you or yours, I
promise, but very much justified.”

James nodded. “I’ll bring it to dinner. You want help?”

Felling her chest fill with affection for her brother, she had to momentarily fight back tears as she realised he still cared about her. More than that, he trusted her.

Smiling widely, she shook her head. “I should be okay. Thank you, though.”

He looked at her like she was crazy. “Of course, Le, you don’t have to thank me.”

So maybe it wasn’t as difficult as Lea had originally thought and sure enough, by dinner the cloak was hers. Not wanting to give herself a chance to overthink anything, she slipped under it and into the Ravenclaw dorms after curfew, three little glass vials tucked under her jacket.

With the coherent descriptions her Ravenclaw allies had given her, Kevin Davies’ bed was not difficult to identify, and – peeking through the bed curtains to see if it was indeed him – she smiled when she saw his mouth wide open in sleep, taking it as a sign from the universe she was on the right track.

Retreating, she silently uncorked the first vial, tipping its contents into the shoes lying haphazardly by the foot of Kevin’s bed, smiling as a tiny puff of purple smoke popped back out. Pulling back his bed curtains slightly, Lea poured the third vial along the length of his mattress, watching as the clear blue liquid vanished as it hit the bed.

Taking a deep breath, Lea uncorked the third and final potion, carefully reaching out to pour the contents into Kevin’s open mouth, thanking Merlin and Morgana the idiot boy didn’t wake as the liquid trickled down his throat.

Making sure to take the empty vials, Lea pulled the curtain back into place and escaped back into the Ravenclaw Common Room. She took a second to appreciate the open and airy feeling of the sky-blue room before making her exit and hurrying back into her own dorms.

Thanking her luck once more that her friends were still asleep, she tucked the cloak under her pillow and settled into bed. She hadn’t told her friends she had access to an Invisibility Cloak – she told them the cloak was a family heirloom that she had demanded from James just to annoy him and remind him she had just as much right to it as he did. The girls were under the impression that she’d convinced the Ravenclaws to deliver the potions and she happily let them continue thinking that.

The effects of the potion were instantaneous. The potion poured into his shoes had led to Kevin tripping over himself constantly, and it was three days in that he managed to trip clumsily into Professor Sprout’s lap as he went up to show her his self-fertilising shrubs. This was accompanied by the loss of a not insignificant amount of skin on his hand as the shrubs slipped from his fingers and, in his haste to catch them, bit right through his gloves when they closed over the plant.

The effects of the second potion also became evident three days into the week. Kevin Davies now sported deep bruises under his eyes and a permanent scowl in the curve of his mouth. His concentration slipped in classes and he was berated more than once by multiple teachers for the dropping standard of his work.

The third potion was equally successful and the girls, making a point to frequently position themselves near Kevin when they could, were able to witness their work first hand.
It was when he was sat at the Ravenclaw table at lunch, talking to his friends about homework they had been assigned that it first began.

“I just think it’s ridiculous that Flitwick expects us to coherently discussall the purposes of a stunning charm in five inches,” he was saying, gesturing wildly, “I mean I’m going to need at least two rolls of penis to –”

His words were cut off by the slightly confused laughter that escaped his friends.

“Penis,” Kevin stuttered, voice rising in panic. “I mean – penis! No, no not penis I mean penis!”

More of the table were paying attention to him, the laughter increasing in volume as it became evident the idiot boy wasn’t able to say anything else. Spinning in his seat and finding Daisy stifling her giggles at the table behind him, he stood.

“You!” he said in outrage, pointing his finger at Daisy. “It’s you! You’ve been fucking with me all week just because – what? I didn’t want to be with you anymore? You and all your fucking friends have been trying to psych me out for weeks but guess what? It’s not working!”

“Looks like something’s working,” Bri snickered, looking pointedly at his splotchy cheeks and harassed demeanour.

“Undo it!” he demanded, drawing his wand on the girls.

Lea was quicker, having been ready for this escalation, and pointed her wand lazily in his direction, drawling a quiet Expelliarmus through her giggles. “Undo what, Davies? We’re just trying to eat lunch.”

“No!” he screamed, hands flailing with his anger. “Don’t act like you’re innocent! I know it was you! What’ve you done to me? Fix it! Why can’t I say penis – FUCK!”

“Mr Davies,” Professor McGonagall interjected, walking down the length of the tables swiftly. “25 points from Ravenclaw. Sit down and watch your language.”

“No – no, I mean they’ve done something! They’ve cursed me or something – see, penis! I can’t say penis! They’ve done something!”

“That’s quite enough.” Professor McGonagall looked to be losing her patience rather quickly.

“No, Professor, he’s telling the truth,” one of Kevin’s friends finally spoke up. Lea thought her name was Laurel something but she couldn’t be sure. “He’s trying to say parchment but – well, you know – comes out instead.”

Professor McGonagall eyed Kevin critically as he nodded furiously. “And you think – these girls are responsible?”

“Parkinson, Potter, Hale, and Kama,” Kevin said immediately, looking to gain some of his composure.
“And do you have any evidence of this?”

“Well, you see, Parkinson’s been rather…upset lately, because I ended a relationship with her,” he replied, adopting a slightly haughty tone. “To focus on my studies, you know, OWLS coming up, can’t have girls to entertain…distracting little things, they are.”

Lea, Bri, Laury, and Daisy shared a brief look of incredulity before Lea lifted her wand once more and shot a *Carpe Retractum* at an unsuspecting Kevin, holding the charm long enough to jerk him forward and cause him to fall face first onto the floor.

“Oh no!” Lea said, voice dripping with mock concern. “You’ve upset *me* now! Forgive me, I can’t help being a distracting little thing – I just need your attention, you know?”

“Miss Potter.” Lea turned to see McGonagall glaring at her disapprovingly. “Detention. My office, after dinner.”

She shot her a blinding smile. “Can’t wait.”

“See! I knew they were out to get me!” Kevin had pulled himself to his feet and was once again pointing his finger at the girls.

“I’m going to bite that finger off if you don’t get it out of my face in one second,” Bri said calmly, reaching for a roll of bread and holding eye contact with Kevin as she pointedly bit into it.

“Indeed,” McGonagall said, nostrils flaring. “Mr Davies, if you have further…illnesses…you may go see Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing. If not, I do suggest you sit down and finish your lunch quietly until and unless you mysteriously find some proof to the conspiracy theories against your person.”

Face flushed with anger and embarrassment, Kevin retook his seat and glared at the housemates that were still snickering. Victory running through their veins, the four girls sported wide smiles as they carefully averted the prying questions of their own housemates, twisting their answers to make Kevin seem as unstable as possible while allowing enough mystery to stoke any rumours that they were responsible for his meltdown.

It was with this victory still flowing steadily through her veins that Lea made her way to Professor McGonagall’s office that night, knocking on the door and waiting for permission before entering. The Professor was sat in the tall chair behind her desk, spine straight in a way that made her look extremely distinguished and authoritative but not so straight that it seemed forced or uncomfortable. Noting this with envy, Lea took her own seat with care, making sure her back was pressed firmly against the back of the chair and her shoulders were relaxed before meeting the teacher’s eyes.

“I don’t suppose you’d be bothered to explain what happened to Mr Davies’s speech this morning?”

Lea shrugged.

“Not even if I gave you the option of getting out of detention in exchange for the truth?”

Lea didn’t even have to consider it – one detention was a small price to pay compared to her friend’s honour and feelings. She said nothing.

“Well.” McGonagall’s sharp gaze was making Lea a little nervous and she had to make the conscious decision to hold her gaze. “I want you to know – hypothetically, of course – that if any
student were to harm you or your friends in any way for whatever reason, all of the professors are here to help you. I understand the appeal of getting justice yourself but unfortunately I am obligated to discourage you from doing so.”

“Even though you think it’s justified? Hypothetically, of course,” Lea asked innocently, a smirk lifting one side of her mouth.

Professor McGonagall looked at her blandly. “Have a biscuit, Miss Potter.”

Lea accepted, carefully taking a Ginger Snap from the tin and biting into it, letting the silence settle between them as McGonagall took a sip of her tea.

“It is no secret that Kevin Davies is a little bit arrogant,” she said after a moment, setting the cup down gently. “And, despite his claims, I find it very difficult to believe that you or your friends would take any action against his person without provocation, and also that a boy like Kevin Davies would fail to provoke you.”

Lea couldn’t help but feel satisfied that the Ravenclaw’s true personality was evident to teachers as well – it was good to see they weren’t all complete idiots. “I’m not confirming anything,” she began warningly, “but it’s really nice to hear you say that.”

A smile graced the professor’s face. “I’m glad you think so. Now. Tell me how you’re finding your electives.”

Lea raised an eyebrow but wasn’t about to remind her that this was supposed to be a detention. Settling into her chair, she dove into an animated discussion of the importance of Arithmancy in magical research, and she left the office an hour later with a list of further reading to learn about the relationship between Arithmancy and Transfiguration.

Back in her dorm, Lea flopped down her bed and announced to the room, “McGonagall is Merlin’s gift to us mere humans. She knows everything. I love her. I want to be her.”

“Does this mean I have to start paying attention in Transfiguration?” Bri mused, idly turning the page of the book she was reading.

“It means,” Lea pulled the covers back on her bed, “if we were to have to deal with unpleasant males in the future – which is likely because, you know, all men do is lie – it can be safely assumed that she will be on our side, whether it be vocally or not.”

“I don’t know, Le,” Daisy piped up from her own bed. “One good experience doesn’t ensure future ones.”

“Okay so we’ll proceed with caution,” Lea allowed. “But I really have a good feeling about this. She’s so smart.”

“As long as she didn’t actually get you in trouble,” Bri said, slamming her book shut and leaning forward with a wide grin. “Now that we’re finally all here – how ugly did Davies look all flushed like that? Handsome, my arse.”

And thus, the four Slytherin girls celebrated their first victory in May of 1974.
Chapter Five

The final exams of Lea’s third year went as the previous ones had gone – with excessive studying and bouts of insomnia. The difference was that, when Lea felt herself reaching toxic levels (characterised by her friends avoiding her and the emergence of Laury’s crystals in the dorm), she didn’t wait to be approached by Narcissa.

“How do you look so good when you have to take NEWTS?” Lea groaned, sliding into an empty seat next to the older girl at the Slytherin table. It was stupidly early on a Saturday morning and the room was almost completely empty save from two or three Hufflepuffs huddled in a corner of their table.

“Priorities,” Narcissa replied dryly, taking a sip of her tea. “I have also been studying for these exams all year and am almost overly confident in my knowledge of all subjects. If I get anything less than consistent O’s you’ll find me at the bottom of the Astronomy Tower.”

“Relatable.”

“I take it your priorities need some adjusting.” Narcissa’s steely eyes ran over the dark smudges under Lea’s and unbrushed hair that had been forcibly shoved into a bun. “That needs to be a braid. It keeps everything tighter.”

Lea poured herself some tea before untying her hair and running her fingers through it. Narcissa wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“Have you been studying well?”

“Well enough,” Lea replied, working her hair into a braid. “It’s the insomnia that’s killing me.”

Cissa frowned. “If it’s really bad, you need to see Madam Pomfrey.”

“I don’t want to make a fuss. It’s only until these damn things are over. A couple more weeks.”

“I suppose if things get bad enough you’ll be forced to do as I say,” she sighed, relenting. They sat in silence for a while, Cissa neatly working her way through scrambled eggs as Lea nursed her mug of tea.

Not for the first time, Lea was struck with just how odd her relationship with Narcissa was – how random it was that the older girl had chosen to approach a frazzled Lea back in her first year. The way she saw it, Cissa was a poised, driven, clever girl who had no obligations to stop and console a sleep-deprived nobody in the Slytherin Common Room, especially because there was absolutely nothing in it for her.

Lea was grateful.

“So…,” she started, “you’re getting married, huh? That’s a move.”

“We are in the talks to be betrothed,” Cissa corrected. “Not engaged yet.”

“Stop it,” she scoffed. “If this is what you want, then this is what you’ll get. It’s just a happy coincidence that Lucius is into it too.”

Narcissa smiled indulgently.
“I just find it a little difficult to understand,” Lea admitted, “the whole wanting to spend your life with one-person thing. I lose my patience with everyone at least once every few weeks; I can’t imagine not being able to leave them if I want to.”

“I don’t know where you got the idea that you’re going to be physically beside this one person all the time – you are allowed to be in different places, you know. You’re not physically trapped anywhere.”

“No, only emotionally,” she replied, dramatically placing the back of her hand against her forehead.

“Besides,” Narcissa continued over her, “you’ll understand when you’re in love. Believe me, you’ll want to share everything with your other.”

“Not everything.”

“How are you already such a cynic? You’re barely a teenager.”

“I just don’t feel it’s in people’s nature to stay with one person for a long time without ulterior motives.”

Cissa’s fork clattered against the plate as she put it down forcefully. “Listen to me. Yes, people play games as a means to an end. Yes, people are likely to play romantic games to reach this end. Yes, more often than not people are driven by their own greed and selfishness but do not allow yourself to get stuck in this thought process. I’ve seen almost everyone in my family lose themselves to their paranoia and I understand that it may be a fine line between being prepared and clever and doubting the intentions of everyone you meet, but make the effort to recognise that not everyone is out to fuck you over, okay? There are good people in this godforsaken world, and there are people who will do things just because they love you. Recognise that, remember it, and cherish it.”

Lea gaped. “Uh…”

Narcissa rolled her eyes. “Obviously I don’t mean drop your guard and trust every idiot you meet, but don’t be so suspicious all the time. People can be very simple sometimes, and they just want to love you, no matter what every Slytherin and their mother tells you.”

“Okay?”

“Good.”

With a decisive nod, she returned back to her meal. Eyeing the older girl warily, Lea resolved not to bring it up again. Thankfully, Narcissa seemed to be equally determined to move on.

“So how are you feeling for Divination?”

“Stooooop,” she groaned, dropping her head into her hands as Cissa laughed quietly. It wasn’t a sound Lea had heard often and she felt a wave of happiness run through her at the thought of being the cause of it. “I’m honestly shocked and surprised I’ve survived a year of Trelawney. Ever since she first lay all three of her eyes on me she seemed to have decided I’m some sort of unlawful, scandalous scarlet woman who’s not only going to have children out of wedlock but also going to cause unimaginable pain and destruction along the way.”

“At least she didn’t ‘see’ your death.”

“No,” Lea agreed, “only all the death I’ll cause.”
“Better that than the other option, I guess. Good on Trelawney for changing it up – it’s usually just a tragic death or two per class, you know.”

“Yes, bless her originality,” was the dry response, “Merlin forbid I just be dumped in with the rest of the tragic deaths. I can’t wait to drop it so hard next year.”

“You’ll pick up Care of Magical Creatures?”

“Nah, I’m hoping to get into Alchemy in sixth year so I’m going to focus on working up to that.”

Narcissa raised an impressed eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah, I hope I can rouse up enough people to make a class in the next two years. Or soften up Slughorn enough to get him on my side.”

“That’s easily arranged – he loves crystallised pineapples and talking about himself. You’re also smart enough that it’s likely you’ll grow to be influential one day so as long you stay on this path you’ll have his attention.”

“Crystallised pineapples, huh? No accounting for taste.”

“They’re delicious!” The affronted expression on Narcissa’s beautiful face sent Lea into a bout of unrestrained laughter spurred on by her exhaustion. Clutching her stomach with one hand, she raised the other to wipe away the stray tears that had formed.

“Stop it,” came Cissa’s demand, although the corners of her mouth had also lifted into a smile. “I take back everything I said about potential – you have no taste, child.”

“Not a child,” Lea managed between gasps for breath. “And I prefer chocolate over lollies.”

She sniffed, dabbing a napkin against her mouth primly. “Like I said – no taste.”

Still smiling, she nodded. “Noted.”

As if on cue, students began trickling into the room as one, immediately immersing the Great Hall with noise and energy. As Lea’s own friends entered the Hall, she poured another cup of tea for herself and raised a questioning eyebrow at Narcissa questioningly. When she received a shrug in response she smiled and turned to greet them as they took their places next to her.

“I know it’s already been two years and I shouldn’t be surprised by this anymore but I still find myself astounded by your ability to function on little to no sleep,” Bri announced as she began serving herself.

“It’s Laury’s strengthening crystal,” Lea responded dryly. “You know, the one she shoved under my pillow and thought I wouldn’t notice.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” came Laury’s innocent reply. “The crystals go where they feel they are needed – I have nothing to do with it.”

“Now the crystals are sentient?” Bri groaned.

“I don’t know if I’m comfortable with sentient crystals in the bedroom,” Daisy interjected.

Narcissa snickered and four pairs of eyes turned to her. “So much for Divination being bullshit.”

“No, no, no,” Laury protested, “the healing power of crystals has nothing to do with Trelawney’s
fake prediction shit and everyone knows it. Besides, look at Lea! No way would she be walking and talking as coherently as she is without their strengthening energy – she’s a mess! Except for the braid, that’s kinda cute.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly, snorting at the pleased expression that crossed Narcissa’s face.

“No, but really,” Laury continued, earnestly reaching for one of Narcissa’s hands and latching onto it with both of her own. “You should look into it! It never hurts to have these things helping you release negative energy and stimulate positive energy.”

Narcissa looked at their joined hands with a raised eyebrow but didn’t pull away. “Indeed.”

Smiling sheepishly, Laury pulled her hands back. “But yes – healing energy.” She brightened. “Actually, I have a necklace I can give you for your exams! It promotes concentration and intuition and it’s beautiful –”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly accept –”

“No, it’s nothing! I’ll get it out for you in the evening!”

“Okay, then,” she acquiesced, sighing in resignation and looking mildly disturbed at the turn the conversation had taken. “Thank you, I suppose.”

Laury smiled widely and Cissa returned it hesitantly before gratefully turning to another older girl that had taken a seat on her other side.

It was as they headed to their first class that Daisy grabbed Lea’s arm in a painfully excited grip. “I didn’t know you were friendly with Narcissa Black!”

From Lea’s other side, Bri shrugged. “Is it really such a surprise? Her brother is inseparable from the other Black. Obviously, Potters have a knack for moving in on the Most Ancient and Noble and Beautiful and Rich –”

“She helped me out a few times,” Lea interrupted, rolling her eyes. “During exams. Gave me an inspirational speech, told me to get my head on straight and relax a little. I think she understands the pressure to maintain good grades.”

“But I don’t understand where the pressure is coming from,” Laury piped up from next to Daisy. “It’s not like your parents are strict about it or anything.”

Scowling, Lea pulled her hand out of Daisy’s grip. “Look, I don’t know either but the idea of failing an exam makes me physically sick and gives me the urge to pitch myself out a window. This is just how I feel, okay?”

Daisy grabbed Lea’s hand again, this time winding her fingers through hers. “It’s absolutely okay, Lea. We’re here for you. Always. Even if you don’t know why you’re upset.”

“Obviously,” Laury agreed. “Why else would I pull out the crystals, huh? That shit’s not just for anyone, you know.”

“I know.” Lea took a deep breath, pushing away her defensiveness and trying to focus on the people in front of her. “Come on, let’s get this day done. I’m so over school.”

The night the entire school had finished their exams, the older Slytherins pulled out bottles of
alcohol and shifted furniture around the Common Room, creating an empty space in the centre to act as a dance floor. As the party ensued, the girls sneakily – or not so sneakily but everyone was too caught up in the revelry to care – snatched up two bottles of Firewhisky and retreated to their dorm, giggling.

Stupidly, they drank eagerly until every drop was gone and half an hour later, were laughing helplessly as they rolled around on the floor, having fallen there after excitedly dancing to the music they could just make out from downstairs.

Lying side by side, blonde hair mingling with honey brown mingling with two heads of jet-black, Lea turned on her side to press up against Bri, curling her hands through the other girl’s arm. She felt Laury move closer to her back and reached a hand back to hold onto her as well, sighing contently.

“I can’t believe I’m drunk,” Laury was giggling, “like actually drunk! My mother would murder me if she knew!”

“Listen – listen!” Daisy rolled onto her side and reached an arm out, trying to cover all three of the girls in a hug but mostly ended up lying on top of Bri, making her burst into laughter. “No, shh!”

“I’m listening!” Bri giggled, muffling the sound in Lea’s hair.

“I just – I need all of you to know,” Daisy began, clearing her throat and adopting an important tone, “I need all of you to know how much it really means to me what you did. You know. Post the raven-doucheface incident.”

“Oh my gods stop it, Daisy, you know we’re here for you.”

“Also, raven-doucheface deserves much more than what we did so it’s not really something to thank us for,” Lea added, pouting. “I really wish we’d done something more.”

“No!” Daisy’s outstretched palm placed itself over Lea’s mouth. “I am going to thank you all because I am grateful and I want all of you to know that I love you all so much and I would die for each of you, okay? Okay.”

Lea groaned. “Oh my gods, okay, I guess if you insist on talking about feelings then yes, I would die for you guys too.”

“Awwwww me too!” Laury cooed, properly spooning Lea at this point.

“Fuck, okay, me too,” Bri groaned, words still muffled.

“I love how painful that was for you to say,” Lea snickered.

“It’s rude, is what it is,” Daisy said, pinching Bri’s hip and grinning at the pained noise that escaped her. “I’m just trying to profess my love and appreciation and you’re completely uninterested.”

“I said it didn’t I! What more do you want, woman?”

“Genuine love and appreciation! That’s all I want, okay?”

“I love and appreciate you so much! Literally so much and I will continue to do so forever and ever.”
Daisy pouted. “Promise?”

“I promise so hard I could make an unbreakable vow right now.”

She scoffed. “Yeah, all right.”

“No, I’m dead serious.” Bri lifted her head to meet Daisy’s eyes. “Right now. Let’s go.”

Daisy’s eyebrows rose. “What?”

“Bri, I don’t know –” Laury said hesitantly.

“Where’s my wand?” Bri had sat up, untangling herself from both Lea and Daisy, and began crawling towards the beds, leaning down to look under them. “I don’t know where it is!”

Snickering, Lea leaned against her elbows and watched her friend search the floor while her wand sat on her bedside table. “Oh no,” she said sadly, “I guess we can’t make the vow now.”

“But it still counts!” Bri insisted, pointing a finger at Daisy. “Never doubt my loyalty.”

“Never,” Daisy echoed solemnly. Then she opened her arms to Bri. “Now come back and cuddle.”

They awoke like that in the late morning, curled together on the floor and shivering slightly in the crisp air of the room. Groaning, Laury was the first to make her way into the bathroom while the others struggled to stay awake long enough to move.

“Train today,” Laury muttered, kicking the girls’ intertwined legs gently when she returned. “Have to get up.”

“Later,” came Bri’s muffled reply as she tucked her head deeper into her arms.

Rolling away from the girls, Lea forced herself to sit up and tried to shake off the lethargic feeling sitting in her bones. “Come on,” she said, successfully standing after a few tries. “Sleep on the train. Food first.”

“Food,” Daisy groaned, lurching up as if the word physically gave her the strength to move.

The majority of Slytherins the girls passed in the Common Room seemed to be in similar states of exhaustion and regret, everyone speaking quietly and moving slowly. The furniture had been returned to its original position and the mess cleared, leaving no physical indication of the events of the previous night.

At the table, the girls ate in silence, exchanging only a few words about the plan to rendezvous at Laury’s place in August. They were almost finished when Narcissa approached, silky blond hair falling effortlessly down her back and a smirk in place.

“I didn’t see you children at the party last night,” she said, taking a seat next to Laury, “but you look far too exhausted to have not been there.”

“What?” Bri said, raising an eyebrow innocently. “We were totally at the party! We didn’t take some Firewhisky upstairs and drink there or anything.”

“Oh of course not.” Cissa smiled sharply. “I just thought I’d stop by – I don’t know if you were aware but I’m not going to be here next semester.”
“No!” Lea gasped, raising her palms to her cheeks in mock surprise.

Narcissa scowled, reaching out to push Lea’s hands away. “Stop that. But yes, I won’t be here so I wanted to thank Laurena here for the necklace – although its success is yet to be confirmed, it’s aesthetic has been more than pleasing. I also wanted to wish the rest of you the best of luck for your studies,” she smirked, “and for the stress tantrums that will undoubtedly be thrown by Lea in the future."

“I’m working on it, oh my gods,” Lea muttered, stabbing her fork into her egg forcefully as her friends snickered. “Give a girl a minute to deal.”

“You’ll all be fine,” Narcissa continued, cool blue eyes meeting Lea’s brown ones warmly. “Stay calm, child, you’ll make it through.” Lea softened, nodding in response. “Now I’m going to leave before too many more people see me associating with children again.”

With that, she stood and returned to her own friends sitting further down the table.

“Think that means we can tell people we’re friends with Narcissa Black?” Daisy asked hopefully.

“Reckon so,” Bri said around a mouthful of food. “She really is the dream, isn’t she?”

“Are we going to be invited to their wedding?” Daisy gasped, hands going to her cheeks as Lea’s had mockingly done before.

“You probably would be anyway because of your family,” Lea pointed out. “But maybe, yes.”

“Cool,” she breathed.

It was as the day was dimming and the train neared London that Lea felt sadness settle inside her. She knew logically that she would see her friends in a month or so but the idea of spending so many days alone made her unhappy. It was only the thought of seeing her parents again that stopped her from completely bursting into tears as she hugged her friends goodbye on the platform and waved at a stoic Regulus and Severus as they passed. Her smile held as she responded to other wishes of a good summer and made her way to where she could just make out her parents near the back of the platform.

“My darling!” Dorea exclaimed, wrapping her daughter in a firm a hug that she was released from only to be enveloped by her equally enthusiastic father.

The smell of home and familiarity of their embrace caused something to settle inside her and she returned their smiles warmly, the feeling washing away whatever worry she had felt a second before.

“Now, where’s –”

Her father’s words were interrupted by James bounding towards them. “Mum! Dad!” He threw two lanky arms around each of them swiftly before taking a step back, excitement radiating off him in waves. “Is it true what you said? The boys can really come stay for a week?”

“Of course, Jamie,” Charlus said, smiling easily and resting a hand on his son’s shoulder to steer him towards the exit. “As long as we see you’ve passed all your subjects, of course.”

“Daaaad,” James groaned, rolling his eyes so forcefully it looked like it hurt but allowing Charlus to lead him away.
With that, the summer began.

It was a hot one; sweltering heat causing a restlessness to settle in both Lea and James. James was spending most of his time in his room, seemingly *studying* for something and, although Lea was furiously suspicious, her pride refused to let her ask him what it was. The fear of being told to piss off was overwhelming.

In the moments they were forced to interact (mostly meals), they bickered and argued (much to their parents’ despair). Lea spent most of her own time penning letters to her friends and even bothering to pester Regulus and Narcissa a little, the elation she felt when they replied (even though Reg’s was little more than a few lines) was enough to relieve her irritation for a few hours.

The restlessness grew so potent her mother physically dragged Lea and James to the front door and shoved them out, telling them to go into town and get some fresh air. Feeling as if her skin was melting off her bones, the scowl she was wearing was matched on her brother’s face as they caught a bus into town, muttering about ridiculous parents and ridiculous weather.

“It’s like she wants us to melt so we don’t come back home,” Lea was groaning, pressing her face against the window of the bus.

“Speak for yourself, nerd, only witches melt,” James shot back although his words lacked bite as he strained his neck to catch the breeze flowing through some of the open windows.

“Bold of you to assume I’d let you live while I died, no way you’re surviving if I’m not.”

“Bold of you to assume you’d manage to kill me at all.”

“Not bold if it’s the fucking truth, idiot.”

“Just shut the fuck up, I can’t deal with you right now.”

“Good, oh my gods, blessed silence at last.”

They had another scuffle once they arrived, arguing about where to go but eventually deciding on browsing some clothes before getting ice cream and going home. They’d been given some muggle money from their mother and ended up *potentially* spending more money on clothes than they had intended but both of them walked out of the store in new clothing – Lea in a floral yellow sundress and James in a short-sleeved red button up shirt and sunglasses.

They had settled in a thankfully air-conditioned ice cream shop, basking in the cool air and sharing a rare moment of relief.

“I know you’re hiding something, you know,” Lea started, her new dress apparently giving her the confidence she had lacked a few hours ago.

“No shit, Le.” He looked completely unbothered by her resolve to finally confront him and Lea was irritated that he wasn’t more intimidated.

“Idiot.” She smacked him on the shoulder. “I was going to offer you help…*again*. Because I can recognise that this level of secrecy – and also the fact that you’ve been maintaining it for likely over a year now – means it’s something important.”

She could feel his gaze on her though his eyes weren’t visible behind his shades. She kept her own on her ice cream, trying to keep the damn thing from melting all over her hand.
I know. I haven’t forgotten. We’re family.” The corners of his mouth twisted ruefully. “But it’s not my secret to tell, Le.”

Lea shrugged, resigned, and asked no more.

Although she wasn’t looking, she could hear the grin in her brother’s voice when he said, “Is this a good time to bring up the Ravenclaw bloke? Davies something?”

Keeping her expression neutral, she met his concealed gaze. “Who?”

He snorted. “Nice. So, what was it? He kept on saying penis or something?”

Licking her thumb where ice cream had fallen, she replied, “Couldn’t say the word parchment, kept on saying penis instead.”

“Curse?”

“Potion.”

“Slytherin.”

“Obviously.”

“Cloak?”

“Snuck into the Ravenclaw Common Room. That riddle thing is truly ridiculous, by the way, what if someone’s having an off day and they can’t figure it out? What, they just sleep on the floor?”

“Their own fault for being Ravenclaws.”

“They don’t deserve that! Literally everyone else has passwords, it’s just mean.”

“So, it was just the one potion?”

Lea shook her head. “Two others.”

“Don’t suppose you’ll give me details on how you got them?”

“You going to tell me what you’re researching?”

“Fair.”

“Hey, you guys visiting for the summer?”

Lea and James startled at the interruption, looking up at the intruder. A tall boy with slicked back blond hair and pale blue eyes approached their table, followed closely by two other boys. None of them could have been much older than James and Lea, and all of them walked with a confidence Lea had come to associate with people like Sirius Black.

James snorted. “Nah, we live here, mate.”

“Really?” Another boy, this one with short, curly brown hair and thick eyebrows, questioned. “We’ve never seen either of you around before and we certainly would have remembered your face.”

A leer crossed his face as his eyes dropped to what was certainly not Lea’s face. Surprise and
indignation filled her, and an eyebrow rose. “Excuse me?”

The blond boy shoved his friend lightly. “Ignore Danny here, he’s forgotten his manners. I’m Will and this is Chris,” he said, gesturing to the remaining boy. “We just thought we’d come say hey, maybe show you around if you were interested.”

“Like my brother said,” Lea replied curtly, standing up and taking a step away from the boys, “we live here.”

“But you don’t go to school here do you?” Will persisted.

“Nope,” James said, popping the ‘p’ and stepping between Lea and the boys, grabbing a hold of her forearm and tugging her gently towards the door.

“Home schooled?” The boys followed them out of the store.

Lea rolled her eyes. “Nope.”

“Boarding school?”

“Sure,” James allowed, setting a leisurely pace back towards the bus stop. “Boarding school. You lot on break too?”

“Yeah, thank fuck.”

“Well, we gotta head home, our parents are expecting us for tea, you know? Got some guests coming over or some shit but maybe we’ll see you around in the next few weeks?”

All the boys snickered. “Yeah, mate, we know how that goes,” Chris said, “parents need to ease the fuck off sometimes.”

“True enough.” The smile James shot back at them looked more predatory than friendly to Lea, but the others seemed to see nothing wrong.

“All right then,” Will offered a blinding smile, extending a hand to James before extending it to Lea. Grabbing a hold of her fingers, he lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips against her knuckles. “See you soon, pretty lady.”

Struggling not to snatch her hand back, she gave him a bland smile and tried to keep a straight face as James snickered from next to her. Once they were out of sight, James’s laughter erupted from him.

“Pretty lady?” he gasped, pressing a hand to his side.

“Shut up, Jamie.” She shoved him lightly, fighting her own smile. “Says a lot though – that he didn’t even ask our names.”

He snorted. “They seem like idiots. So, you going to find them again?”

“Not likely.”

“Thank Merlin, you’ve not completely lost your head down in the dungeon.”

“Shut your mouth, James Potter, before I shut it for you.”

He snickered again. “What are you going to do? Set Will on me?”
She grabbed his ear and twisted.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow stop it stop it!” She relented, smiling as he glared at her.

Despite making a few more trips into town over the remaining holidays – both together and separately – neither of them ran into those boys again, and, as August blew in with the summer wind, Lea left for the Hales’ house the morning before James’s friends were due to arrive at the Manor.

The rest of the summer was uneventful, the girls stole some of Bri’s parents’ liquor when they went to visit some other family for the weekend, leaving the house free for them to enjoy themselves to the point of puking and still leaving enough time the next day to clean up after themselves.

Lea returned home for a few days before the new term started, spending the remaining days baking with her mother and Twitchy in the kitchen and eagerly listening to her mother’s tales of society parties and politics she had been involved with. The Potter seat on the Wizengamot was rightfully her father’s but everyone knew he had little to no interest in the politics despite having strong opinions on almost everything. So, it was Dorea who was given the task of playing the game on behalf of herself and her husband, and she had recently begun opening up more about the inner workings of the Ministry to Lea.

“You’re friends with Narcissa Black?” Dorea was asking, sipping tea and watching Lea knead dough they were using to make scones.

“We’re friendly,” Lea said, a fond smile emerging on her lips.

“We recently received news of the betrothal.”

“Really? It’s finally happening?”

Her mother hummed in agreement. “Indeed. That’s a good relationship to maintain. I’ve heard the girl’s very smart and, although seemingly uninterested in politics, about to be married to someone who’s going to hold one of the most influential seats in the Wizengamot.”

Lea paused. “I barely know Lucius, I’ve only ever spoken to him, like, twice.”

“That’s not what it’s about, darling, and I’m not saying to do anything either. All I meant was that it’s good that you seem to have a natural friendship with her because it might come in handy to have an ally in government one day.”

“One day,” she echoed thoughtfully. “You think I’ll take your place?”

“I think your brother, though it will be offered to him first, has no interest in playing the long game like this.”

So, she’d be the next best option, Lea realised bitterly. What a surprise.

“Besides,” her mother continued, “Slytherins have the mind for this kind of thing. Cunning, you know?”


“Though the entire family was invited, both the engagement party and the wedding will be during your school term, my darling, so I’m sorry but you won’t be able to attend.” Her mother stood and
rubbed a hand soothingly on Lea’s arm.

“Daisy will be shattered. I don’t have a single doubt in my mind Cissa did that on purpose. No children to cause a ruckus during the vows.”

Dorea smiled. “See? Cunning.”
Chapter Six

September, 1974

The term began with ease, the familiar routine and cooling weather a welcome change from the looseness of summer. Lea was thriving post-Divination, ecstatic to be free from the weekly prophecies slandering her character and was living for the wit-sharpening potion Slughorn was teaching them – they hadn’t even begun brewing yet but Lea was already planning on keeping a fully replenished stock in preparation for exams.

All in all, fourth year began strong.

Daisy had shacked up with Tommy Cross – a fifth year Hufflepuff much to some of the older Slytherins’ disgust – and spent most of her time in the Hufflepuff Common Room. It was through this relationship that the girls were introduced to the kitchens that they took to frequenting every other evening for tea after dinner.

Laury got involved momentarily with a boy none of them could remember the name of during a party they attended with Daisy in Hufflepuff. The boy was in their year but apparently no teacher ever called on him in class and none of his friends used his name – at least not loud enough for the girls to hear. The involvement didn’t progress into a relationship but the girls remained determined to discover his name, especially because the poor boy kept on engaging in small talk with them before class and in the halls.

They decided to spend Christmas at Hogwarts, on the request of Daisy who wanted to stay with Tommy and needed the excuse that her friends were also staying at the castle to tell her parents. Lea couldn’t help the pang of sadness she felt reading her parent’s regretful letter at the news, their words made even more sorrowful because James was also remaining in the castle.

It was the day after Christmas that Lea happened to have been in the library, strolling through the tall stacks of books, not looking for anything in particular but hoping something would call to her, that she spotted Severus sitting at a table in the corner. Before she could reach him, James and Sirius turned the corner, appearing seemingly out of nowhere (likely from under the cloak).

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Snivelly Snape sitting all by his lonesome on the most joyful of holidays,” James drawled, a mocking tone Lea knew all too well from her own interactions with him but tinged with an edge she had never heard directed at her before – a mean edge. “Makes sense, don’t you think, Sirius? That even his parents wouldn’t want his greasy face –”

Seeing rage form on Severus’s pale face just as it rose inside her, Lea moved forward, taking a seat at his table.

“All right, James? Sirius?” she threw out casually, smiling blandly. “Good Christmas?”

Seeing James visibly falter was nowhere near satisfying enough for the frustration bubbling in her chest.

“Uh…yeah, fine.”

“Great.” She pulled her wand from the bun she’d use to tie with it and twirled it between her fingers. “Now get the fuck out. We’re busy.”

Her tone seemed to pull James from his surprise, and he and Sirius both looked at her
incredulously.

“You would really take his side over mine?” James asked disdainfully.

“Told you Slytherins had no sense of loyalty,” Sirius sneered, grey eyes tauntingly holding Lea’s gaze. “Family means nothing to that lot.”

Lea – who had seen sadness and disappointment on Regulus’s face as his brother consistently ignored him for his Gryffindor friends, watched Reg try and fail to hide endless worry about Sirius and Walburga’s relationship, throw his name round the Common Room as a warning whenever older students were slagging off James and Sirius for getting too cocky, all to just be ignored and mistrusted even more – found herself leaning forward in her seat dangerously, palms slapping against the table.

“You want to talk to me about family, Black?”

Obviously not expecting the weight of her words, Sirius narrowed his eyes at her, his own wand slipping into his hand from the sleeve of his shirt.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked lowly.

“Woah.” James placed a placating hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Forget it, Sirius, she didn’t mean anything.”

Baring her teeth at him in a humourless mimic of a smile, Lea leaned back again. “Yeah, Sirius, I didn’t mean anything.”

Shooting a pleading look at Lea, James tugged slightly on Sirius’s shoulder. “Dude, forget it, we got the books – let’s just go.”

Lea hummed in agreement. “Best to just leave. Don’t want to start anything now, do we?”

“Lea.”

“Agree to disagree, right?” Eyeing him with irritation, she repeated, “Best to just leave.”

“Fuck this,” Sirius muttered, shooting one last glare at Lea and Sev before leaving, anger still rolling off his lithe frame. With a final baleful look at Lea, James followed.

“Well,” Lea exhaled, crossing her legs and knotting her hair with her wand once more, “that was fun.”

Severus slammed the book in front of him shut. “I don’t need your help,” he spat at her.

She raised an eyebrow. “You can’t be serious.”

“I don’t need you interfering where you’re not wanted –”

“Don’t you start too,” Lea hissed, shoving him in the shoulder. The surprise on his face – as if shocked that she would dare touch him – almost made her smile. Almost. She considered him, seeing that his pride was driving him like a physical force, and paused before saying, “This isn’t about you. James’s behaviour is childish and embarrassing and it’s absolutely my right to stop him from doing things that will reflect badly on me too. I don’t know if you knew this but we do share a name and unfortunately, it’s the important one.”

He relented slightly. “Your brother’s idiocy isn’t something that can be untaught – I fear it’s just
“Are you insulting me? I feel like you’re insulting me.”

Sev’s dark eyes bore into her lighter ones. “If I’m insulting you there won’t be a single doubt in your mind that that’s what I’m doing.”

“Good to know.”

Severus flipped open his book once more and Lea didn’t hide her smile at the victory.

After a few moments of silence, he said, “I still find it very difficult to believe the two of you are related.”

Though she knew he meant it as a compliment, she couldn’t help the bitterness she felt at his words. No, she wasn’t like James.

“For one, you’d never associate with the degenerates he does. Black? A disgrace to his family. Disrespectful. Arrogant. The only relation I find harder to believe than yours and your brothers is his and Regulus’s. Pettigrew? Abysmal. Lupin? Well, blood as tainted as his would have been horrifying enough if not for his other condition.”

Lea looked at him in disbelief. “If we’re following that mentality you’re not exactly someone to be talking about tainted blood, Severus.”

Severus scowled, an embarrassed flush colouring his cheeks. “It’s still not as bad as being a werewolf.”

Lea couldn’t help it – she laughed. “A werewolf?”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. The scars? The weakness? Sick every month? On the full moon?”

A werewolf. Huh. “I’ll be honest I’ve not paid a lot of attention to Remus Lupin except when I’m trying to successfully cast a charm faster than him in class.” The smug smile on Severus’s face made Lea’s stomach turn. “Are you spreading this information?”

“No one will believe me. Not yet. I think the teachers know. Although, how they let something like that live in the castle is beyond me.”

“He’s still a person, Severus,” Lea said wearily. “If what you’re saying is true, then he’s absent on the full moon. They’re probably not keeping him in the castle at that time – if what you’re saying is true.”

He sneered. “So, you don’t believe me either? Guess you are just as idiotic as your brother after all. When it’s time to act you’ll just go stand with the Gryffindorks, won’t you?”

“What? Just because I’m not taking you at your word? It’s a pretty ridiculous assumption to make, Sev.” She leaned forward, holding his gaze firmly. “A second ago you were talking about tainted blood, Severus, if that’s the kind of shit you believe then I’m not the stupid one here. I know you know that lineage has nothing to do with a witch or wizard’s power and integrity so why are you furthering that rhetoric?”

“It’s not ridiculous.” He slammed his book shut and stood. “I thought you would understand – family is everything.”
“I thought we just determined the opposite.”

“You just proved me otherwise.”

“What? By disagreeing with you? Gods, Sev, you’re being ridiculous.”

“This conversation is ridiculous,” he muttered, turning to leave. “Doesn’t matter. You’ll see that I’m right soon enough.”

As he swept out of the room, radiating frustration not unlike his rival had earlier, she slouched in her chair. Staring at the corner he had just turned, Lea pressed her fingers to her temples. “What the fuck is going on?”

Hesitant though she was about relaying James and Sirius’s actions to her friends, Lea was desperate to ask about what the fuck was going on with this blood purity nonsense. When had it reached a point that Severus was using blood status to define people’s characters? Had she just been completely blind to something that had been brewing for a long time?

Either way, she wasn’t able to wrangle her friends together in a private place for some time given the nature of Daisy’s busy schedule and the fact that the girls had taken to spending their spare time with the Hufflepuffs.

It was only when term started up again that Lea settled with the girls in the dorm after dinner, all of them sitting in a close circle on Lea’s bed. She relayed the story, leaving out the werewolf theory but keeping James and Sirius’s involvement, and sat back to watch her friends process it.

“You haven’t heard some of the older girls talking about it before?” Daisy asked quietly. “Whenever they’re slagging off girls from other houses blood purity always comes into play.”

“It’s like it’s a justification for their hatred,” Bri said, disgust heavy in her voice.

“I’ve mostly heard it associated with Sirius,” Lea admitted. “The blood traitor thing, you know. Whenever those boys take a prank too far or trip the wrong Slytherin in the hall. Regulus always stops it before they get too vivid with their revenge fantasies, though, at least when I’ve been around to hear it.”

“Severus is angry at them,” Laury said thoughtfully, “and when he hears things like this he sees it as something else he can use against them.”

“Severus has enough reason to be upset with them – ones that are completely justified and have nothing to do with blood.” Lea exhaled, rubbing her eyes angrily. “Why is this a fucking thing? Why does it exist? Who came up with this? I’m going to write them a strongly worded letter.”

The girls snickered. “You do that, Le,” Bri said, rolling off the bed and moving into her own. “I’m going to sleep. I want to know why homework exists. Who came up with that? I’m going to send them a strongly cast curse.”

Rolling her eyes, Lea fell asleep feeling relieved that she wasn’t the only one who was confused by the conversation, and grateful her roommates were not idiotic like her brother.

A few days later, Lea was up late in the Common Room having procrastinated the aforementioned homework and regretting every decision she’d ever made in her life when Regulus slid into the chair opposite her.
“Severus has been angry mumbling ever since I got back from holidays and he finally revealed what’s upset him,” he announced. “The poor sod’s convinced you’re going to turn on us and side with your brother.”

“Side for what?” Lea exclaimed. “I’m so confused what the sides are for. What’s the issue?”

“Just in life, I guess,” Reg mused. “I’m also a little confused about the specifics. I guess it’s just very intense house rivalry, really.”

“Did you hear the kind of shit Sev was spouting about blood purity? He’s going to make it about more than just house rivalry.”

“To be fair, James and Sirius have made this very personal for him.”

“I’m not saying not to defend himself,” she explained, pleading with Reg to understand, “but he’s going to escalate this to something else.”

“I think this began escalated, Lea,” he said bluntly. “Whatever the reason, everyone’s very upset and has been upset, and the smartest move is to just stay out of it.”

Although she disagreed, she could feel worry drain from her in the face of Regulus’s calm, almost disinterested demeanour.

“I barely see it happen anyway,” she muttered irritably. “Everyone tells me this has always been a thing and they’re always going at it with each other but I’ve never seen it!”

Snickering, Regulus rocked back in his chair. “Not anyone else’s fault you don’t pay attention.”

Lea scowled and threw her quill at him. “If I see it I’m not going to stay out of it.”

Reg shrugged. “It’s you who’ll be stressed, not me.”

“Fuck off, Reg. And give me my quill back.”

Still smirking, he acquiesced, but didn’t leave. “Where’s the rest of your girl group?”

“They already finished their work,” Lea mumbled, directing her glare at her notes. “Probably in Hufflepuff.”

Regulus scrunched up his nose in distaste. “What’s that about?”

“Tommy. Also, their Common Room has more cushions.”

“Still yellow.”

“I look great in yellow. How was Christmas?”

Reg straightened in his seat, letting the chair fall back onto all fours. Lea looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Fantastic,” he said, somehow sounding even posher than usual. “Mother and Father gifted me the most beautiful purebred owl. I’ve named him Talon.”

She couldn’t help it – she snorted. Covering her face with her hands as she laughed, she didn’t see the way Regulus’s mouth twitched in humour.
“Talon,” she managed once she’d caught her breath. “What an elegant name.”

“He’s an elegant owl.”

Talon was an elegant owl, Lea thought as it swooped into the Great Hall a few days later, if you considered the angry set of its bright orange eyes and odd-looking ear tufts elegant. She watched as the owl landed gracefully on Reg’s arm and patiently let him untie his letter. Staring at him, Lea waited until he met her gaze before pointedly placing her mug on the table and laughing at him from the other end of the Slytherin table.

In response, he raised his middle finger at her and turned his back on her, but not before she caught the smile beginning to form on his face. Her amusement followed her into Herbology, not deterred by the grey sky or even by Professor Sprout splitting the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs into pairs to work. It faltered slightly when Sprout announced the work would be learning how to extract Bubotuber pus but strengthened once more upon learning that the first lesson was to only be a lecture and no pus was to be handled that day. Riding on this high, the day seemed to pass quickly and efficiently and before she knew it, Lea was sitting in the Hufflepuff Common Room, warm from a satisfying dinner and the crackling fire in front of her.

The girls were sharing the space with Tommy and some of his friends, all students from fifth and sixth year, and Lea was sharing one of three couches with a sixth-year girl named Nikki Lee, someone she had seen in passing but never spoken to. In all honesty, Lea found herself slightly intimidated by the girl – she was tall and striking, with straight dark hair falling down her back and hooded brown eyes framed by thick lashes. Nikki was a popular girl; beautiful and smart, but not arrogant or rude. She was the seeker for the Hufflepuff Quidditch team and a good one at that – any games the team had won in the last two years were a direct result of her unchallenged ability to catch the snitch. Unfortunately, Hufflepuff tended to find it difficult to score points with the quaffle, meaning although Nikki consistently caught the snitch, the team still struggled to win.

“You are smiling way too much for someone who just learned they’re going to be touching toxic plant fluid,” Nikki said quietly, leaning towards Lea as the other girls continued their complaining.

Lea shook her head, leaning further towards Nikki but keeping her eyes forward on the conversation in front of them. “Saw something funny this morning, still thinking about it.”

“Care to share?”

Lea turned her head to meet Nikki’s gaze. “It was more of a ‘you had to be there’ kind of joke,” she said, mouth curling into a smirk, “but I’m sure we can find something else for you to smile about.”

The amusement that coloured the older girl’s face was tinged with something Lea couldn’t quite read but somehow made her feel uncharacteristically shy, causing her to lean back against the sofa.

Nikki inclined her head towards Tommy and Daisy, curled up together on the loveseat opposite. “They’re pretty cute, aren’t they?”

Lea followed her gaze. “I guess.”

“You guess? What’s not to like? Tommy’s disgustingly kind and respectful and Daisy’s just uptight enough to balance his carelessness. It’s a perfect match!”

“No but that’s the point,” Lea said conversationally, turning back to Nikki to find the girl already watching her, “Tommy’s obviously hiding something. No way is he so perfect for her – it’s not possible.”
“A cynic, huh? I dig it. But some people are simple enough to be perfect for each other, you know.”

“I don’t know about Tommy but simple is the last word I’d use to describe Daisy.”

Nikki hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose Tommy isn’t exactly simple either.”

Lea looked at her interestedly. “Really? Why do you say that?”

“Oh no, no, no,” she laughed, “I may not be a Slytherin but I’m not about to give up my friend’s secrets just like that.”

Amused, Lea raised an eyebrow. “No? What do you want in exchange?”

She raised an eyebrow back. “I was thinking more along the lines of just keeping the secret but okay I’ll trade it for something.”

Lea couldn’t help her laugh. “What would you like in exchange?”

“I’m not sure yet. You’ll have to ask me tomorrow. At lunch.”

Confused, Lea paused before answering. She wasn’t sure what the game was here but if there was something off about Tommy that Daisy needed to be aware of Lea had a responsibility to her friend to find out. So, she shrugged mentally, unsure what could be so bad about sharing a lunch with a Hufflepuff – and a well-liked one, at that – before nodding at Nikki.

“Lunch.”

“Nikki! Tell Daisy what happened with your pus in fourth year,” Tommy called, drawing the girls’ attention back to the larger conversation.

Snickering, Nikki animatedly recalled a tale of her plant refusing to let her extract the pus until she fed it some strawberries of all things and cajoled it with compliments to build its confidence before it allowed itself to be touched. The group laughed together until curfew when the girls left the Hufflepuff Common Room, Nikki meeting Lea’s eyes one final time and pointedly mouthing ‘lunch’.

Lea would have forgotten her lunch plans the next day if not for Daisy dragging her to the Hufflepuff table anyway to sit with Tommy. Lea had woken up in a poor mood, the previous days revelry long forgotten, and it was only made worse by History of Magic and double Transfiguration that morning. She silently took a seat opposite Daisy, remembering her commitment only when Nikki slid down the bench to sit next to her.

“You look bummed,” she said with a wide smile. “Regretting your decision already?”

Lea blinked. “What decision?”

“There’s no debt, Nikki, I’ve not received any information yet.”

Nikki pointed a finger at Lea. “True. I’ve decided what I want. Hogsmeade this weekend. Come with me and I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

“Hogsmeade?” She was beyond confused now – what was going to happen in Hogsmeade? “Uh, I guess. If that’s what you really want. But that makes us even! No more debts. Hogsmeade for
“Deal.”

Trying to decide what to wear the morning of the Hogsmeade trip was a painful experience. “Nothing feels right,” Lea complained, angrily throwing another skirt on the growing pile of clothes by the foot of her bed.

“Stop throwing things!” Daisy looked over her shoulder at Lea through the open door of the bathroom where she was carefully applying a thin layer of red lipstick. “An outfit depends on intent. What are you trying to gain from today?”

“That’s the thing,” she growled, angrily picking up some discarded jeans and eyeing them critically. “I don’t know.”

“It’s Nikki Lee, right? The black skirt, red top. Boots.”

“That feels a little edgy.”

“You’re going to be standing next to one of the most beautiful people Hogwarts has ever seen.”

“Point. Stockings?”

“Too school uniform. Also, it’s hot.”

“Another point. What would I do without you?”

Daisy sighed theatrically, fluttering her eyelashes. “I honestly wouldn’t know.”

The two made the trip out together, Bri and Laury having gone ahead of them to avoid Lea’s tiny stress tantrum. A plan was devised between the Hufflepuffs to go their separate ways and reconvene at the Three Broomsticks before it was time to return. Lea, no wiser about how to deal with her situation, followed Nikki from store to store, finding herself laughing at the girl’s quiet jabs at students they passed and never-ending commentary on the contents of the shops they perused.

It was after Lea had let herself be persuaded to buy a horrifying amount of chocolate from Honeydukes (“Please,” Nikki had pouted, “Just so I don’t feel so terrible about this giant slab of nougat I need to buy.”) that Lea finally just blurted, “So tell me the truth about Tommy then.”

They were strolling towards the Three Broomsticks, Nikki’s long hair swaying in its high ponytail with every step she took. “You lasted a lot longer than I thought you would,” she laughed. “I’m glad – it makes me feel like you were having a good enough time to just go with it.”

After a silent debate whether or not to reveal it, Lea replied, “I was. But I haven’t forgotten and the time has come – reveal your secrets.”

Nikki’s laugh made something flutter in Lea’s stomach. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling but it wasn’t wholly pleasant either, and she frowned momentarily.

“Well,” Nikki slid an arm through one of Lea’s, bringing the two closer, “Tommy’s a sensitive guy, yes? We all know this. But the thing is – Tommy’s actually got severe commitment issues. To the point where he doesn’t even realise what’s happening but things get a little tense and he is out.
He’s very much a ‘if something’s not working let’s through it out and get a new thing’ kind of guy.”

Lea waited, but nothing more came. “Is that it? All of this build up for that?”

“I said Tommy wasn’t a simple guy,” she shrugged. “I never said anything about him being complex.”

“Oh my gods. I’ve been strung along for days thinking I was about to uncover some relationship ruining gossip I needed to save my friend from, only to find out the boy might have some commitment issues but probably just has a reasonable and healthy perspective on moving forward and understanding when things need to be let go.”

Nikki smiled unapologetically. “Of course you would say that, you’re a total commitment-phobe. But this hasn’t been a total waste! We’re friends now.”

“A commitment-phobe?” Lea said incredulously. “What the fuck do you mean by that? More importantly, how the hell would you know? We’ve only spoken to each other for, like, two days.”

“I meant no offence,” she said calmly, holding Lea’s arm tighter when the younger girl tried to move away. “And I just have a feeling. You come across as more of an independent spirit. I might be wrong, of course, but I tend not to be about these things.”

Annoyingly, Lea found herself admiring the other girl’s confidence and lacking any genuine irritation. “Good save.”

“It’s all about phrasing.”

“You fully just out Slytherin-d me, you know?”

Delighted, Nikki laughed, sending the same foreign giddiness through Lea. “I never thought of it that way! It wasn’t really my intention, though, and it’s not really on me that you perceived my hints as something major.”

“See?” Lea looked balefully at the girl as they walked through the open door of the pub. “That’s the worst part! That’s also why you aren’t a Slytherin – we do it with intention.”

The smile Nikki directed at Lea then had the same unidentifiable edge Lea had seen in the Common Room where this had begun – something almost predatory but not quite. “Oh, I had intention. Just not the kind you’re thinking of.”

Before Lea could answer, Nikki untangled her arm from Lea’s enough to wind her fingers through her hand and pull her through the tables of the pub to where their friends were sat. Forced to follow, she was wondering if confusion was to become a permanent state of being for her and barely noticed where they were walking, causing her to jump slightly when she heard a loud, “Lea!”

It was James, sitting at a table with his usual shadows of Sirius, Remus, and Peter, and a few other Gryffindors from their year. All eyes were on her or – more specifically – only the girl pulling her along.

Nikki didn’t pause, so Lea didn’t bother stopping either, settling on an incredulous look and a sharply toned, “What?” before refocusing on the group they were approaching. Her and James had not been on speaking terms and she wasn’t about to change that now.
Nikki slid into the booth occupied by Daisy, Bri, Laury, Tommy, and three other Hufflepuffs—Colin something, Johnny something, and Jerry Rivers. Lea really was terrible with names.

“Your brother?” she whispered to Lea as pre-ordered drinks were slid towards them.

“Not important,” Lea replied just as quietly, taking a sip of her Butterbeer. She could feel Nikki’s eyes still on her but forced herself to focus on the conversation holding the rest of the table.

“Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw?” Johnny was asking.

“Ravenclaw,” Bri said around a mouthful of peanuts. “Easily.”

“You’re joking, right?” Colin questioned disbelievingly.

“She just has to say that because she’s a Slytherin,” Tommy said, “you’ll never catch this lot rooting for the red and gold.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, James Potter’s got the game in his bag,” Johnny continued.

“You’re joking, right?” Bri scoffed. “Have you never seen Doreen Claydon play before? She’s going to catch the snitch two minutes into the game – Potter won’t have time to run a comb through his hair let alone win anything.”

Daisy snickered. “That’s not a fair comparison – it would take at least thirty minutes to untangle that mess on the boy’s head.”

“Don’t say his name too loudly,” Lea said, resisting the urge to glance back at her brother, “we don’t need to summon the devil.”

She sighed internally when five pairs of curious Hufflepuff eyes settled on her, making her regret her words instantly. “What is it?”

“My words exactly,” Johnny said, leaning forward and resting his chin on his hands. “What’s the deal with that, then?”

“Nothing? I’m so confused.”

“They’re looking for some juicy gossip,” Nikki informed Lea, her thigh shifting to press along the length of Lea’s. Feeling even more confused, Lea struggled to hold back her scowl. “The Potter drama.”

Snickering, Bri adopted a mysterious voice, “A brother and a sister. A Gryffindor and a Slytherin. They’ve been close since they were young but can their relationship withstand the seductive call of house rivalry?”

Lea rolled her eyes as Laury gasped, a hand raising to cover her mouth. “Not house rivalry!”

Lea’s scowl deepened as the group laughed. “Our friendship is cancelled.”

Another gasp, this one from Daisy. “Not our friendship too!”

“Gryffindor will win,” Lea spoke over the giggles. “Unfortunately.”

“So sure?” Nikki asked, teasingly nudging Lea with her shoulder.

She sighed. “I know how the idiot plays and I know how Ravenclaw plays. Claydon is their only
chance but odds of her getting to the snitch with the obstruction the idiots are going to plan will be minimal. Little to no chance.”

“It must be true if Lea’s saying it – she has insider knowledge,” Johnny announced.

Daisy reached across Tommy to slap him on the shoulder. “You’re just saying that because she agrees with you!”

He shrugged. “If it’s right, it’s right. Now. What the fuck was Potions yesterday? Strengthening Solution? Then why does it weaken my mind and soul? That’s my fucking question.”

The afternoon passed jovially for the most part, although the brief discussion of OWLS that occurred amongst the Hufflepuffs left Lea mildly traumatised. It was fine, though. That was a problem for later.

Nikki had continued whispering snide comments to Lea on the walk back to the castle, making it very difficult for her to control her laughter, and had left Lea with a parting hug once they reached the dungeons to go to their respective dorms. Once the girls managed to pry Daisy from Tommy, the four of them settled in their dorm to unpack the day’s purchases.

“Nikki Lee,” Laury was saying dreamily, folding some new clothes. “What is that?”

“How is that?” Bri corrected from where she was penning a letter to her parents by the window, sweets already packaged to send alongside. “How can someone be so beautiful and graceful yet so funny and smart?”

“What really gets me,” Lea added, critically eyeing the slab of chocolate she had bought and resigning herself to the fact that yes, she was going to eat it all now, “is that she’s also a huge gossip. She knows something about everyone.”

“So, what was the point of today, again?” Laury asked.

Glancing at where Daisy was shuffling through a stack of books on the floor by her bed, Lea said, “Well. She had said something – implied something, really – and I was trying to find out what it was.”

Daisy looked up at her, an eyebrow raised. “And?”

Lea almost blushed. “It was nothing. My own fault for assuming she meant more than she did.”

“Come on, Le,” Bri snorted. “Give us more than that.”

“Fuck okay! She made me think there was something shady about Tommy – there isn’t!” she added hurriedly as Daisy looked up in horror. “But I thought it’d be best for me try and figure it out, right? It’s good to have all the information.”

“And?” Daisy repeated.

“There’s nothing,” Lea reassured, “apparently some light commitment issues but that’s not a problem, right? You’re not looking for marriage or anything, are you? It’s still pretty light and easy.”

“Well, yes. I’m fourteen.”

“Exactly! No harm done.”
“So, what? She was just messing with you?” Bri asked, blowing on her parchment to help the ink dry.

Lea frowned. “I guess? I’m still not very sure what it was all about. She says we’re friends now but how can that be all? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, don’t take it for granted,” Daisy said, standing. “Nikki Lee is a very cool person and a good friend to have. Put in a good word for the rest of us?”

“You’re joking, right? It’s you three who’ve been moving in on the Puffs these past few weeks, you probably know her better than I do!” Lea received three baleful looks for her trouble. “Fine, oh my gods, if she speaks to me again – which I doubt! – then yes, I’ll work you guys into it.”

With the others content, Lea was about to start on her chocolate only to be pulled away by a stern Laury, declaring dinner was to be eaten first. Grumbling, she relented and made her way to the Great Hall only to have her disdain solidified even further when James hurriedly fell into step with her, tugging her away from her friends just outside the Hall.

“James,” she hissed, snatching her arm away. “What is it?”

“How do you know Nikki Lee?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“What?”

He shrugged. “I just want to know how Nikki Lee is talking to you?”

Lea, who had stupidly entertained the idea that he was about to apologise for a second, felt indignation and irritation settle inside her. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged again, looking slightly sheepish. “I just mean she’s so…you know…and I was just wondering how you managed to speak to her.”

Properly upset now, she shoved him before snapping, “She spoke to me, James, so I wouldn’t know how to help you if I wanted to.”

“No – Lea, wait!”

She didn’t, going to join her friends at the Slytherin table and waving off their curiosity instead. As she sat she noticed James join his own friends at the Gryffindor table, Sirius and Peter eagerly questioning him while Remus listened much more calmly. Even they were infatuated by the older girl that had somehow taken interest in Lea. An interest that, apparently, wasn’t just a passing sentiment. Nikki took to joining the girls at the Slytherin table with Tommy (his friends rarely joined him there) for most breakfasts, sitting with Lea on the rare occasions she joined her friends in the Hufflepuff Common Room, and even accompanying her to the library where Lea set up camp as exams loomed closer.

Disgustingly, Sirius, James, and Peter also decided to join Remus, Lily, and some other friends of theirs for study sessions. While the latter were not infrequently seen amongst the books, the former were most definitely anomalies and Lea wasn’t doubtful about their presence being positively correlated with her new friend. Because of them, Lea’s usual study buddies of Severus and Regulus retreated, leaving her to manage their growing study group of other fourth year Slytherins by herself as everyone buckled in for pre-exam cramming. Nikki was a helpful presence during this time, apparently unconcerned about her own sixth-year exams and more than ready to help Lea direct ill-tempered students through the entire year’s Charms curriculum.
Sure enough, Laury’s crystals emerged once more in the dorm, but Lea was already taking extra effort to contain her bad mood and insomnia by pointedly remaining positive around her friends or staying out of their way altogether. When this was explained to Nikki over an early cup of tea in the Great Hall (Nikki had apparently been sexiled from her dorm and the couches of the Common Room – although very comfortable – did not allow for a full night of satisfying sleep) she also invited (ordered) Lea to attend these special evening sessions that occurred every second or third night in the Hufflepuff Common Room during exams. They involved a firm ban on academic discussion, copious amounts of alcohol, and, although she didn’t know it at the time, something that was to become Lea’s saving grace.

“Now.” It was roughly six in the evening on the Monday of the final week of classes. Nikki and Lea were standing by the fire, already slightly tipsy, one of Nikki’s arms curled around Lea’s shoulders and the taller girl’s head bent low to speak into Lea’s ear. “I wouldn’t be telling you this if I didn’t know you have the soul of an eighty-year-old and you know these parties are generally for OWL students and above so technically since I’ve already broken this rule I might as well just _-

“Nik,” Lea laughed, elbowing the girl lightly. “Just say it.”

“Fuck, okay,” Nikki giggled too, turning her face into Lea’s hair before straightening up again. “Okay, you see that girl over there? In the pink? That’s Emily Cloves. See those brownies she’s serving? Weed brownies. You know what that is?”

Lea looked at the girl in the pink interestingly. “Yeah I know what weed is. I didn’t realise it would be making rounds in a magical school, though.”

“Easy to grow out the back of the greenhouses,” came the excited reply, “we think Sprout knows but doesn’t say anything – sometimes some plant goes missing, you know? And we know no student can get there without explicit permission cause it’s got some fucking ancient ward shit around it or something.”

“Weed growing is Puff tradition?”

“It’s someone’s tradition,” Nikki snorted. “Don’t know for certain if it’s been ours all along but yeah, probably. Either way, it’s been here since before we were born, passed down from generation to generation etcetera etcetera, you know the drill. So basically, there are a handful of students who run this shit and they induct their successors when they leave and so on. Don’t tell anyone but I’m kind of holding out for a spot in the inner circle next year.”

“Who would have known the badgers were so business minded?”

“Right! But anyway, I wanted to give you the option of trying some if you want because I think it might be the solution to all this angst you’ve got sitting in your stomach and on your shoulders. Only if you want, though! No pressure, I promise.”

Lea did want.

Her and Nikki went and made friendly with Emily, shared some nice banter, and sat down on a cushioned window seat with half a brownie each.

“The temptation will be to eat more because it takes a while to kick in,” Nikki was telling Lea as they practically inhaled the chocolate. Lea thought she could taste a hint of a grassy aftertaste but she wasn’t sure if she was just imagining it. “But do not do so. There is such a thing as being too high, Le, take my word for it.”
“Okay, Nik, I believe you,” she giggled, resting her head against the window and pulling her feet up on the seat, smiling as Nikki did the same.

Their legs entangled, Nikki nodded seriously. “I’m glad you heed my wisdom.”

Silence settled between them for a moment. “Speaking of my wisdom,” Nikki started, voice tinged with hesitation Lea hadn’t heard from her before, “I just wondered – has it always been this bad for you during exams? Stress is normal, of course, but to the point of insomnia?”

It was Lea’s turn to hesitate. It was her reflex to deny it but Nikki had never given Lea a reason to doubt her friendship. In fact, she had been supportive in a way Lea hadn’t experienced before, and the support hadn’t wavered even slightly in the face of her bad moods. So, it was carefully that she said, “For a few years, yes. But I’m learning my limits.”

Slightly more confidently, Nikki reach for one of Lea’s hands. “Have you ever spoken to your parents about this? You know I’m only making a suggestion but – you’ve always spoken very highly of them and I think this is something you might need some help with. Even if it’s just speaking to someone about it.”

Lea looked towards the students scattered around the room, unable to meet Nikki’s eyes. “I’ve not told my parents, no.”

More confident still, Nikki leaned forward to brush a hand down the length of Lea’s hair. “Will you consider it? If not now, then before OWLS. I don’t want you to keep on feeling like this if it can be helped.”

Feeling the now familiar flutter run through her at Nikki’s touch, Lea nodded, finding herself grateful once more for the girl’s presence. She knew – she knew – her friends were there to support her but lately she had been plagued with guilt atop of fear of exams for ruining their moods by constantly worrying. She understood why they took to treading carefully around her and she had taken a step away from them herself to try and reduce the burden, but there was no denying the loneliness she was left with without their company. This was made worse by Severus’s retreat as well – the two of them had gotten into the (unhealthy) habit of feeding off each other’s bad moods at this time of year – and she was only staying afloat through Nikki’s refusal to leave.

“And,” Nikki’s smile turned wicked, “did you hear how Johnny got his arse handed to him by the Ravenclaw he was dating – Danielle? Denise? D-something.”

Lea groaned. “The Ravenclaws! He should have known better – those guys are ruthless.”

“That’s not even the worst part – so he went and dumped her but, like, he was very nice about it, she shouldn’t have gotten so angry in my opinion – then she went and shacked up with Sirius Black.”

“Oh?” Lea asked interestedly. “So, the Black heir is finally on the market, then. This should be fun.”

“Right?” she exclaimed. “The drama. How long is that going to last, do you think?”

“It’s hard to tell,” was the thoughtful response, “I suppose we’ll find out soon enough. This one’s really going to set the tone, I know it.”

“I have a feeling,” Nikki said grandly, making Lea giggle, “that he’s not the type to have a very long attention span.”
“Mm. I guess. I mean, I know James certainly doesn’t and I guess those two wouldn’t be able to keep up with each other if they didn’t share such poor impulses.”

“Either way, that’s something to keep an eye on, huh? You should’ve seen the Bat Bogey Hex the chick shot at Johnny, though. That was a hex. Oh, and did you see the way Sinistra was glaring at Sprout during lunch today? They’re absolutely fighting!”

“Nik, I don’t think them having an argument necessarily means they’re in a relationship –”

“No, but they are which makes their argument all the more heartbreaking. It’s just…it’s meant to be you know. She studies the earth, she studies the stars. Opposites attract. It’s romance!”

“You saw them having tea together once –”

“You didn’t see how close they were sitting, or the looks they were giving each other! Lea, I am dead serious – they are in a fucking relationship.”

Lea smiled at the older girl, acquiescing, and watched as she animatedly continued her retelling of the day’s news. Not soon after, the effects of the brownie they had eaten kicked in, ramping up their giggling another notch and resulting in them somehow ending up on the floor under the window seat, so curled together that they were almost in each other’s laps. They got up a while later once the initial intensity died down a little to join the larger group. More drinks were passed around, and the two girls were struggling to walk without stumbling. Lea lost all sense of time and space to the sensations that ran through her every time Nikki reached for her hand or ran fingers through her hair. This, intermingled with the warmth of the room and the warmth of her drinks, left her so pleasantly relaxed that she resolved to do this more often.

It was only when Tommy walked into the Common Room that Lea had a vague thought that it must be around curfew for him to be back here and not with Daisy, making her balk slightly at the realisation that it was probably only ten in the night.

“Tommy!” Nikki exclaimed, pulling him in for a hug that included Lea by default as they were still attached to each other. “We’ve missed you!”

“Yeah, looks like I missed a good time,” Tommy replied, eyeing both of them carefully as Lea leaned over to touch his hair with a finger, mesmerised by the warm shades of blonde in the light of the fire, and Nikki watched Lea, giggling hysterically at her. “Merlin, how much have you two had? It’s a Monday night.”

“I’m de-stressing, Tommy,” Lea pouted. Nikki nodded seriously. “Stress doesn’t care about business hours.”

“Uh-huh, I can see that.” His gaze became slightly more worried as Lea somehow stumbled where she was standing, sending both girls a few steps to the right and into another round of giggles. “Maybe you two should head up to bed? Lea, you might want to stay here tonight, you don’t want to get caught out past curfew like this.”

“Oh my gods, yes!” Nikki shrieked. “Sleep over!”

“Yes!” Lea barely had time to voice her own excitement before Nikki was clumsily leading her up some stairs to her dorm. The room was dimly lit and the four beds were empty. “Where are your roommates?”

“Saw them downstairs,” Nikki mumbled, flopping onto the bed on the right. “Well. Saw two of them downstairs. Alexis is probably in Gryffindor with the boyfie. Gen and Loey will probably be
up later. Well? You getting in?”

Lea didn’t have the energy to do much except clumsily pull off her shoes, throwing them somewhere under Nikki’s bed, and messily unhook her bra, throwing that somewhere off to the side. Her eyes already closed, she lay next to the other girl.

“I fucking love this.”

Nikki’s laugh was soft and quiet, laced with affection. She gently pulled the covers out from under the two of them and somehow managed to get it over both of them before half-heartedly closing one side of the bed curtains. “I thought you might.”

Eyes closed, under the covers, one side of her body aligned with one side of Nikki’s, Lea felt so warm and content that she almost thought she was dreaming. Turning on her side so she was facing the other girl, Lea curled the fingers of one hand through one of Nikki’s and smiled when she felt the fingers squeeze her back.

“This is good, right?” Nikki whispered, turning her head on the pillow to face Lea. “This whole thing.”

Lea hummed in agreement. Nikki yawned, making Lea snicker softly though even her own eyes refused to open anymore. “You never notice how fucking exhausted you are until you lie down,” Nikki complained lightly.

Lea felt the bed shift slightly as she assumed Nikki turned, though her hand remained in Lea’s. In the silence that fell, Lea felt herself falling asleep in seconds, and the gentle “goodnight” that passed through the air was the last thing she heard before giving into her dreams.
“Ladies!” A hand gently shaking Lea’s shoulder roused her the next morning. “You’re going to miss breakfast!”

“What?” That was Nikki, shifting under the covers and blinking awake. “What’s the time?”

“Time for breakfast.”

Lea rolled onto her back, forcing herself to open her eyes despite the fuzzy feeling that lingered in her head. She could vaguely make out the form of Genevieve, one of Nikki’s roommates, standing over the bed, a smirk in place.

“Rough night?”

“Shove off, Genny,” Nikki mumbled, stuffing her head half into the pillow and half into Lea’s shoulder.

“Not to rush you, Lea,” came Loey’s voice from behind Gen where she was pulling on her uniform, “but if you want to make a stop in your dorm to get dressed you might want to head out. There’s only about half an hour left of breakfast.”

“Fuck,” she groaned, rubbing her eyes. Nikki had an arm thrown over her waist and a leg interwoven with hers so she gently untangled herself before practically falling out of the bed. “Where are my shoes? Fuck, forget it I’ll get them later.”

“Bra?” Gen threw it over to Lea, still smirking.

She blinked. “Thanks.”

“See you at our table?” Loey called as Lea struggled to hook her bra and head out the door.

“Of course,” Nikki said, rolling onto her back and looking at Lea with hooded eyes that were still partly glazed with sleep, “see you in a few, Lea.”

Snorting, Lea threw a smile at her over her shoulder. “If I make it.”

Lea made it through the Common Room with no trouble, most students having already left for breakfast, and practically ran through the dungeons to her own dorm, the icy stone floor harsh against her bare feet. Rushing into her room, she barely registered the other girls still in there before she stepped out of her jeans and sweater.

“Where have you been?” Bri demanded as Lea buttoned her blouse and clumsily knotted her tie. “You haven’t been here all night!”

“Things got a little late in Hufflepuff,” she replied distractedly, blowing her messy hair out of her face. “I stayed with Nikki. Didn’t want to get caught out past curfew.”

“Nikki, huh?” Bri’s voice had adopted an edge Lea had only heard directed towards the players of rival Quidditch teams. “You’re with her an awful lot these days.”

“Bri,” Laury said hesitantly.

“We’re friends.” Lea turned, meeting Bri’s challenging gaze with confusion.
“Now isn’t the time, we’re going to be late,” Daisy interrupted, tugging on Bri’s hand.

“Go on without me,” Lea said when Bri remained silent, eyes flitting from each of the girls in search of clues.

Bri shook off Daisy’s hold on her. “I’ll wait with you.”

“Bri,” Laury interjected, more desperate than before.

“You don’t have to.” Uneasiness was settling in Lea’s stomach in the face of Bri’s determination.

“No, it’s okay.” Bri shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “You two go on, Laury, Dais. We’ll see you in a bit.”

Noting the worried glances exchanged between them as they relented, Lea turned her back on them as they made their exit. Reaching for her hairbrush, she began running it through her mess of hair and tried to keep calm. She was struggling to think of what could have upset Bri – she thought she had been doing a pretty good job of keeping her nerves to herself and besides that she didn’t know what else could have made such an impact.

“All right, Bri?” Lea threw out casually, back still turned to the other girl.

“Sure,” came the reply, just as calmly. “I mean, not that you would know either way considering we barely see each other anymore.”

Indignant, Lea spun. “We have every class together all day. We eat together all the time. We sleep in the same room. What on earth are you talking about?”

“Yeah, we spend classes together but that’s not really a social kind of thing, is it? Not with you constantly taking stress-notes and being attentive.” The way Bri said that – as if it was annoying – made a pang of hurt run through Lea before it gave way to anger. “Meals? Not a thing anymore with Nikki Lee and co. sitting with us on the rare occasions you’re not with them. Sharing a dorm? Apparently even that’s not a thing anymore, either.”

“Nikki?” Lea said, dropping her hairbrush on her bed. “You’re upset about Nikki? Why? Because I spend more time with her than with you? Are you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous,” Bri spat. “I just think it’s extremely disloyal of you to just forget your friends the moment someone more popular comes along –”

“Disloyal?” Lea took a step forward, frustration coursing through her veins. “Because I’ve made new friends?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Bri matched her movement, glaring at Lea daringly. “Everyone knows it’s just you making your way up the food chain! The way you’ve latched onto her – it’s embarrassing!”

Lea let out a laugh, a brittle sound devoid of any humour. “I have a distinct memory of you begging me to include you in conversations with her – put in a good word? I suppose that’s all forgotten now, right?”

“It was nothing like what you’ve done! The way you follow her everywhere – it’s like how Daisy was with the Raven-douche!”

“What I’ve done?” Lea exclaimed, reflexively sliding her want into her hand from the holster on the inside of her sleeve. “What do you mean what I’ve done? I’ve made new friends! Was I just
supposed to sit quietly all by myself while the rest of you made kind with Tommy’s friends? How come you’ve said nothing to Daisy? She’s the one who brought these people into our lives. Was I supposed to just ignore them? Refuse to make conversation with anyone but you three?”

“That’s not what this is!” Bri snapped. “The way you’ve ignored the rest of us – we’ve all felt it – and you’re sleeping in her dorm now? What is she, your girlfriend?”

Infuriated, Lea forced herself to take a step back, feeling her magic like a physical thing as it responded to her anger. Her skin turned hot and she pointedly pushed her wand back up her sleeve.

Coldly, she said, “I’m sorry you feel as if me making new friends can’t be anything less than a power play. I suggest you come to terms with the fact that Nikki just likes me more than you and nothing’s going to change that. Think of it this way – you don’t have to worry so much about me and my incessant note taking or stress tantrums anymore, will you? So, really, you should be grateful.”

She pushed past Bri before she could answer, swiftly making her way through the dorm and through the dungeons.

Still radiating fury, she moved quickly, deciding on a whim to bypass breakfast entirely. She walked aimlessly through the castle, trying to shake off the anger and frustration that made her vision blur with its force. She had made it up to the fifth floor when she heard the sound of students approaching, presumably for morning classes. Panicking, she rushed to open the nearest door, finding three of them locked until she was finally granted access into the fourth.

Slamming the door behind her, Lea rest her forehead against it, taking a deep breath of relief. She turned to find the room shrouded in darkness save for the tiny slivers of sunlight peeking through the edges of the curtains. Stumbling through the dim room, Lea yanked them open, the other curtains opening along with the first and bathing the room in warmth. Looking around the large space, she couldn’t help but gasp.

Rows upon rows of stools and music stands adorned the centre of the room, a grand piano and a lone stand situated in front of them. A long blackboard covered the wall from floor to ceiling and wall to wall at the front of the room.

“Oh shit,” she muttered, jumping at the way her soft words bounced off the walls. This was Hogwarts’s music room – the one James had mentioned to her once long ago. The other walls were adorned with multiple images of both muggle and wizarding musicians although they remained perfectly still no matter how keenly Lea eyed them, and the wall opposite was lined with tall windows, each set in a small alcove allowing for, essentially, a neat row of window seats.

Lea, who had been momentarily enchanted by her find, found her poor mood swiftly returning, although this time with a heavy dose of sadness to accompany her frustration. She moved to a window at the back of the room, falling onto the cushioned ledge just as tears started to fall. She covered her face with her hands, stifling her sobs and praying for some control.

She didn’t completely understand why she was feeling so off balance. Yes, Bri’s words had hurt – made worse by how Lea hadn’t seen them coming at all – but it was her that was jealous of Nikki and that had nothing to do with Lea, not really. But it was something about – something about how Bri had said she had latched onto Nikki. Had she really been with Nikki that much? She felt as if the other girl wanted to spend time with her, especially since she was always the one seeking out Lea in the beginning. But had that changed? Had Lea just assumed she was welcome company? Had she appeared desperate?
Sniffling, Lea could only hope that Nikki didn’t see her as someone to pity – someone she spent time with because she didn’t have the heart to turn her away.

She couldn’t help the way her thoughts went to James, remembering how he once considered her a friend as well as a sister only to find, once given more choices, that she wasn’t all that impressive after all. Had she been making a fool of herself for so long? Gotten too caught up in the relief of not having watch her words and actions around her friends and being able to express her fears and concerns freely? Was it so bad to want to spend time with someone who wouldn’t dismiss her and roll their eyes the moment she brought up school work?

“Fuck,” Lea exhaled slowly, trying to even her breathing. “Fuck. Okay.”

She stood abruptly, walking to the piano and sitting in front of it carefully. She hadn’t played for years though her father had insisted on some musical lessons during her and James’s childhood. James as a child had even less patience than he did as a teenager, and he made his way almost weekly from piano to drums to the clarinet to the guitar and so on. Lea, however, had found herself at peace with the piano. She played it consistently for many years, only really stopping when she came to Hogwarts. It had been one of the few bonding points for her and her father – his love for music resulting in the two of them spending many evenings together playing and singing in both English and Hindi.

On a whim, she gently lifted the keylid of the piano, the surface so shiny she could almost make out her teary reflection in it. Hesitantly lowering her fingers to the keys, she pressed on one, the lid of the body of the piano opening as the sound bounced through the room. Feeling a shiver go through her as a staff lifted itself to prop the lid at half-mast, she released another breath, letting her shoulders drop as she exhaled. Her fingertips drifted over the keys – not playing, but just touching, feeling the ridges and the shape of the ivory.

Settling her hands more firmly, she played.

Hours passed by the time Lea could no longer ignore her cramped fingers and growling stomach. She rubbed at the tears that had dried on her cheeks and stood, stretching her stiff muscles. She stood by a window for a moment, looking out onto the grounds of the castle. The music room had a view of the lake, and the sun – at its highest point in the sky – made the water almost painful to look at.

Exhausted after her morning of playing and crying, Lea made her way down to the kitchens once she knew the students had returned to class after lunch. Greeting the house elves as jovially as she could, she settled with a sandwich stacked high and a big mug of tea to wash down her remaining nerves, already yearning for more assistance from her recently discovered brownies. Of course, that thought brought her back to Nikki, and she unhappily risked a quick stop in her dorm to grab her school books before retreating back to the music room to drown herself in key dates of the Giant Wars until the sky darkened.

“Lea?”

She jumped as the door to the classroom opened, head lifting from where it had rested against the window – she had been dozing off.

“How’d you find this place?” It was Regulus, looking around the classroom interestedly as he made his way towards her.

“Accident.” Lea’s voice came out dry and tired, and she cleared her throat roughly before asking,
“How’d you find me?”

“That’s a funny story, you know,” Reg said in a tone that implied it was anything but, “I hadn’t
seen you in the Great Hall all day and apparently you hadn’t been in class either. Not uncommon,
of course, but everyone else was present so you weren’t skiving off with some friends, so then I
thought you must be in the Hospital Wing – maybe you’d had a headache or something? But no,
you weren’t there either. So, then I had to resort to speaking to people,” he paused to scrunch up his
nose distastefully, making Lea smile, “but they hadn’t seen you either! I even went and questioned
the Hufflepuff you’ve taken to – and by questioned I mean I sent a firstie to question but the
sentiment remains.

“So, then I was grasping at straws because I had only two options left – to ask your brother or find
a way to sneak into your dorm and cast a rather complicated and long-winded charm that required
one of your hairs as well as an item of clothing.”

“You snuck into the dorm?”

“Of course I snuck into the dorm. What? Did you think I’d resort to speaking to the Gryffindorks
for anything? Even if it meant my life I would rather die.”

“A healthy perspective.”

“I’m glad you agree.”

“Well, you’ve found me,” Lea said, shifting her books so he could take a seat next to her. “What do
you need?”

“A little admiration for the tracking spell? It’s not easy magic, you know. No?” Regulus sighed
dramatically as he sat when Lea raised an eyebrow. “Well, then, how about a reason for your
sudden disappearance? If the firstie is to be believed, you were out partying with the Puffs just last
night.”

“Exactly,” she said, meeting his sharp gaze head on, “I’ve been exhausted all day, I couldn’t be
bothered going to class – it’s all just revision this week anyway.”

He stared at her disbelievingly. “I’m going to ignore how there was nothing realistic about a single
aspect of that lie and let you out of this one for the moment because you do look like shit.”

“So, there was a reason for your sleuthing, then?”

“Sleuthing? I like it.”

“You’ve become very dramatic as a teenager, did you know?”

“I’m taking that as a compliment.” He sobered slightly, his gaze shifting to the lake outside. “I
received a letter this morning. From my mother.” He paused. “I don’t want to burden you with this
– I know it’s not your problem –”

“I’ve never associated the word ‘stupid’ with you before, Regulus, don’t make me start now.” Lea
looked at him sternly. “Tell me.”

He offered her a grateful half smile before growing sombre once more. “There’s to be a party, over
the summer. It’s no secret my parents are sympathetic to…certain causes. It wasn’t explicitly said
but this guest list – these families – it’s a shift. I’ve been inducted into society for a long time but
it’s always been broader than this. The fact that they’re hosting and the circle is so tight – it feels
like I’m being inducted into something else.”

Lea felt worry hold her once more. “Reg.”

Regulus shook his head. “That’s not the problem,”

She didn’t have to guess. “Sirius.”

“Mother said Sirius won’t be home – he’s made plans to stay at someone else’s house for some weeks – it’s not yours so I’m assuming it’s either Lupin’s or Pettigrew’s, most likely Pettigrew’s. If this is happening, wholly and truly, something’s going to change.”

Lea watched him wearily. “More than it already has?”

“There is no doubt in my mind my mother has only just begun to express her disappointment in my brother.”

“You’ve thought of something.” It was said as a statement, recognising the resignation in his grey eyes.

“It’s not a great idea.”

“Let’s hear it.”

She listened. She understood. “Will I be allowed to attend?”

He looked at her hopefully. “I’m not certain but I think there’s enough mystery around your alliances to garner you an invite. It helps that you’re friendly with Cissa and, of course, that you were sorted Slytherin. If it’s you alone, I’m sure you’d be allowed. The Parkinsons also made the guest list, it’s likely your friend will also be there.”

“That’ll be helpful in getting my parents’ permission to attend. And you said Sirius was to be away at the time of the party? It’s likely James won’t be home either which is always helpful.”

“It’s not going to be fun,” Regulus said warningly, although a smile had already emerged on his face.

Lea scoffed, forcibly ignoring her uneasiness. “I’m sure the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black will sufficiently cater to my needs. I expect the ballroom to be adorned with no fewer than one thousand emeralds. Green jewellery only, of course.”

“Of course,” Reg drawled, his grin widening. “What? Did you think there’d be rubies? Don’t be ridiculous.”

Lea snuck back into the dorm before dinner had ended, hiding herself firmly behind her bed curtains before any of the girls returned and setting an alarm for before they’d wake. Sleep took her immediately after a day of crying but her rest was fitful and she awoke the next day feeling just as rested as she had felt the night before – not at all.

She quietly dressed and went down to breakfast early enough that she had to spend a few minutes reading over some notes before the plates appeared at all. She had barely poured herself a cup of tea before Nikki slid into the seat next to her.

“Are you all right?” she asked quietly, reaching for the tea when Lea put it down.
“Yeah,” Lea replied just as softly. “I’m sorry for disappearing on you yesterday.”

“The baby Black was asking after you and pretending he wasn’t. His informant made it seem like you hadn’t been seen all day. I was worried.”

“He found me.” Lea couldn’t help a tiny smile at that. “I’m sorry for worrying you. I just needed a day to myself.”

Silence fell when Lea didn’t continue and she could feel Nikki’s gaze on her like a physical thing. “Are you going to explain or am I going to have to pry it out of you? I don’t mind doing that, you know I don’t, but it would save a lot of time if you just told me what was wrong.”

Sighing, Lea turned to face her. She knew she’d made a mistake the moment she met those concerned brown eyes. There was no way she was going to keep this a secret. “Bri and I had an argument.”

An eyebrow rose, waiting.

Lea took a sip of her tea. “She’d been upset that I didn’t come back to the dorm the night before. We got a little bit carried away and some things were said.”

There was a glint in Nikki’s eyes that she hadn’t seen before. It almost made it difficult to hold her gaze. “What things.”

“Nothing important.”

“Lea. Obviously it was important if it made you go into hiding for the whole fucking day.”

She scowled. “Just because I think something is important doesn’t mean it’s objectively important.”

“Well tell me what was important to you, then. Don’t make me out-Slytherin you again.”

“Nikki.”

“Just say it.”

When Lea didn’t, Nikki moved closer, placing a hand on Lea’s arm. “Was it that bad?”

“No, it wasn’t. I’m just being ridiculous.”

“What did she say, Le? It was about me, wasn’t it? Come on, I can take it.”

Lea shook her head. “It was more to do with how I was ditching them and using you to make my way up the social ladder.”

Nikki laughed. “What?”

“Yeah.”

She laughed again before she caught a glimpse of Lea’s face. “You have to know I don’t think that, Lea. You’ve never asked me for anything, ever. I spend time with you because I want to. If anything, you tried to get rid of me for ages. Believe me, I would never think you were using me like that.”

Lea couldn’t remember ever feeling relief as potently as she did in that moment. “You’re sweet. But it doesn’t change the fact that that’s what she thinks.”
“She’s wrong.”

“About what?” Lea smiled wryly. “About someone like you only taking an interest in me because I’ve somehow manipulated you into it?”

“Lea.”

“I don’t even know where people get the idea of me being some master manipulator? Is it because I’m a Slytherin? It must be, because I swear I’ve never knowingly and successfully manipulated someone into giving me something I want but, somehow, that’s what everyone seems to think I do in my spare time.”

“Lea, shut up,” Nikki said, smacking her on the arm. “No one thinks you’re of questionable character, okay?”

“Trelawney absolutely thought I was of questionable character.”

She looked at her incredulously. “You’re listening to that old bat now? You really did need a day off.”

“Take a day off? From my incessant manipulating? Unlikely. Especially when I’m so busy obsessing over you and sleeping in your bed like I’m your girlfriend.”

Nikki smiled with a now familiar edge that Lea still couldn’t quite describe. “Obsessing over me, huh?”

Lea panicked slightly. “I mean – that’s what Bri said. That I was obsessed with you. Well. I think her exact words were more along the lines of ‘I follow you everywhere’ but yes. Essentially. Obsessed.”

Gods, what was wrong with her?

“That’s probably a good thing,” Nikki said casually, “considering I’m pretty obsessed with you too.”

Lea froze. “Uh. What?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded seriously, “And you know that girlfriend thing you were talking about? I’d like to do that. If you want.”

Dumbly, she repeated, “What?”

Is that what it was, all this time? Lea could have smacked herself as everything fell into place in front of her eyes. The fucking touching, the damn tingles – they had been flirting. Merlin’s saggy balls. How was it physically possible for her to have been stupid enough to miss it this whole time?

“Wait,” Lea said, watching Nikki’s face carefully, “are you fucking kidding me?”

Nikki’s smile fell and she pulled away slightly. “I’m sorry, I misunderstood.”

“No, wait.” Lea grabbed Nikki’s arm. “You mean, all along?”

Nikki looked at her wearily. “You don’t have to rub it in.”

“What? No! I’m just –” she moved, closing the space Nikki had created between them. “I’m sorry. I’ve been stupid. And confused. Always confused. I’m sorry. I’d fucking love to be with you.”
Hesitantly, Nikki met her eyes once more. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, oh my gods, I’ve just been – well, I’ve been confused about everything – but, yes! What do you mean, am I sure? Who would possibly –”

Nikki kissed her. **Nikki kissed her.**

It was over before Lea had time to register what had happened, her hands hovering hopelessly in the air.

“Sorry.” Nikki was smiling sheepishly, though her eyes suggested she was anything but.

“Don’t apologise.” Lea was still reeling from the fact that this was what Nikki had been leading up to this whole time, that this was what she had been feeling despite being unable to recognise the foreign emotion – a fucking crush. “Oh my gods.”

Nikki was looking at her in mild surprise. “You really didn’t know this was a thing, did you?”

“How would I? It’s never happened to me before and why would I assume you were into me like that? Makes no sense.”

“Okay, stop with this thing, I don’t like it.”

It was Lea’s turn to be sheepish. “I’m sorry. Habit.”

“A bad habit.”

“Maybe. But it’s true.” Lea found herself grinning uncontrollably. What the fuck was going on. How did this happen? “Why did you even – why me?”

Nikki did something Lea had never seen her do before – she blushed. “It wasn’t a spontaneous thing, you know. Me talking to you. I’d seen you in the Common Room with Daisy and the others but you weren’t always there, were you? Maybe it was the elusiveness, the mystery, that made me want to speak to you so badly.”

Lea snorted. “Mystery? I promise I’m not that complex a person. Most of the time I didn’t show up I was just studying. Or napping.”

“I didn’t know that, did I? Can you blame a girl for being intrigued? I don’t know what it was exactly, okay, you just looked really pretty and you mostly kept to yourself and it made me want to know more.”

“That’s some girly shit, Nik.”

“Hey, fuck off. The heart wants what it wants. I was borderline desperate. I sat next to you all the time but never managed to think of anything to say.”

“If it’s any consolation I didn’t notice at all.” But Lea couldn’t restrain the smug smile on her face. Nikki Lee had a crush on her.

“It’s not, really. Apparently, you don’t notice a whole lot about anything. Except exam questions. You break those down until they can’t hide a single thing from you.”

Her smile gave way to a pout. “Oi, is that why you led me on a wild goose chase over some non-existent secret?”
“Because I was trying to hold your attention? Unfortunately.”

Lea snickered, expecting Nikki to complain about her teasing, but all she got was a soft smile in return. Fuck, this was a thing.

“I’ve pulled some stupid shit over this, Lea,” she said dryly. “I’m obsessed.”

She laughed harder. “As long as I’m not alone in this obsession,” she said fondly, running her fingers through Nikki’s sleek hair, moving forward so her forehead was almost touching the other girl’s.

They sat like that, heads bent together, until the Great Hall slowly began to fill with students.

Lea, although she felt better overall – borderline ecstatic, really – hadn’t forgotten the sharpness of her friend’s words the morning before. It was because of this that she made her exit before they arrived in the Great Hall, brushing off Nikki’s tentative encouragements to reconcile with Bri but brightening when she followed that with a casually toned comment describing the violence that would occur if Bri didn’t apologise for her words. She hid around the corner from the Transfiguration classroom and didn’t enter until the last moment, relying on everyone having already taken their seats so she would be forced to sit up the front, away from the other girls.

She repeated this all day, although Daisy unsuccessfully attempted to wait her out by third period, and skipped lunch altogether, making a trip down to the kitchens to grab a snack instead. The downside was that she ended up sitting in the first row in almost every class, and even though she was willingly attentive, she got an unobscured view of all her teachers repeatedly telling her how difficult the exams would be that year. She knew, logically, that they would not be more difficult than what they had studied for but she also knew the images of pacing teachers and their disapproving gazes would visit her in her nightmares.

She made it to fifth period relatively unscathed and was lulled into a false sense of security that proved fatal when Daisy blatantly got up after Binns had started lecturing and taken a seat next to her. Binns didn’t even notice, the fool.

“Don’t listen to Brianna,” Daisy whispered, directing her blue eyes pleadingly to Lea’s brown one. “She’s upset there’s been a change, whatever she said – she didn’t mean it.”

“If she didn’t mean it, she would tell me herself,” Lea whispered back, tampering down on her initial relief that not all her friends were upset with her.

“She’s stubborn,” Daisy said, irritation evident. “She’s stubborn and proud and you know this. Do not let her idiocy get to you when you’re smarter than this.”

Lea scoffed. “You think praising me will make me speak to her? You’re right, I am smart. And there’s no way I’m falling for that.”

“I’m not praising you for the sake of it,” she replied, grabbing one of Lea’s hands. “I’m telling the damn truth.”

“So, I’m supposed to just forgive everything? Because I know better?”

Daisy paused. “No.” She sighed. “No, I won’t ask you to do that. Fuck.” She settled back into her seat, slouching ever so slightly (the only amount she ever allowed herself to slouch) and crossing her legs under the table.
When she said no more, Lea shifted impatiently. “What?”

“What?” Daisy repeated mildly. “It just means I’m going to have to resign myself to sitting at the front every classroom then, huh?”

Lea stared.

Daisy sighed. “I don’t agree with Bri, how could I? If she’s saying you’ve gone and betrayed us then the same should be said of me, right? She will come around but it’s not my job to baby her through her angst tantrum. Gods, this whole thing is embarrassing, honestly. Whatever happened to repressing your feelings to fuel your revenge at a later date? I hate to say it but it’s at times like these that it really does become obvious Brianna wasn’t raised as we were.”

Lea hid her smile. “I don’t think anyone was raised quite like you were, Daisy.”

She received a baleful look in response. “Sometimes it’s easy to forget you’ve got some messy manners in you too. It can be hard to see them under all the repressed emotions that make you seem as purebred as the rest of us.”


So, Daisy took to sitting with her during the week, the two of them happily spending time with their Hufflepuff counterparts and, when the week was over, settling down to study for their exams. The girls re-entered a somewhat normal routine when they were all in the dorm, save for Bri and Lea blatantly ignoring each other which, Lea thought, was one of the better ways this could have gone.

Daisy had thrown Lea an exasperated look when, on the first night, she and Nikki curled up next to each other in the Hufflepuff Common Room. Lea received a solid dressing down later that night about what was considered important information to share with friends and what the consequences were if one were not to do so.

As exams continued Lea found herself growing restless – as she did – and tucked herself neatly into a corner of the Slytherin Common Room. Her mood lifted immensely when she received a letter halfway through the exam period from Narcissa. She could almost hear the older girl coldly saying the words to her, telling her to remain calm and that she could do this and do it well as long as she held herself proudly. Her words of motivation were more easily believed with the help of the Hufflepuff business Lea was now heavily contributing to, with her money going towards both the acquisition of brownies and joints. They calmed her enough to get her through the nights, if nothing else, and it was amazing what sleep did for her nerves. They weren’t gone – not even close – but they were slightly less demanding for her attention after a full night of rest.

As she left her final exam – the Defence theoretical – she forced herself to remove her mind from how it went.

“Daisy,” she said to her friend, the two of them strolling the corridors to their dorm so they could change out of their uniform, “have you heard about the dinner that’s going to be held at the Black’s home?”

“Mm,” was the reply, not nearly as interestedly as Lea would have thought. “How have you?”

“I’m going to be there.”

That got her attention. “Really?”
Lea nodded. “Just me, though, not my family.”

Daisy turned her pale blue gaze on Lea. “Who asked you?”

“Regulus.” Lea could see no point in lying – it would be no secret that she would be Regulus’s guest. She had thought about what would be assumed that he invited her specially but had come to the conclusion that supporting Regulus in this was worth more than some rumours. Especially because they wouldn’t be true.

“Really?”

She raised an eyebrow. “It’s not that much of a surprise. We are friends, you know.”

“Of course.” Daisy shook her head lightly as if shaking off the surprise. “I just didn’t realise – well, that it had reached a point that he would be inviting you to his home, that’s all – that he would be inviting anyone to his home, really.” She brightened. “It’s going to be eons better now that you’ll be there, though! Especially because mother has dropped many hints in the past about how their home is a little…extra. I was going to try and convince my parents to let me stay home but now that it won’t be such a bore, I don’t have to bother bartering something on this one.”

“I just –” Lea cut herself off. Ran over the words again in her head. Started again, “I was just wondering how much you knew of the guest list? Both you and Reg have said now that it’s not going to be fun and I’d rather like to be prepared.”

Daisy’s gaze sharpened as she understood, focusing on Lea appraisingly. “Of course, babe. I’ll give you the rundown although, knowing you, I don’t actually have as much information as you want.”

They had reached the dungeons, and Daisy lowered her voice before saying, “You know of the Sacred Twenty-Eight?” Lea nodded. “When it comes to hosts like the Blacks, that’s a good place to start. Essentially all of the families will be there, maybe not everyone but at least one person from each. This is, of course, excluding the Weasleys, Prewetts, and Ollivanders. Slughorn will probably be there, which is disgusting.”

She paused, frowning thoughtfully. “I think it might be helpful to ask Regulus about specifics – he could probably tell you more. Or even Narcissa, if she will tell you? You met a lot of the people at my birthday, actually, you probably know everyone already but it does make a difference, you know. You showing up alone.”

Lea brightened – she’d forgotten about Daisy’s party. “So, in terms of who to blatantly avoid if possible…”

“The Lestranges,” was the immediate response, “obviously. The Carrows if you can, they’re a bit nutty. Have a sense of humour that leans more towards abuse than teasing, if you know what I mean. I don’t know if you remember but the two children were in seventh year when we started – Amycus and Alecto. They’re absolutely crazy. I’ve never heard either of them say a single kind thing. Other than them it’s unlikely a scene will be caused publicly but prepare yourself for underhanded insults. Especially about your appearance and who you’re going to marry. That’s my advice.”

Lea wrinkled her nose distastefully. “Lovely.”

“But don’t fear, my love,” Daisy threw an arm around Lea as she voiced the password to the Common Room, “I’ll be there with you. And for all that these people can be mean and harsh
sometimes, they really do enjoy their fineries. If you stick with me and Regulus there’s more than a slight chance the night will be perfectly pleasant."

“Mm,” she said doubtfully. “Then why have you and Reg been terrifying me so much?”

“Look. There’s a fifty-fifty chance, okay? It’ll probably be fine but also people are mean.”

Exhaling, Lea nodded. “It’ll be fun,” she said decisively, separating from Daisy as they reached their dorm.

“That’s the spirit.”
Chapter Eight

The party was to be held in the second week of August. Lea, nervous as hell about having to go alone, relied heavily on the soft encouragements from Nikki and frank disclosure of facts from Narcissa. She and Reg had sent a few letters keeping Lea updated on the preparations and build up to the party. What Daisy had said about these families enjoying their fineries hadn’t been untrue and Lea found herself pleasantly distracted in the middle of the worry by the images of grandeur Regulus’s letters conveyed. Although all it did was make her nervous, she was most gracious for Narcissa’s advice. The older girl had owled her short notes over the course of the week before the event, all containing little tips from how to dress and who she should compliment. It made her feel more and more like this was another class she was studying for and – naturally – with that came the same uneasiness that followed her during the exam period.

Uneasiness only made worse by her parents’ hesitation to let her go.

“You can’t possibly be that close to these people that you would attend this party on your own,” her father said, eyeing her from over his metal framed glasses.

She had approached them after dinner, both her mother and father retiring to the sitting room after James had disappeared into his bedroom as he had taken to doing since they had returned home. It was disgustingly obvious he was hiding something and Lea would find out what after this damn party was done with.

“I won’t be on my own,” she replied, trying not to appear as nervous as she felt, “my friends will be there.”

“Regulus Black,” Charlus said disbelievingly.

“And Daisy. Also, Narcissa.”

He shook his head, leaning back into the sofa. “I don’t think so.”

Before she began pleading, she turned to her mother. Dorea was watching her carefully, worry lining her beautiful face.

“Darling, if this is something you really want to do then we’ll let you,” came her hesitant response. Her father turned an exasperated look towards her mother. They had a silent conversation for a few long seconds. Her father broke first.

“Not alone,” he said firmly.

“We’ve not been invited, my love,” Dorea said dryly. “Besides, the Parkinsons will be there and they can be trusted to watch over Lea for us.”

When her father didn’t move, Lea made her plea, “Please, Papa. My friends invited me and I want to be there for them. Please.”

He softened almost immediately. “That’s the Slytherin in you, right there,” he said wryly. “Fine. But I’m going to be speaking to the Parkinsons before you go anywhere to find out exactly what this is.”

Lea smiled widely, almost vibrating with excitement. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” A moment later, she sobered, a darker thought occurring to her. “Is it possible... for you to maybe not
bring this up with James?"

Her mother’s worry deepened and her father looked at her sternly, making her rush to say, “I mean if it comes up then don’t lie to him but…if he doesn’t ask then don’t say anything maybe? I just think it will cause more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Is this still happening?” Charlus’s mouth turned down, displeased.

Lea shook her head fervently. “No! It’s just – you know Sirius and James are best friends. I don’t know if he would be very pleased about the situation in general.”

Neither looked as if they believed her, but they let her go and she gratefully retreated to her room, basking in her victory.

James was to leave on the Friday to head to the Pettigrew’s and the party was to be held on Saturday night. The day of the party found Lea doubting the black dress she had chosen – knee-length and short-sleeved – to be worn under fine black dress robes. She knew it wouldn’t matter that much – she was wearing robes after all – but she worried nevertheless. Coming to the conclusion that there was no alternative anyway, she resigned herself to the dress and adorned herself with gold plated diamonds on her ears and neck. The jewellery itself was also simple, on loan from her mother, but the curve of the gold surrounding the diamonds screamed of her wealth and thought it could only endear her to the crowd she was to face. Keeping her face bare save for some liner around her eyes and a little red on her lips, she asked her mother to perform a curling charm on her hair to neaten her messy waves, and slipped into a pair of sparkling black heels.

The shoes were the first thing her father commented from where he was waiting for her by the fireplace. “Are those heels? Can you even walk in those?”

Lea adopted an affronted expression. “They’re not that tall! And I absolutely can.”

“She looks lovely,” her mother said from behind her. Lea didn’t have to turn to see the pointed look Dorea was sending Charlus to make him mumble an apology. In moments like these the resemblance between her father and brother were strikingly obvious.

“You do look beautiful,” her father assured her after a moment. Lea spared a grateful smile for him before grabbing a handful of floo powder.

“Enjoy yourself, darling,” Dorea said, kissing Lea’s cheek and stepping back.

“Be back before midnight,” Charlus said sternly, dropping his own gentle kiss to the top of her head.

She mustered up a reassuring smile for them and passingly wondered if there was truth to the ‘fake it ’till you make it’ mentality because her voice didn’t waver in the slightest when she spoke, “Grimmauld Place!” and although she was doing her best to project confidence, it was most definitely not what was swirling in her stomach.

She had never been more grateful to Regulus Black than when she saw him with a hand extended, waiting to help her step out of the fireplace.

“Lea.” She wouldn’t have said that Regulus smiled, exactly, but she would claim she felt a distinctly pleased air emanating from his being.

She did smile, accepting his hand and using the other to brush of the slight soot that had settled on her shoulders. “Regulus. All right?”
He frowned at her informality but the room was empty save for an old and sunken house elf standing off to the left, presumably to direct any guests down the hall where Lea could hear the sound of faint laughter and soft music coming from.

“I’m pleased you could make it,” he said, letting go of her hand to lead her out of the parlour.

Her smile widened. Somehow, she felt lighter now that she had arrived. She felt like she could deal with this now, finally. Falling into step beside him, she wrapped an arm through his, gleefully ignoring the alarmed expression that crossed his face before he schooled it.

“Have your holidays been okay?” she asked.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “They’ve been good. What about yours?”

Unsatisfied but knowing he was unlikely to offer more in the moment, she nodded. “Good, too. Relaxing.”

As they neared the entry to what Lea assumed was the ballroom, she unwound her arm from his.

“I’ll take you to my parents,” he murmured, leading her into the room and into the crowd. It was a wide, circular space, the walls white and chandeliers glistening from the ceiling. Trays with drinks and appetisers were floating around the edge of the room and there were no tables or chairs in sight, although Lea didn’t doubt they would appear when they were needed. People had formed a loose circle around the centre of the room where few couples were twirling effortlessly to the gentle music but the majority were conversing, drinks in hand, looking happy enough. Some were even laughing.

She couldn’t help the light giggle that escaped her as she realised no, these people weren’t sitting around and planning the demise of the wizarding world as they knew it.

“Cecilia,” Regulus said lowly, “I believe you’ve met my mother and father, Walburga and Orion Black.”

Walburga and Orion were just as tall and intimidating as she remembered – dressed in black and stormy grey eyes piercing into her critically. They were stood with a woman dressed in shimmering teal robes, whose dark hair was braided tightly and curled into a bun at the top of her head. If Lea wasn’t mistaken, she believed the woman to be Daniella Greengrass – a lady in her mid-twenties who was causing a mild stir amongst the elders of her family by having yet to take a husband.

“Of course.” Lea’s smile dimmed a notch, appearing more disinterested but not so much that she was disrespectful. “Thank you so much for having me.” Her smile became more genuine as she looked around the room and added, “This is all very beautiful.”

The smile that graced Walburga’s face was nowhere near sincere but Lea took the fact that it was there at all as a win. “We’re very glad that you could make it,” she said, her voice the same taciturn tone she remembered from Daisy’s party.

“Yes.” Orion reached for Lea’s hand and pressed the back of it to his lips. “Regulus speaks very highly of you.”

Resisting the urge to shake off the feeling of his beard from her skin, Lea raised an eyebrow at Reg who raised one right back. “Well, Regulus is smart enough to recognise excellence when he sees it.”

Lea could have imagined it but she would swear Walburga’s smile became softened for a second.
“Indeed. Have you met Daniella Greengrass?”

“I don’t believe I have.” Lea offered her hand to Daniella who took it with a warm smile. “Cecilia Potter.”

“Oh, I would recognise that head of hair anywhere,” Daniella said, smiling widely. “How has your father been? He did a lot for me when I got out of Hogwarts, you know.”

“He’s well. He and Mother speak very highly of you, it’s truly a pleasure.”

“That’s what your father did to help me,” she said teasingly, “he told your mother of my work.”

Lea knew the story – Daniella was a fashion designer. As she had left Hogwarts, she had struggled to spread word of her work as her parents had refused to back her financially and she was determined to remain independent rather than selling her designs to established wizarding stores. She had worked under her father in the Ministry for a short period of time where he eventually determined her true aspirations and, upon seeing them, told Dorea who had immediately invested in Daniella.

She was now one of the most sought-after fashion designers globally and spent most of her time in Italy.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Regulus interrupted politely, “I believe Cecilia is being keenly awaited by someone else.”

“Make sure you get your guest a drink, Regulus,” was Orion’s parting words, his gaze falling to where Reg had gently placed a hand on Lea’s elbow to direct her.

“Yes, father.”

“Good, right?” Lea murmured to Reg, looking at him hopefully.

His mouth twitched, almost smiling. “Good.”

As they made their way around the dancefloor, Lea noticed the appraising gazes that fell on the two of them. She made a point to hold people’s eyes if they met and smile or nod in acknowledgment if anyone looked at her expectantly. She recognised almost everyone she passed and could make a guess at those didn’t, growing more and more confident with each step and relaxing as she realised they were just people, for fuck’s sake.

“Lea!” Daisy rushed to hug her.

“Hey,” she said into her friend’s hair, taking further comfort in the familiarity. “Hi Mr Parkinson, Mrs Parkinson.”

“It’s good to see you, Cecilia.” Mrs Parkinson leaned down to kiss her on each cheek. “I’m glad you were able to come.”

“Yes, yes, it’s amazing,” Daisy said dismissively, stepping away from her parents and gesturing for Reg and Lea to follow. “It’s time for us to go now, bye.”

Lea threw a smile and a wave over her shoulder at Daisy’s disdainful parents as they moved to an emptier side of the room.

“Drinks?” Reg asked them as they neared a floating tray of what looked like wine. “Kreacher!”
The elf from the parlour appeared with a crack, holding a tray with a bottle of elf wine and three empty glasses. “Yes, Master Regulus,” came the gravelly response, the wine pouring itself as he spoke.

“First drink of the night should always be elf wine,” Regulus told them, “Father’s labelled it etiquette but everyone knows he just enjoys showing off the fact that we can afford it.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Lea said, talking a glass from Regulus when he handed them out.

“Yes, Kreacher, thank you,” Reg echoed, a tiny smile finally gracing his handsome face as the dismal looking elf bowed lowly before apparating away.

“You look gorgeous, Le,” Daisy said excitedly, taking a rather large sip of her drink.

“Easy, Dais,” Lea said in mild alarm.

Regulus snickered softly, hiding his smirk behind his glass. “She won’t get more than the one glass, anyway.”

Daisy rolled her eyes but lowered her glass. “How’s everything been? Minimal stress?”

“Like, no stress,” Lea smiled. She frowned at the disbelieving looks that were shot at her. “What? I feel great. At peace, even.”

Daisy frowned, leaning closer to Lea. “Are you high?”

“No.”

“Merlin, you are.” Daisy put a palm to her face, groaning. “Gods, you can’t do that every time you get a little tense, Le.”

So what if she’d smoked half a joint before coming? She was stressed.

“I’m just trying to have a good time,” she said. “Don’t worry yourself, Daisy.”

She scowled. “Don’t tell me what to do. But this isn’t the place to discuss it. How’d the parents take it?”

“Well enough. Helps that James wasn’t there.”

“That I can relate to,” Regulus muttered.

“How’s that been going?” Lea asked quietly, slipping an arm through one of Reg’s once more.

“It’s been going,” he said dryly, shooting her a mildly exasperated look. “Nothing dire yet.”

Lea made a pleased noise, taking a sip of her wine. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Lucius and Narcissa approaching them. “I have to make the rounds,” Reg said, noticing them as well. “Or people will start approaching me. It’s better the other way around.”

She took her arm back and reached for Daisy’s hand. “We’ll come with you.”

Reg was shaking his head, ready to protest, but was interrupted by Narcissa and Lucius’s arrival. “Mrs Malfoy,” Lea said, smiling widely at the older girl. “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Mm.” Narcissa was just as beautiful as Lea remembered, standing proudly on Lucius’s arm.
“Likewise, children.”

The three of them groaned. “Not the children nonsense again, Cissa,” Reg said, frowning as the two Malfoys smirked at him and Lucius slapped a hand onto his shoulder jovially.

“You’ll always be a child to me, Reggie,” her smile was sharp but held an undeniable edge of fondness.

“Doing well, Regulus?” Lucius asked, a smirk painting his sharp features as he looked at the younger boy. “I heard you made the Slytherin Quidditch team last year.”

Reg brightened immediately, nodding. “It was a good season.”

“Are Ravenclaw still…”

Narcissa rolled her eyes and turned to the two girls, putting her back to her husband and cousin. “Have you two been well? Exams go okay?” The second question was accompanied with a pointed look at Lea.

Daisy snorted. “Exams went very well for Lea.” She lowered her voice, “Have you heard – she’s dating a Hufflepuff.”

Narcissa’s eyes widened in obvious shock. “Who?”

“Nikki Lee.”

She relaxed. “Oh. She’s one of the least Hufflepuff-y Hufflepuffs you could have chosen. A wise choice.”

Lea was barely listening, too busy glaring at Daisy. “Can you not?” she hissed, slapping her friend on the arm.

Daisy, the traitor, simply laughed. “That’ll teach you to not tell me major news straight away.”

“Fake friend.”

“Well, suffice it to say, her exam stress was pleasantly soothed by her new company.”

Narcissa smirked. “Indeed. Remember when you were insistent about never trusting people enough to form romantic relationships? You’ve grown so much, child.”

“Oh, shut up, Cissa.”

“You didn’t think to mention this in the midst of your gossip updates in our letters?” Her icy eyes were narrowed, pinning Lea in place.

“I don’t consider it gossip if it’s about me,” she sniffed. “Besides, it was rather sudden and exams began right after – there was barely any time to process.”

“That’s a lie,” Daisy declared.

“Come now, Lea,” Cissa purred, an edge that Lea now recognised as flirty accenting her words, “don’t you want to tell me the full story? I thought we were friends.”

Horrifyingly, she felt a tiny shudder run down her spine and the satisfaction that crossed Narcissa’s face made Lea think she knew even though there was no way she could have seen it.
“Who’s this, Cissy?”

A woman, followed by a man, approached. Upon first glance Lea found her striking, enough that the urge to relinquish eye contact passed strongly through her. She was pale skinned, gaunt to the point her cheekbones looked as if they could cut glass. Long, silky, curly hair was haphazardly (probably on purpose) knotted into a large bun, wisps of hair framing her face. It was the taunting set of her red lips, however, that immediately set Lea on edge – a feeling only intensified by the deep set, dark eyes that bore into her unflinchingly with something more than an appraisal. A challenge.

“Bella.” Narcissa straightened and lost her teasing tenor. “This is Cecilia Potter, a friend of Regulus and Daisy’s. Cecilia, this is my sister Bellatrix.”

“A Potter? Here?” Bellatrix’s laugh was perhaps the most humourless sound Lea had heard in her life, but still held a certain intrigue. It wasn’t a pretty sound, exactly, but there was something in it that wasn’t completely mean. Lea tilted her head, holding Bellatrix’s eye. The woman sobered, “Oh, hold on. You must be the Slytherin one.”

Half of Lea’s mouth tilted upwards. “Indeed.”

“Bella,” Regulus said dispassionately, stepping between Narcissa and Lea to face the woman. “Mother said you weren’t coming.”

Not looking away from Lea, she answered, “Hello, Reggie, my darling cousin. Yes, there was a change of plans and Rodolphus and I were able to return in time for tonight’s festivities. Odd, isn’t it, that your disgrace of a brother would take up with one Potter and you would the other?”

“It seemed only fair, given that,” Lea said blandly, “to even the playing field.”

The smile Bella gave Lea then was more of a baring of her teeth, and it warped her stunning features into something crueler, more taunting.

“Smart girl,” was her final statement, dismissing her and finally breaking their eye contact. “Lucius, I believe we have some business to discuss.”

It was only then that Lea took note of the man that had been behind her, presumably Rodolphus. He was tall and broad, an intimidating presence, with a thick beard and chin-length, slick-backed black hair. Though he was dressed neatly, there was something about his stance that radiated a distinctly restless aura. The moment Bellatrix’s attention had diverted, his had landed on her. She shuddered.

“Business? Now?” Narcissa was protesting, pointedly stepping forward to cut off Daisy, Lea, and Reg from the conversation, effectively breaking the man’s gaze. “Honestly, Bella, you and this business…”

Daisy exhaled loudly as they exited hearing range. “You really had a point about being the one to approach others,” she said to Regulus.

“Bella’s something else,” Reg noted slyly. “You did well.”

“I’m high,” Lea deadpanned, throwing back the remnants of her wine. She hadn’t eaten all day and the effects of elf wine were potent and immediate on her already fuzzy mind. “Well? Shall we greet the others?”
The rest of the night passed rather smoothly, even from Lea’s slightly glazed perspective. She greeted almost everyone, some even without Regulus by her side, and received a mostly positive reception, if a little distrustful. It was Slughorn’s presence that threw her off the most, immediately making her want to take cover because she was high and he was a teacher.

“He’s so drunk,” Reg was telling her softly, leading her towards him. “Believe me, with him you really want to be the one dictating the conversation otherwise you’ll never be free.”

“Fuuuck,” she groaned, equally quiet.

He caught sight of them then and she drudged up the kindest smile she could manage in that moment.

“Lea! Regulus! How good to see you!” His voice was even louder than she remembered and her step faltered slightly only to be pushed forward by Reg’s hand on her back.

“Hi, Professor,” she greeted. “How have you been?”

“Good, good! I hadn’t realised you were going to be attending tonight, my dear,” he said, beady eyes crinkling with the force of his smile. “Although I’m glad you’re here! Yes, very glad indeed. You know, I’ve always said you were one of my brightest students. So much potential! I do hope you’ll make it to my little get togethers next semester – both of you. Of course, I understand you have many responsibilities with Quidditch and other extracurriculars –” Lea and Regulus shared a look as if to say ‘you too?’ “— but surely we can work something out.” His gaze sharpened on Lea for a second. “Especially with the little surprise you’ll be getting with your Hogwarts letter.” He tapped the side of his nose and smiled at her with pride.

Lea’s eyes widened. He didn’t mean – no, surely not.

“Yes, hopefully our schedules will be lighter,” Regulus picked up, smiling charmingly. “Have you had a chance to sample the hors d’oeuvres? They really are quite spectacular…”

They left Slughorn with Catarina Flint, a rather unseemly looking woman with large teeth, by a tray of hors d’oeuvres floating by their arms. It was then that Regulus parted with Lea to check in with his parents before dinner was served and Lea reunited with Daisy who had been happily taking advantage of Narcissa’s availability as Lucius had disappeared somewhere with Bellatrix and Rodolphus.

Lea nursed a second glass of wine over dinner, this one not elf wine, and ate slowly, unwilling to lose the final remnants of her buzz despite her yearning for food. Two long, rectangular tables had emerged in the centre of the ballroom and Lea sat with the Parkinsons during dinner, grateful that they were on the opposite end of the table from Bellatrix and Reg’s parents. Unfortunately, it meant Reg was also down the other end, but there was nothing to be done about it.

“Still no word from Bri?” Daisy asked quietly, there’s head bent close together as they demurely poked at their dessert.

Lea shook her head. “Didn’t really expect anything, either.”

“She’ll apologise,” she said confidently. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she was just waiting to do it in person rather than by letter.”

Lea shrugged slightly before catching herself in the unseemly action. “The time apart can only be good, I suppose.”
“She probably regrets whatever she said anyway considering,” Daisy paused to glance around briefly, “well, considering you and her are together now.”

“Whatever the case may be, nothing’s changed. I’m still going to spend time with her and do what I want to in that regard, so Bri may still be upset.”

“Would you consider apologising? To restore the balance, if nothing else.”

Lea looked at her, bemused. “Have you been talking to Laury? Maybe. But like I said, even if I was to apologise, nothing else is going to change.”

“Mm. Well, I have faith it’ll work out.”

Lea looked at her ice cream, feeling some of her confidence drain away. “I certainly hope so.”

She left with the Parkinsons, just before midnight. Keeping her round of goodbyes swift, she gleefully sneaked in a quick hug from Narcissa, much to her everlasting disdain, and couldn’t help the tiny, tiny blush that gently flushed her skin as Regulus dropped a kiss onto the back of her hand under his parents’ watchful eye.

The Parkinsons followed her through the floo and sat with her parents in their parlour for a nightcap, Daisy and Lea retreating to her room while they spoke.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

The girls lay on Lea’s bed, fully dressed, staring up at the ceiling.

“No,” Daisy agreed. “I’m happy I got to speak to Narcissa so much. She really is an idol.”

Covering her face with her hands, Lea groaned. “I can’t believe Bri and I chose these holidays to get into an argument – it would have been the perfect time to have all of you stay here since Jamie’s gone to the Pettigrew’s.”

“It really would have,” Daisy said sadly. “Your house is rather lovely.”

“I would have loved to have you over.”

Neither considered having the stay without all four of them and nothing more was said on the matter.

As the Parkinsons left, Lea shared a quiet conversation with her parents as they walked up the stairs to their bedrooms, assuring them the night went well and she was all okay. Without the distraction of other people, exhaustion had settled quickly and solidly in her bones and the sleep she had that night was sound in a way she hadn’t experienced in a long time – full of satisfaction and a lack of regrets.

The summer continued, getting distinctly hotter for a few days before it gradually began to cool. James returned, sullen to leave his friends but full of excited stories of exploration and experimentation with non-magical explosives he had undertaken over the week. Lea, though amused by his retellings, still couldn’t shake off the bitterness at being left behind and thus retired to her room more often than not, losing herself in disgustingly thick tomes detailing muggle history – something she’d turned to in the wake of Binns ruining wizarding history for her. Much of the time passed like such, both James and Lea locking themselves up in their respective rooms on the days both parents left the house for work and barely speaking to each other.
Lea’s suspicions regarding James had been put on hold during the term but she had most definitely not forgotten about them. He was hiding something and she knew, rationally, that he was allowed his secrets but being back at home with little to occupy her thoughts other than Nikki’s latest letter she was borderline desperate to uncover something juicy.

So, she was onto him. Because of this, she had never been more grateful their rooms were side by side so she could position herself on the floor against their joined wall to listen for any clues. Other than the slightest scribbling of quill against paper, though, she heard nothing. On the few trips they were sent into town by their mother, she managed to gauge no further information except that her brother’s indifference towards her prying was so fucking annoying.

She had almost resigned herself to having to find a new plan of attack when, one day, she heard a violent crash from the direction of her brother’s room.

“James?” she called hesitantly.

It was a Friday morning – the next week was to be the last of their holidays – and Dorea and Charlus were both away on business for the day.

There was no reply. “James!” she called louder, closing her book and standing from the floor. At this point she had spent so many days there she had made herself a tiny pillow throne against the wall.

“James, are you okay?” she asked, standing in front of his closed door. She heard another thud, this one louder and followed by a distinctly distressed sound – one that didn’t sound human.

Worried, Lea pulled her wand from the back pocket of her jeans and announced, “James, I’m coming inside, okay?”

The same distressed sound barely registered before she had thrown the bedroom door open only to come face to face with a huge. Fucking Deer.

She screamed.

The animal made aggressive noises of fear in response from where it stood tangled in the sheets of James’s bed, half of the bedpost crushed and broken and the mattress tilting onto the floor, a hole straight through it where one of the deer’s hooves had gone through.

“What the fuck,” Lea was screaming over the deer’s horrified wheezing, “what the fuck what the fuck what the fuck –”

The deer tried to move towards her but the hoof stuck in the mattress made it fall forward, the one leg bending and its head bowing, positioning its antlers dangerously close to the other side of the bedpost.

Suddenly where the deer stood was James, falling to his knees on the half-displaced mattress and sheets.

“James,” she screeched, still standing just outside the door. Her wand was held painfully between the fingers of one hand and the other hand was clutching the door frame desperately. “What the fuck was that.”

“Lea,” he struggled to stand but his knee was caught in the same hole the deer’s front hoof had been a second ago. “It’s not what it looks like.”
“IT LOOKS LIKE YOU’RE A FUCKING DEER.”

He winced. “CAN YOU STOP SHOUTING?”

She frowned at him and stepped into the room. That was a huge fucking deer.

“It’s not a deer, it’s a stag,” James said, scowling as he finally untangled himself from his bed.

Lea took a deep breath and glared at him through her pounding heart. “If you’re about to lie to me, James, do not.”

He stood in front of her, arms crossed over his chest. He said nothing.

“An animagus, huh?” Lea raised an eyebrow. “That’s what you’ve been working on this whole time.”

The only time she’d seen an animagus transformation before was Professor McGonagall’s demonstration in first year but she couldn’t think of what else it could have been. Polyjuice, maybe? But she would swear she had read somewhere that the Polyjuice transformation was nowhere near as smooth as the one James had just undergone.

He nodded once, stiffly. Suddenly, she found herself extremely annoyed that even after the trauma of the moment before, he still had the nerve to not tell her the truth.

Going for shock value, she cocked one hip, putting a hand on it, and twirled her wand between the fingers of her other one. “So, Lupin really is a werewolf then.”

It worked. James almost fell over despite not having even been moving and gaped at her. “How do you know that?”

“What do you expect to achieve by turning into an animal as well?” Lea demanded. “Play catch with the werewolf? Keep him company? Make him feel better because he’s not the only one turning into an animal every now and then?”

James rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“What,” she screamed. “I WAS JOKING. JAMES, you can’t honestly think this is a good idea! Don’t wolves eat deer? What do you think you can really achieve –”

“This isn’t something we decided on a whim,” James interrupted firmly, “we’ve done research. Remus having company during the full moon – having a pack – will help make his transformations much easier on him. Did you know he hurts himself every month? Because he’s alone and trapped and can’t do anything about his instincts to hunt or run? Short of finding a cure or sending him off to a real pack, this was the best solution.”

“Fuck,” she breathed, pressing fingers to her temples. “James…”

“You can’t tell anyone.”

She looked at him incredulously. “Obviously. I don’t suppose you’re about to go register as an underage animagus, James, honestly what the fuck is this? All of you are doing this?”

He nodded, unrelenting.

“Fuck,” she repeated. Closing her eyes for a second, she prayed to whatever gods may or may not exist to give her strength. “Come on, then. What are we going to do about your bed?”
The elation in his smile made her heart clench. She could do nothing except help them or tell someone and risk them getting expelled or having their wand broken for underage sorcery. “Wait, was that your first transformation?”

He nodded, looking even more proud, if possible. “I’m the first.”

“Of course you are,” she said dryly.

Much to both her amusement and disgust, he puffed up his chest with pride. She cleared her throat, looking pointedly at the bed remains.

“I can risk a Reparo,” James said, not sounding like he believed that. “It’ll only be a small one. What’s one Reparo in a wizarding household?”

“Oh,” Lea stepped forward, putting a hand on her brother’s shoulder, “we could ask Twitchy to fix it and swear her to secrecy.”

She patted him patronisingly, silently revelling in the words of gratitude that poured out of him.

Though she had spent the better part of three summers trying to understand what James was hiding, Lea wasn’t so sure she was glad she knew now. She found herself restlessly calculating all the full moons for the next school year and doing as much reading as she could on both animagi and werewolves. She asked James a lot of questions, gratefully discovering they wouldn’t attempt anything until all of them had completed the transformation at least but upset that there could be no timeline for when this would be.

The more reading she did, the angrier she found herself becoming. It was horrifying how little material on werewolves – or the majority of magical creatures – was unbiased and factual. When it came to describing patterns in werewolf behaviour, accounts varied from book to book. Some claimed the human was in full control during the full moon and all killing was conscious and intentional, while others stated everything from there, all the way to the beast taking over wholly and completely. James told her that yes, the beast took over completely, but the descriptions of how the human became bloodthirsty alongside the animal as time went on were completely false. Many writings described the human as just as much to blame as the wolf for any violence but James told her that all Remus got from the transformations was more pain and more scars, both visible and not.

One thing she could take definitively from her research was that Remus Lupin was not to blame for the wolf. If anything, what properly solidified her rage was seeing Lyall Lupin’s name in newspaper clippings and books retelling his merciless hunt for all werewolves. She couldn’t begin to imagine what Remus had gone through.

Her plagued thoughts halted on the day their Hogwarts letters arrived. The whole family was having breakfast in the kitchen when the owl flew in, dropping off the letters that were eagerly overturned.

Two small metal slabs thudded onto the table.

“Prefect?”

“Quidditch Captain?”

Dorea and Charlus both exclaimed in joy, taking turns to hug James and Lea who sat in relative shock for a moment before simultaneously snapping out of it and returning the hugs.
“Oh my gods, Slughorn was right,” Lea said, twisting the badge in her fingers.

“What do you mean, darling?” Dorea asked.

She faltered, “Oh, uh, nothing. He just dropped some hints before I left that this might happen.”

This, along with her six O’s and one E (Herbology was always messy business for her), put Lea in a fantastic mood for the few days that remained.

She happily bickered with James as they ventured into Diagon Alley with their parents, a promise made to both of them that they deserved a gift for their achievements. James, who was oddly sentimental about his Nimbus 1500 although the Nimbus 1700 had recently been released, settled for newer gear and broom servicing kit. Lea, who had already stocked up on her favourite self-inking quills and even stacked up on muggle pens and notebooks, found herself enamoured with a single, rectangular music speaker at one of the stalls. Instead of the speakers being attached to a turntable separately, there was a small version of one attached to the top of the speaker.

“It’s completely magic-friendly,” the salesman was telling her. “It’ll have to be, innit? Gotta shrink the vinyls a little to fit in the turntable. Unparalleled sound quality, no electricity needed, and the whole thing can be shrunk to fit in your pocket for easy travel.”

Lea turned her wide eyes onto her parents. She needn’t have worried about trying to convince them though; her father’s love for music had him mirroring her awe.

“We’ll take two.”

It was that evening that she sat with her father in their ballroom for the first time in many years, testing out the quality of the speakers. Their excitement led from one thing to another and soon enough they were both sat at the piano, gleefully playing duets and singing into the night until Dorea came in to pull them out.
September, 1975

The morning they were to leave for King’s Cross was hectic – somehow, all of them managed to sleep in. Then, in the rush to take their trunks downstairs, Lea and James managed to knock into each other and drop their trunks down the stairs, the contents of both mingling as they spilled out of the cases. They hastily shoved what they could back into the trunks, randomly pushing bits of paper and other little things into their pockets if they would fit.

They made the train just as the whistle blew. As the platform disappeared from sight, the siblings turned to each other.

Almost in unison they gave each other a shove and went their separate ways.

Lea passed Severus and Regulus first, huddled in a compartment with Evan Rosier and Barty Crouch Jr.

She stuck her head in the door for a second. “Hey, you lot. All right?”

“Have you seen the Daily Prophet?” Regulus asked without preamble, holding out the newspaper to her.

“I don’t really read the paper,” she said, glancing down at the open page, blinking at what she saw. “What?”

The article was titled ‘Gathering at Grimmauld’, apparently detailing the events of the dinner that had taken place at the Black household.


“You never cease to amaze me, Severus, how one person can find the energy to be so consistently sullen and dry is beyond…oh.”

She had caught sight of it – a black and white photo in the middle of the page, Regulus standing proud as he did next to Narcissa and Lucius. On his other side, arm wound through his, was Lea, smirking arrogantly at the camera, Daisy close on her other side. She had a vague recollection of a photographer floating around the room on the night, but it hadn’t been much of a thing for her in the moment.

“Is this today’s paper? The party was weeks ago,” Lea said, handing back the paper to Reg.

“Mother had some disagreements about some of the wording of the article.”

“Tell me, Lea,” Evan said, his dark eyes watching her teasingly, “how does it feel to be on the arm of the heir of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black? In the paper, no less. Was this intentional? Shall we let everyone know both of you are off the market?”

“You tell me, Evan,” she replied wryly, “you’re the one who spends half your life following him around like a lost puppy. Merlin knows you’ve spent more time on his arm then I ever will.”

Barty snickered, his thin face gleeful in humour. Lea sighed, looking at Reg again. “Well at least I look the part, right?”
“Oh, yes. Cecilia Potter – ever the Slytherin princess,” Evan agreed, smirking. “I must say, diamonds really are your stone.”

She smiled widely and channelled her mother. “Thank you, darling, how sweet.”

“It’s a good photo,” Regulus said with a wry grin. “But perhaps beware of your idiot brother should he see it.”

She sighed again, displeased. “Yeah. Okay, I’m leaving now, have a good train ride.”

She continued down the carriage until she found Daisy, Laury and Bri. She stepped into the compartment, more hesitant this time, eyeing Bri carefully.

“Hey.”

“We were so worried, Lea!” Laury jumped up to hug her. “We hoped maybe you were with Nikki or something.”

She shook her head. “We were just running late. Only just made it in time.”

Silence fell for a moment, no one quite knowing where to look.

“Fuck, fine,” Bri said, jutting her chin up defiantly. “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean what I said. I was just worried because Daisy had already stopped spending time with us and then you started doing the same but –” she took a breath “– but these holidays were shit without seeing you. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Lea smiled, grateful. “I’m sorry, too. I didn’t want to bum all of you out with my moods so I was keeping my space. It wasn’t that I was leaving you for Nikki, not really, she just always found me.”

“I bet she did,” Bri’s took on a teasing grin. “I hear the two of you really are girlfriends now.”

She groaned as her friends teased her, fluttering their eyelashes and swooning mockingly. “As much as I’d like to hang around and listen to this – I’ve actually got somewhere to be.”

“Running to Nikki already?”

“Not quite,” Lea smirked, reaching into her pocket and feeling for her badge. Smugly, she held it up to her friends.

There was silence. Laury cleared her throat as Bri and Daisy began to snicker. “You made…Gryffindor Quidditch Captain?”

Appalled, Lea looked at what was indeed James’s fucking Quidditch badge.

“Merlin fuck,” she swore. “Excuse me, I have to go hunt down my idiot brother and then attend a prefect’s meeting.”

“Congratulations.” Daisy blew her a kiss as she left. “Now you’re a professional nerd.”

“Fuck off.”

Grateful the direction James had gone when they entered the train was the direction of where the
prefect meeting was to be held, she sped through the train, planting a quick kiss on Nikki’s cheek as she passed her (“PDA in the carriages, Prefect Potter? Well, I never!” the older girl smirked, grin only widening when Lea blushed helplessly and threw up her middle finger in response), promising to return soon. She threw open the door to the compartment and threw the badge at James who was sitting with Sirius, Remus and Peter opposite them.

“James, you have my fucking badge you twat, give it back.”

“What?” he spluttered, automatically catching the badge she had thrown. “No, I don’t?”

“Why don’t you have a fucking look in your pocket before you say you don’t,” she said sweetly, putting her hands on her hips. As he did, she turned to Remus, smiling genuinely. “Hi, Remus. Good summer?”

The boy looked bewildered at being addressed directly but scrounged up a smile nonetheless, “Yeah, not bad. You?”

“Stop being a creep,” James interrupted, throwing her badge at her.

She caught it triumphantly. “Who’s being a creep? What about you, Sirius? Peter? Have a nice summer?”

Peter mumbled a response, still looking uneasy at her sudden appearance, and Sirius narrowed his eyes distrustfully at her. Rolling her own in response, she said, “Don’t look at me like that! I’ve not even done anything! Well,” she bared her teeth slightly, “not yet, anyway.”

“Lea! Why are you so fucking annoying?” James exclaimed.

“Hey! I don’t think anyone who thought sending dozens of mini bird-looking howlers to alternatively compliment and ask out Lily Evans was the way to win her heart can call me annoying. You’re embarrassing, really.”

Seeing him about to argue, she continued over him, “Alas, it’s your lucky day. I’ve got a meeting to get to, anyway.”

“I’ll come with you.” Remus stood, grinning sheepishly at her.

Sirius brightened immediately, smirking at his friend, “Ah, yes, wouldn’t want to keep Moony the Prefect from his rule-enforcing duties, now would we?”


“Shove off.” Remus rolled his eyes, gesturing for Lea to exit first. She did, sticking her tongue out at James over her shoulder in parting.

They walked in silence for a little while, trying to manoeuvre past the students littered through the carriages as carefully as they could. When they neared the compartments at the back and the students hanging around got older, the space cleared out and the air became quieter.

“I saw you in the paper this morning,” Remus said into the hush.

“Did you?” Lea was glad she was in front of Remus and he couldn’t see her expression.

“You looked good. Confident.”

Lea had no idea where he was going but she tried to roll with it as best she could, turning and
throwing a smirk at the tall boy. “I’m a Potter.”

He smirked right back. “I know.”

Taken aback, she looked away, trying to hide her sudden blush.

“I didn’t say anything to James or Sirius,” he added, all teasing gone from his voice.

She paused, hand poised to slide open the door of the prefect’s carriage. The entire situation was a bit of an unknown for Lea. Yes, she knew it was unlikely James would react well to seeing her in the paper with his best friend’s family, especially because said best friend despised said family, but other than his anger, Lea didn’t know what to expect from James.

Remus shrugged. “I didn’t want to ruin their good mood.”

She nodded curtly and pushed the door open.

Lea had gotten little time with Nikki on the train after she had done her rounds of the train with Evan Rosier of all people as her counterpart. He wasn’t a bad person, just a little biased towards his own house and known to taunt those of others. He had taken to complimenting her in every other sentence as well, likely a result of her success at the Black’s dinner party, and she found she was rather partial to having her ego stroked.

She sat with her friends at dinner, basking in the familiarity and comfort of having them all back together, and did her part in leading the first years to the dorms after (it was difficult to stifle her amusement at their general awe and Evan didn’t much help the situation when he started making up myths and stories about the paintings and ghosts – one poor girl looked like she wouldn’t get any sleep that night). Because of this, it was well after dinner that Lea managed to get away to the Hufflepuff dorms.

“You looked so good,” the older girl was telling her softly, “in the paper. The smirk – it’s so sexy.”

Lea covered her face with her hands, groaning but also hiding her smile. They were in Nikki’s bed, facing each other and hidden from the other girls by the closed bed curtains.

“Don’t say that – I’ll get an ego.”

Nikki snickered. “But you look like you belong there. On Regulus’s arm.”

Lea lowered her hands, meeting Nikki’s eyes only to find them soft and amused right on hers. “Reg is a good friend. He asked me to keep him company.”

“I’ve no doubt. You know I’ve always thought of you as an independent spirit.”

The seriousness of Nikki’s gaze gave Lea pause. And then she understood. She took a moment to think about how she felt – if she was upset, or betrayed – but really all she found was acceptance. Like she wasn’t even surprised that this is what Nikki thought they were, even though she’d never considered anything like it before.

“So – you mean – we aren’t exclusive, then?”

Nikki smiled. “I guess, if it had to be given a title. I just – I have no plans of seeing anyone else in the foreseeable future but I don’t want you to feel…stifled.”

There was an automatic defensiveness that arose in Lea at having her feelings decided for her but
she paused for a second.

“Well, I don’t have any plans like that either,” she said slowly, “so it doesn’t really matter then, does it?”

“No,” Nikki agreed. “I guess I just want you to know that it’s an option for you – I don’t – I’m not the type of person to get jealous and offended if you like other people. I’ve – it’s happened to me before. Being stuck in a relationship. I never want to do that to you.”

Lea had a vague understanding of Nikki’s past relationships in that she knew they existed. Other than that, she couldn’t remember details of who or when except a distant memory of Bri referencing some of Nikki’s drama in some obscure memory she had of third year. Not for the first time – really, she needed to do something about this – Lea cursed her inability to pay attention to her surroundings. She didn’t know what to do with the strange mixture of curiosity and anger that bubbled inside her at the thought of Nikki being treated poorly enough to make someone so kind and positive and loving feel insecure enough to be waiting for her reaction so nervously.

Nikki raised a hand and tucked a strand of Lea’s hair behind her ear. Lea’s heart clenched.

She would mark this as a later-problem. For the time being, she needed to wipe that sombre, hesitant look from Nikki’s face.

“What did you decide?” she asked, curling her fingers through Nikki’s. Nikki had done extensive research on careers and – multi-talented as she was – had found herself conflicted between all the possibilities. Lea quietly thought Nikki would thrive if she chose to pursue Quidditch, but Nikki’d become rather invested in the idea of looking into research projects and further education.

“Between Magizoology or Curse-Breaking?”

“I’m thinking Rome, actually.”

“…Rome…isn’t a career?”

“More like I want to go to Rome, maybe study Curse-Breaking, most probably go into history. Archaeology, or something.”

“That sounds amazing,” Lea said honestly.

“I can’t believe this is my last year,” Nikki admitted, closing her eyes.

“It’ll be perfect. I’ll make sure it is.”

She smiled, leaning forward to brush her lips against Lea’s. “I know you will.”

It was just after curfew that Lea returned to her own dorm, lips softly bruised and hair mussed, feeling rather satisfied with herself.

The first week of classes, full of professors detailing just how difficult OWLS were to be, urged Lea to quickly acquire some weed and settle at a table with Severus – the only person whose aura she could stand given its sullen nature.

“I missed studying with you last exams, you know,” Lea was saying, lounging back in her chair, eyes half-lidded and pleasant tingles running through her body. She had a cup of tea and a stack of biscuits on the table in front of her, crumbs all over the Transfiguration notes.
“I can’t say I feel the same.”

She giggled. “No, I wouldn’t expect you to. You’re very clever, Sev, did you know that? You should be proud of yourself.”

He stared at her. “You know, I think I preferred you when you were tense and mean. I don’t really like who you’ve become after all this smoking.”

“You just don’t know what to do with compliments. That’s okay. It’s very British of you.”

He dropped the quill he was holding, pushed his book away from him, and crossed his arms over his chest. Long strands of his straight hair fell forward onto his face, framing his dark eyes as they bore into her.

“The only thing the boys in the dorm can talk about is the blatant message you’re sending with the photo in the Prophet.”

Lea rolled her eyes. “You boys will always be worse gossips than us, I’m never going to understand how it was women that got the stereotype planted onto them.”

“Is it true?” he persisted. “Have you honestly and properly made your decision?”

She crossed her legs under the table, tilted her head. “Decision?”

His gaze remained steady. “Decision.”

“Severus. I still don’t believe there’s a decision to be made.”

“You’re not going to be able to stick to that for much longer,” was his flat reply, eyes darkening as he grew frustrated.

She didn’t really think she could, either. “Is that a threat, Severus?”

“It’s a fact, Lea. Don’t let yourself get caught in a helpless situation that could have been avoided.”

She sighed. “Noted.”

“I don’t know if you quite understand.”

She leaned forward, hands gripping the arms of the chair. “What are you saying, then?”

“I’m saying that others are making their decisions. You’re not going to have much longer to remain unaligned unless you’re ready for people to start acting like you’re the enemy – which is what will be assumed until you prove otherwise.” Severus remained calm in the wake of her increasing agitation and that bothered Lea to no end. When had Severus Snape gained more self-control than her?

“Have you chosen?” she asked, forcibly relaxing once more.

“You know I have.”

“Properly, I mean. I’m assuming you have, given that you’re speaking to me about it.”

He hesitated, but it wasn’t a hesitation filled with contemplation or debate about how much to reveal – it was coy. Proud. Anticipating.
“There have been conversations…with individuals such as Rodolphus Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy.”

Out of the two, Lea knew more of Lucius’s political stance though she could guess where Rodolphus stood. Lucius was clear and blatant about his views on the superiority of wizards compared to muggles, views that aligned rather neatly with those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, though Lucius would never dare get caught saying or doing anything untoward.

There was sympathy, sure, but few outright supporters of the man looking to expand his ranks and further his political views. They were controversial in that they were rather aggressive, and most members of the Wizengamot as well as general members of society were hesitant to speak of it one way or another. The Blacks were known to be sympathisers – Cygnus and Druella Black specifically (parents of one Narcissa Black) – although even they had yet to do more than throw their political weight behind this man and his ideals. Lea wouldn’t be surprised to find Rodolphus Lestrange on the same page, especially with his marriage to Bellatrix.

Her heart sank. “Sev.”

His pride reared its head immediately. Scowling, he snapped, “Don’t speak to me like that.”

“How am I speaking?”

“Like I made a mistake.”

Lea leaned closer, lowering her voice. “I know you don’t really care about blood purity. How could you? You’re infatuated with a muggle-born and you always have been. She’s your best friend.”

“It’s about more than that,” he replied just as lowly, jaw clenching stubbornly.

“I know it is – it’s about power. Power over muggle-borns, half-bloods, and muggles. But it’s also about blood purity.”

He opened his mouth to speak, expression growing colder by the second, but she pushed, “No, Sev, it is. And you don’t need to explain to me about them offering you friendship and accepting you – the same people are my friends and I won’t ask you to stand against them. But consider not standing completely with them either, maybe?”

“You don’t see it,” his voice took on an edge she was familiar with from being witness to a few conversations between him and Lily Evans – something tinged with desperation, “they understand me. I’m good at this – at what they talk about. Dark spells, potions…it comes easily to me.”

She shook her head. “That’s because you’re smart, Sev, I just told you that! I’m not going to ask you to renounce any of your friends, okay? I just worry you’re getting yourself into something more than you’re going to want to deal with.”

“Weorry about yourself,” he said frankly, dismissing her and looking back at his work.

She supposed she should just be glad he didn’t storm off again.

The conversation stuck with her enough to make her bring it up with Regulus.

“Hey, Reg?”
“Mm.”

It was a gloomy Sunday afternoon, and she had roped Laury and Bri into sitting with Regulus to smash out a Transfiguration essay. She was worried about how much reading she still needed to do – if she reached the point where she struggled enough to ask James for help she’d never be able to look him in the eye again.

The three of them (much to Reg’s dismay) had fucked around all morning, and Bri and Laury had just decided to go on a snack run to the kitchens.

“Has Severus told you he plans to join the fucking Death Eaters?”

Maybe it was an exaggeration, but it was well worth the way Regulus seemingly choked on air.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What has he told you?” She had been joking, but the demand in his voice made fear trickle down her spine.

“What has he told you?”

Regulus sent her a pointed look. Lea sighed.

“He’s been giving me ultimatums about picking a side. Says that time’s running out.”

She had heard Severus and believed him, but she didn’t realise how much she doubted the severity of his words until Regulus’s expression hardened, adopted a coldness Lea thought they were past – at least with each other.

Evidently seeing her unease, he cut to the chase. “It wasn’t a good summer. I was right about the party being another induction – Mother had been riding Sirius extra hard, going on about how he had failed the family in his poor sorting and poor friendships and then he went and charmed posters of naked muggle women on his wall permanently and started wearing that insolent leather jacket and made things a hundred times worse. But then she said a chance would be coming to redeem himself. She never said the words but she was talking about talking the mark.”

“That’s a real thing?” Lea said, heart sinking. She had heard rumours – as everyone had – but there was yet to be any confirmation.

“Bella and her husband have taken it,” he said lowly. Her eyes widened and she pressed her fingers to her temple. Merlin and Morgana, she really had been stupid. “Others, too, but none as loudly as them.”

“If she expects Sirius to take the mark, why wasn’t he at the party?”

“Father disagrees with Mother. Says Sirius has no business in things like this, especially when he’s already been an embarrassment. He said more focus should be placed on increasing my presence rather than trying to redeem his character,” he paused, looking at her wryly, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but mother tends to be the more vocal one of that marriage, so when father speaks it’s generally in everyone’s best interest to listen.”

“Regulus.”
“Sirius won’t take the mark.”

“Oh? What gave you that impression? Was it the way he hexed Rowle for mocking that Hufflepuff girl and calling her certain unsavoury names in regards to her blood status? Or is it how he blatantly and wholly hates everything to do with your family and pureblood wizarding culture?”

She regretted her harshness when she saw the genuine alarm on Regulus’s face. Horrified, another realisation came to her. From the way Regulus’s mouth turned down grimly at her suddenly wide eyes, he had reached the same conclusion long ago.

“Fuck, Regulus.” Panicked, she reached across to grip his arm. His smile tried to be reassuring but barely succeeded.

“Don’t worry –”

“Don’t worry?” her voice rose, incredulous. “You’re not – you don’t want to. I know you don’t.”

“Someone will have to.”

“It doesn’t have to be you.”

“It’s just a tattoo, Lea. It doesn’t mean nearly as much to me as it would to him. in fact, this is barely a chore for me at all – these people are my friends, my family, my house, and they treat me well. It’s a fuck-load more than can be said for him.”

Lea could have cried.

Instead, she swallowed the lump in her throat, took a deep breath. She pulled her hand back, leaning on the rear legs of her chair, and watched him carefully. “But you don’t want to,” she repeated.

“I don’t not want to, either.”

The effects of the summer were evident once Lea was looking for them. It was in the way Sirius taunted and teased the boys in her year, the way he was the first to draw his wand on the boys in the year above. He was quicker to temper than usual, goading James into starting fights and causing chaos more often than usual – to the point where he wasn’t all that concerned with not getting caught as long as his goal was achieved. For his part, James seemed to not only feed off Sirius’s urges to antagonise but was more than willing to support him so completely in his threats that Lea had little doubt he knew exactly what Sirius had gone through.

It was in looking for these shifts that she began to notice Remus’s habits as well. He did miss classes at the same time every month, as Severus had once told her, and was host to more than a few scars though they were only ever visible by the edges of his sleeves and collars. She similarly recognised the way James, Sirius, and Peter seemed to close ranks around Remus during these times – always making sure he was seated between two of them in class, always making sure he was never caught if he dozed during lectures,

It was embarrassing, really, that she didn’t think Remus’s actions were odd earlier. Another way in which she had been blind to the truth of what was happening around her.

The depth of her ignorance only proved to worsen.

“Did you hear?” Nikki whispered, slipping into a seat, wide eyes jumping frantically from girl to
Lea was with Daisy, Bri, and Laury, sat quietly in the library. The room was almost completely empty given it was a Sunday – more than that, the Sunday before the first Quidditch game of the season – and the weather was beautiful, driving majority of the students onto the grounds where a few mock games of Quidditch were taking place. The four girls were cramming for a History of Magic test they had the next day because they’d previously made the decision to attend a gathering first in Hufflepuff on Friday, and then in Slytherin the next day. If the truth were to be told, they were really both one event that had blurred together. Lea was still a little drunk.

“Don’t want to hear anything,” Bri muttered. She was still a little hungover.

“James and Sirius attacked Snape again.”

“What?” Lea exclaimed, only to hear a loud ‘shh’ from another aisle.

“Hung him in the air from his legs in front of everyone,” she continued. “Evans intervened and – get this – Snape called her a mudblood.”

“Merlin, Severus,” Daisy breathed, shaking her head. “The idiot knows not to say these things in public.”

“Daisy, I don’t think him saying it in public is quite the problem here,” Laury said quietly.

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

“James wouldn’t have been pleased to hear that,” Lea murmured, looking desperately out of the nearest window even though she knew they weren’t there.

Nikki nodded. “Snape went on about how he didn’t need help from someone like her and your brother was demanding he apologise but then Evans said she didn’t need his help because he was no better than Snape and then she stormed off and James followed her but Snape was about to curse his back so Sirius knocked him down again except Professor Morgan showed up just at that moment and intervened. Detentions all around.”

“Trust Morgan to show up at the right time,” Bri snickered.

“She really is amazing,” Nikki agreed dreamily.

Professor Morgan was the new Defence teacher that year and her long, warm blonde hair and clear green eyes had taken the students by their sex drives and placed her straight in their dreams. It was only worsened by her engaging nature and extensive knowledge about her subject which made her a terrifyingly competent teacher.

“I have to say something,” Lea decided.

“Lea, I don’t know if you should really get involved,” Bri disagreed, “It’s not your business and Severus can handle himself. Or rather, he won’t take kindly to you trying to help him and neither will your brother. There’s too much of a chance you won’t succeed at all.”

“Lovely. But isn’t that the problem? That not enough people are saying anything to James and Sirius? Not trying hard enough? Like, I get that Sev isn’t always the most likeable or kind person but he doesn’t deserve this.”

“Talk to them if you want, Lea,” Nikki reached across the table to put a hand on Lea’s, “but don’t
forget that Snape isn’t innocent. Do you remember that time your brother and his friends were puking up mud for days? Or even that time Black’s robes caught on fire in the Great Hall?”

“Not to mention his constant degradation of their characters,” Daisy added. “Which, in my opinion, is more than half of the reason the other boys in our house hate them so much – Sev’s been turning them against that lot and taking advantage of the ruckus they cause all the time.”

Lea herself had been on the receiving end of Severus’s anti-James lectures more than once and was similarly guilty of never proving him wrong. She had just always felt he was allowed an angry vent or two given the shit James put him through.

“Boys are stupid,” Lea concluded. “No one even knows what they’re fighting over, it’s just always been like this.”

“It’s just fundamental differences in character,” Bri said dismissively, “and they don’t know how to handle it passive aggressively like rational people because yes, boys are stupid.”

Severus looked more sullen than usual that night in the Common Room where he entered just before curfew, and retreated quickly to his dorm after aggressively ignoring Lea’s attempts to speak to him.

“Don’t take it personally,” Evan Rosier said to her as she watched him rush up the stairs. “He went to apologise to Evans, it must not have gone well.”

She tilted her head speculatively. “What do you know about this?”

She and Evan had become friendlier lately, given that they were required to undertake prefect rounds together frequently, and for all his arrogance she found him not at all unpleasant but rather chivalrous instead.

“Other than his rather public mistake earlier today? The same as everyone else.”

She narrowed her eyes. “What do you think of it then?”

He smiled widely. “There you go.” He cleared his throat, ever the drama queen, and said, “I think he’s finally pushed his pet Gryffindor as far as she’ll go. Can’t have helped that it happened so publicly – she’ll be less likely to forgive him after such a loud humiliation – and she’s already given him some grief about his…magical inclinations.”

He lowered his voice, “Good riddance, if you ask me. He’ll be better off without her trying to get him to change his mind all the time. Sev’s destined to do great things and all she’s been doing is making him feel shit. He’ll find a better girl. Someone to support him, like it’s meant to be.”

Unwittingly amused, she replied, “And how is meant to be, exactly?”

Much to her delight, he blushed, looking towards the couches in front of the fireplace. “You know what I mean. Relationships are supposed to be supportive and encouraging. Equal.”

She followed his gaze, finding none other than Brianna lying on the couch by herself, reading through one of those science fiction novels she loved.

She almost squealed. “Oh, I know what you mean now.”

He looked back at her, eyes wide when he saw the grin on her face. “What – no. What’s that look?
What are you planning?"

“Never you mind, darling,” she laughed, patted him on the head and delighting at the way his eyes narrowed. “Have a lovely evening now.” She sobered. “Will you check on Sev?”

Softening as well, he nodded. With a parting smile, she went over to Bri and sat when she lifted her legs. Lowering them over Lea’s lap, she put down the book. “Update?”

“Got ignored. Unsurprising. Still rude. But the real news – Evan is into you!”

Bri raised an eyebrow.

“Brianna. This is not the time to play coy. In the moments since I’ve discovered this information I’ve analysed the successfulness of your relationship and it will work!”

“No, no, no, no,” she shook her head, “listen to me. He’s so pretty and – as far as I know – very nice. At least consider it? Get a little closer? You’ve worked with him in class before, right?”

“He was the sole reason I got full marks on that Potions essay that one time,” she said thoughtfully.

“See? Clever, too.”

“I’ll consider it.”

Lea did squeal this time, jumping on top of her friend and cuddling her tightly. “You’re gonna get laid,” she sing-songed.

“Oh, fuck off, Le.”
Chapter Ten

Bri did get laid. Her and Evan’s relationship was hot and fast once Evan realised Bri was showing even the tiniest bit of interest in him and he pulled out all the stops to woo her – bought her gifts, took her to Hogsmeade, held doors open for her. More notably, he made a point to make her laugh and Lea could tell it was really his dry, dark sense of humour that really got Bri hooked.

With them paired off, Daisy milking the last days of her relationship with Tommy (she had found herself quite bored with him after the summer but was afraid of losing something good), Laury back with the boy whose name NONE OF THEM COULD REMEMBER, and Lea dividing her time neatly between being stressed and releasing stress, the term progressed nicely.

Evan had become surprisingly soppy about his new girlfriend and Lea, for all that she loved singing the praises of her friends, found that no, she really didn’t care about elegant curl of Brianna’s honey-brown hair as it splayed across a pillow after an extended period of steamy lovemaking, and her irritation almost reached a point where she considered suggesting they take rounds individually. If she phrased it right, he’d probably agree given that it would mean more time to spend in Bri’s arms.

The advantage of this relationship, however, was that they chose to sit together in nearly every class so they could retain physical contact at all times and that meant Lea had a valid excuse to sit next to Severus given he was also short a desk buddy.

She didn’t bother trying to bring up the events or anything, uninterested in being told to fuck off for the billionth time, but rather decided to just act as a supportive presence. It wasn’t completely selfless, of course, and she thrived off his sullen energy because it also led to some of the most productive classes she’d ever had the pleasure of attending. This was particularly true for Defence Against the Dark Arts because while she’d always been a competent dueller, Severus was quite a bit more than just competent, and she not only improved in anticipating her opponent’s movements, but also picked up a few more jinxes along the way.

Another perk of this was the praise.

“Amazing, Miss Potter!” Professor Morgan exclaimed. “Excellent defence! And Mr Snape, beautiful attack! Did everyone see how Severus switched to defensive immediately when he realised Lea was going to successfully shield herself? Brilliant!”

Lea was still basking in the compliment when class ended, strolling dreamily out of the classroom and waving merrily to Professor Morgan as she went.

“Aren’t you in a relationship with the Hufflepuff girl?” Severus asked pointedly. “Doesn’t she get upset at this blatant mooning over a professor?”

She scowled at him. “No, Severus, she doesn’t. Because objectively thinking someone is attractive is far from cheating and we don’t stifle each other. Besides, we’re really rather more casual in general – she wouldn’t care even if was more than just admiration.”

“How progressive,” came the dry reply.

She smiled wickedly. “Besides, she feels the same way about Professor Morgan, you know. We’ve gotten each other off by telling each other what we’d do to her.”

The horrified expression on Severus’s face would give her strength for days to come.
His reprimanding lecture continued as they headed to the Great Hall for lunch, Lea’s laughter nearing hysterics as his exasperation grew.

They had almost entered the room, her smile hidden behind her hand and shoulders shaking as Severus complained: “It’s just ridiculous! How can you expect someone to go sit and have a meal after saying nonsense like that – it’s not even the act itself, it’s that it’s you –”

They stopped suddenly, path obstructed. Lea’s smile fell and Sev’s wand was in his hand before she registered his movement.

“Potter,” Sirius Black said coldly, eyes narrowed on Severus. “A word.”

Peter was by his side, half a step behind, but the other two were nowhere to be seen.

“If you think –”

“Severus,” Lea spoke over his sneer, giving him a slight nudge towards the Hall. “I’ll meet you in a second. Keep Daisy away from the tea or she’ll inhale the whole fucking pot.”

He didn’t look like he was going to move and as always, Sirius chose that moment to say, “Yeah, Snivellus, go follow your orders like the little bitch –”

She grabbed Sev’s arm and pulled him down firmly so she could quietly say, “This isn’t the fucking time, you can’t afford to get into more trouble right now.”

With that, she shoved him more firmly and gratefully watched as he threw a final glare at the sneering pair before stomping into the Great Hall furiously.

She turned back to the boys expectantly.

“Let’s go somewhere a little more private,” Sirius suggested, no warmer than he had been with Severus but perhaps a touch less aggressive.

“Why?”

“You’ll find out when we’re there,” Peter said easily, sounding completely calm though his eyes were sharply sifting through the students walking past them.

Her curiosity grew.

“Fine.” She led them back down the Entrance Hall and into the first alcove, dimly lit but out of obvious view from the corridor unless someone took the effort to look inside. Once there, Sirius and Peter shared a brief glance before casting silencing charms.

“This is a lot of build up,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “I hope this is good.”

“We’ve heard –” Sirius began.

“James finally said,” Peter corrected.

“– that you know about Remus’s affliction.”

“Oh.” Lea didn’t know why, but this hadn’t at all been what she thought they were going to say. They were into the first week of October – she figured if they were going to do something about her knowledge it would have been done by now.
“Yeah, oh,” Sirius said. “Pete and I just wanted to make sure you understood what would happen if you were to share this information with anyone.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “If I were so inclined, don’t you think I would have done it by now? I’ve known for a long time.”

“Right,” Peter said, nodding. “It’s just that – well, Remus means a lot to us, you know? And if he were to be exposed for something that isn’t even his fault, by the way, things could become very difficult for him. Like a life or death type of difficult.”

“If that were to happen,” Lea only noticed then that Sirius had his wand in his hand, “we would make sure whatever difficulties he’d endure would be replicated on you tenfold.”

She understood objectively that these were just two boys trying to protect their friends and wouldn’t she do the same for hers? Yes, probably. On top of that, it was severely unlikely they would actually follow through with any threat either, but in that moment, fresh off the near incident with Severus and faced with the sharp, arrogant face of Sirius Black, accented with fierce eyes and an even fiercer smile, full of coldness and hatred whether for her or the situation, she did not know – she was angry.

“How dare you threaten me,” she said lowly, taking a step closer to him. Peter could be seen adopting a surprised expression out of the corner of her eye and though she didn’t get so much as a flinch from Sirius, she accepted Peter’s shock with glee.

“It’s not a threat,” Sirius snapped back, just as dangerously, “It’s a fact. Keep the information to yourself and you’ll have no problem with us.”

She smiled humourlessly. “Unfortunately, I don’t see that happening any more than I see you managing to lay a finger on me.”

He smiled back. “Fortunately, I have enough vision to see both.”

“Come on, Lea,” Peter said pleadingly. “Just say you won’t tell anyone and we’ll be good.”

“But that’s not all you’re saying, is it? You’re talking about what you’ll do to me if I don’t keep it to myself.”

“I’m glad you’re following,” Sirius intoned.

“That’s a different fucking game.” She crossed her arms over her chest and met Sirius’s eyes pointedly. “The thing is: I don’t really think you’d believe me if I told you I have no interest in exposing Remus and making his life a living hell because I’m just not an evil person, and the way you’ve threatened me before I’ve even done anything sends a very particular message about how you see me. I’m not going to spend my time trying to convince you otherwise, since you’ve already made up your mind.”

She took another step forward, pushed Sirius back a step. “Do not threaten me again. I’m not the one you have an issue with.”

“You’re exactly who I have an issue with,” he hissed back. “You and your type – snakes, bigots, and social climbers. James should never have trusted you to keep Remus’s secret!”

Lea’s heart suddenly throbbed in pain, anger turning into rage and hurt. She took a step back. “Well, I know it,” she said as dismissively as she could manage, “and you’re just going to have to deal with it.”
She left, exiting the muted bubble the boys had created and moving swiftly towards the Great Hall. Blinking furiously as she took her seat next to Laury, she struggled to tamp down on her hurt. What did it matter what he thought of her? Why was she being so sensitive?

“Are you all right?” Laury asked, touching her arm gently.

Lea took a deep breath, forcing a smile and a nod. She was perfectly fine.

Or she would be, after the extended bitching session she had with Nikki that evening in her dorm.

“It sounds like another case of people somehow assuming you’re a master manipulator,” Nikki said, lying on her side and watching Lea with gentle amusement. “And you say you don’t even know what he was talking about?”

She shook her head. “He was just going on about some secret I apparently knew! Ridiculous, honestly.”

“I’m sorry he spoke to you like that, love.”

“It’s fine,” she said, smiling as Nikki rolled over a little more so she was half on top of Lea and cuddling into her side. “I mean, I just want to understand how people get this impression of me? What part of my personality is giving off this vibe? I’m just trying to pass my classes during business hours and get drunk on the weekends, you know?”

Nikki kissed the side of her neck. “I know.”

Lea giggled, the touch on her neck sending soft shivers through her. “You’re just agreeing with me to get me out of my clothes.”

“I’m agreeing with you because I agree with you,” Nikki mumbled against her skin. “If that gets you naked then that’s a pleasant side effect.”

She did get her naked, and Lea returned to her own dorm feeling sated enough to push any thoughts of mean boys from her mind as she fell asleep.

Her peace didn’t last, however, and she woke in such a poor mood that Laury took one look at her and handed her a necklace with a crystal dangling in the centre to wear “for positivity”. Things improved slightly in that morning’s double Potions, at least until she noticed Severus glancing longingly every few minutes at Lily Evans’ table across the room.

“Am I not engaging enough, Severus?” she snapped finally.

“Oh, shit,” Bri’s voice came from behind her.

Sev looked at her in surprise. “What?”

“Oh, it’s just that you keep pining after Evans every two seconds and I was wondering if you needed me to be more engaging?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he said incredulously.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she hissed back. “Can’t you see she’s not interested in being your friend anymore? Have a little self-respect and move on.”

Coldly, he replied, “I don’t see how that’s any of your business – I never took you as someone
desperate for attention but I suppose given your family it’s not really a surprise.”

This irritated her more. “Why is it always about James? Why is it so impossible for anyone to just see me without bringing that douchebag into it?”

“When you act like this it’s impossible to see anything but the similarities,” he sneered back. “You need to sort out whatever the fuck is wrong with you and stop taking it out on me.”

“So that’s it, then? You’ve decided I’m the enemy too? Even though I’ve spent all this time trying to help you?”

“I never asked for your help. Especially when you’re acting like this.”

“Fine,” she spat, packing up her books and shoving them into her bag. “I’ll just stay out of your way, then.”

“Lea –” Bri began, reaching a hand out to Lea.

“Forget it.” She brushed past her. She’d made it out the door before Slughorn even registered she’d moved and made a beeline for her dorm, wanting nothing more than to scream her frustrations into her pillow and have a nice cry.

And cry she did, the post-tears exhaustion running so deep it bogged her down for days after.

For the first time since they’d been invited, she refused to hang out with the Hufflepuffs that Friday and resolutely huddled in her dorm only to find out Slytherin were having their own party downstairs, and the sound of laughter was so persistent she tried everything from closing all the windows, putting out all the lights, and eventually settling on playing her own music to stifle it.

She was just so angry. How could people think so little of her? Had she really been so terrible that everyone assumed she was some untrustworthy and manipulative person? That she was a bigot? But whatever. Why bother trying to be careful about other people’s feelings and situations when they had already decided who she was anyway? Obviously, it was exhausting having to live up to the malevolent image others had of her, but if this is what they thought of her, then this is what she should be, right? At least then they could neatly place her in their evil Slytherin boxes and move on with their lives. But no.

When faced with a sullen, moody, and quiet Lea, people were even more weary of her than before – avoiding her eye in class, not starting conversation, and even moving out of her way in the hall. She could say it hurt, but it was rather nice to not have to engage in small talk for a change.

Her poor mood fell away gradually with time, chipped away piece by piece by the increasing workload that came attached to OWL students. On top of that, her prefect duties, Slug Club responsibilities (she’d been feeling self-destructive enough to agree and found she rather liked pretending to be an adult and forging relationships with notable members of society), re-kindled study sessions with Severus, and occasional participation in Charms Club, left her rather exhausted most of the time. She happily teetered on the edge of exhaustion, the happiness being helped along by the occasional Calming Draught and frequent spliff. Lea was grateful that whatever stupid emotions had been following her around were forced to the side by sheer inability to do anything except focus on the present.

It didn’t last, as these things rarely did.

First, it was little things that began to slip – she stubbed her toe on the leg of her bed, she took the wrong books to class, she accidently spilled tea down her shirt. All of this, while infuriating in their
own way, was still bearable.

It was when she forgot the Transfiguration essay that was due on Tuesday, and the Arithmancy questions that were due on Wednesday, and then the reading for Charms on the Thursday that she began her Friday with weariness so deep it could be physically seen as she slouched at the Slytherin Table.

“Lea,” Laury said in that soft way of hers, “It’s not even close to exams, please don’t be feeling this way just yet. What does it matter that you forgot a little homework? No harm done, you’ll catch up over the weekend no problem.”

“I know.” Lea kept her eyes on her toast, steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the day for as long as she could.

“Okay…what’s bothering you, then?”

“I’m just tired, Laury.”

“You haven’t been sleeping well?” She placed a hand on one of Lea’s in concern. “Do you want to go see Madam Pomfrey? I’ll come with you –”

Lea blinked. “Laury, love, I’ll be fine. Just one more day until the weekend, right? And I have a free period this afternoon, so I’ll be great.”

It was a free period she knew Severus shared with her, given neither of them took Divination anymore (thank Merlin), but he was nowhere to be seen at lunch and she couldn’t help but nurse a little heartbreak as she travelled through the empty halls of the castle, trying to figure out what to do given her complete apathy regarding studies. The castle was beautiful in the sunlight, warmth pouring through every window freely and staving away the chilly air she knew hovered just outside. It was almost enough to make her feel better, and she settled for the peace it brought, however momentary.

And momentary it was.

She could never pinpoint what it was exactly that drove her to jump in between James and Sirius’s wands and Severus but that is what she did, without hesitation and without regret, all ideas of tranquillity vanishing.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she hissed at them.

“Stay out of this, Lea,” James spat, eyes still on Severus behind her.

“I don’t need your help,” came Sev’s bitter protest.

She barely looked at him. “Shut up and get out of here, Sev.”

“Yeah, Snivellus, listen to the girl,” Sirius taunted.

“You,” Lea drew her wand on him, fuming, “keep your mouth shut.”

Hearing Severus moving behind her, she hoped and prayed he was leaving and not doing something stupid.

“You didn’t hear what he called Lily,” James growled at her. “He deserves –”

“It is not for you to decide what he may or may not deserve,” Lea turned her wand onto her
“I will fight you, James, if you don’t back the fuck down right now.”

Almost immediately, her brother lowered his wand, although his glare was relentless. Sirius didn’t move. Lea raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’ll fight you too, Black, don’t think I won’t.”

“You can try,” he goaded. “You lot walk around here like you’re so entitled –”

Lea saw red, lowering her wand and stepping forward so his was almost touching her chest. “We walk around like we’re entitled?” she asked him quietly. “We do? Don’t you dare act like the victim in this – you give just as much as you take, if not more.”

“Lea,” James started, moving as if to separate the two of them.

Sirius moved his arm forwards that tiny bit, pressing the tip of his wand against her collarbone. “Sirius,” James said desperately.

Just as he placed a hand on Sirius’s shoulder, an irritatingly familiar voice spoke from behind her. “Well, isn’t this a party?” Regulus drawled, strolling forward, twirling his wand in circles between his fingers.

Furiously, Lea broke away from her standoff with Sirius and turned to him. “You’re not invited,” she spat out, shoving him around and pushing him the opposite direction before following, shooting one last glare at the pair behind her. “Merlin fuck, Regulus, what do you think you’re doing?”

The anger in the pointed look he shot her surprised her enough to shut up at least until they rounded the corner. As they turned out of the corridor, he spun to face her. “What do you think you’re doing?” he hissed at her. “That is not your fight.”

“The fuck it isn’t,” she shot back. “Who else can fight it, if not me? Literally, who the fuck else, Reg? It’s definitely not you.”

He sobered slightly at her words and she pushed a little further. “Never do that again, Reg. It doesn’t mean nearly the same thing as me doing it.”

And she meant it. If what Regulus had told her about the state of his family life was true – and she knew it was – there was little to no chance Sirius and James would miss an opportunity to take out their anger on him. At least with her, she didn’t think James’s hatred for Severus was strong enough for him to draw his wand on her and if he wasn’t ready for it, she didn’t think he would let Sirius truly harm her either.

He sighed, relenting. “How are you always thinking like this?”

“This was a decision I made a long time ago and it’s about time I acted on it,” she informed him wryly. “But you should try it sometime. Thinking, I mean.”

“Hilarious.” He watched her with narrowed eyes for a moment longer before sighing and taking a step back, gesturing for her to lead the way. She took a second to shake off the adrenaline as best she could, breathing deeply and forcing a smile before moving forward.

“What are you doing out of class, anyway?”

“I have history right now and the moment Binns started lecturing I knew he was just going to
regurgitate the readings, so I mumbled something about a bathroom and left. Happened to run into Severus on the way out – decided to follow up on his sneering about that ‘interfering Potter bitch’ and how he ‘didn’t need her help’ and how she’s ‘just as bad as the Gryffindork twats’.”

“He called me a bitch? Boo, Severus. At least have the balls to say it to my face.”

“You know he’d never dare.”

“Well, I should hope not. I’d hate to have to finish what he starts, and I’ve had enough drama in my life these past few weeks, thanks ever so…”

As they turned out of the corridor, neither of them noticed the two boys listening just around the corner.

It was a Saturday.

Nikki was wearing this dress – a skin tight, long-sleeved, short little thing – and it put Lea straight in the mood, whatever hesitations she had felt about joining the celebratory party in the Slytherin Common Room post Quidditch victory evaporated. And then when she smiled, well, Lea happily threw herself into the revelries and gleefully danced the night away.

The celebration lasted well into the next morning, as things went in Slytherin, and the brilliant idea of meeting the sunrise head on was somehow passed through the attendees, resulting in Lea, Nikki, the entire Slytherin Quidditch team, and majority of the fifth, sixth, and seventh years from the house – as well as the odd Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw – scattered leisurely on a few benches in the Quidditch stands as the sun rose to greet them.

“This is some proper gay shit,” Nikki murmured into Lea’s hair. The older girl had an arm thrown around her shoulders and her eyes on the brightening sky.

“You’re the one who’s all cuddly on me, Nik,” Lea replied, her own eyes closed as the sun slowly warmed her face. There had been some messy warming charms thrown about as the group had left the castle, and Lea herself had thrown her school robe over the short black skirt and tight pink top she’d been wearing, but nothing could compare to the warmth of the sun.

“Well excuse a girl for wanting a fucking cuddle after a couple orgasms, Lea,” she teased. Lea snickered, fondly remembering their brief retreat a few hours ago to achieve said orgasms. Maybe it was the weed or the alcohol or the aforementioned orgasms, but Lea felt like the stress of the past week was eons ago.

Abruptly, whoops sounded from a group of boys to their right.

“SLYTHERIN VICTORY,” Theo Nott, the sixth-year prefect, was shouting, the others echoing him vivaciously. Regulus, who had caught the snitch for them, was laughing along with them. He had gotten just as drunk as the rest of them and the sight of him enjoying himself had made Lea smile, all thoughts of toxic brothers falling away.

“It’s always been true, you know. What they say about Slytherins,” Nikki yawned, half her words coming out muffled.

“What?”

“That you’re all party animals.”
“Duh.”

“I obviously wasn’t talking about you, silly. You’ve always been a slut for a dance,” she paused, arm tightening around Lea, “Although, I am glad you decided to stay out this time.”

Lea turned her head, pressing her lips to Nikki’s. “So am I.”

“Oh!” Bri shouted from a few seats away. “Breakfast’s on!”

“Fuck yes,” Lea groaned. “I didn’t want to say anything but I’ve been thinking about bacon for at least three hours.”

They migrated as a group to the Great Hall, settling gleefully right in the middle of their table and helping themselves to piles and piles of beautiful, greasy breakfast foods. Lea savoured her long-awaited rashers of bacon, Nikki on one side and Bri on the other, as other students trickled into the room and shot curious glances at the boisterous group of Slytherins.

“I know this may be a weird time to say it,” Nikki said, lowering her voice and leaning into Lea, “but I am so into you and I’m so worried about leaving.”

The words took a minute to register but when they did, Lea smiled at her softly, placing an arm around Nikki’s shoulders and pulling her even closer. “I’m so into you too and I know I can’t just tell you to stop worrying but there is not a single tiny bit of doubt in my mind that you will be nothing but successful no matter what you choose to do, okay?”

Nikki turned her head so her mouth was near Lea’s ear. “It’s just. I’m going to leave. The country, I mean. And I won’t know anyone there and I know this is what I want but I’m still so scared and it’s still so far away! And, like, if I’m this nervous now I’m so afraid that it’s going to be ten times worse the closer it gets –”

Lea wrapped her arms more securely around Nikki and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You can do nothing except ride this wave right now and I promise – I can really, really promise – that it will pass and you will persevere and you are never alone. Never.”

“Hey, Potter, you mind easing up on the PDA? Some of us are trying to eat.”

Lea disentangled from Nikki to look at none other than Severus Snape, finally emerged from the depths of the dungeons after weeks of silence and cold stares from across classrooms.

“Look who’s decided to finally show his face!” Evan Rosier exclaimed from Bri’s other side.

“Yes, how amazing,” Bri drawled. “Finally decided to stop having a sulk?”

“Oh, don’t try to put him in a box, Bri,” Lea said, running a hand through Nikki’s hair as she held Severus’s dark eyes challengingly, “he can still sulk in public just as much as he does in his room.”

“Very funny.” He managed to squeeze into a seat opposite them and looking rather happy, if you asked Lea, despite the teasing that would have usually put him on the defensive at least a little bit.

There was a tiny bubble of silence around them as everyone waited for Severus to say something further. He didn’t.

Lea and Bri shared a suspicious glance.

“So,” Lea started, “I hate to look a gift horse in the mouth but what the fuck’s got you so chirpy?”
“Oh, nothing.” The lightness of his tone was definitely enough to solidify her suspicion if there was any doubt before.

“Don’t make me push,” she added warningly when he said no more.

Severus shrugged. “I have just a new perspective on life, you know? A new goal. Ambition. I’m really starting to see things in a new light.”

Silence.

“Are you high?” Bri asked. She glanced suspiciously around the table at their surrounding housemates, “Who slipped Sulky Sev a brownie?”

“Well, I owe whoever it was a drink,” Evan announced, raising his cup that definitely didn’t contain pumpkin juice.

Severus laughed, causing multiple alarmed expressions to turn his way. “No, really! I just feel like I have purpose.”

Silence.

“Well, fuck,” Lea said, raising her own glass of whisky. “To Sev’s new purpose!”

Cheers erupted around her, half of them completely unaware of what was being celebrated but happy enough to support the festivities.

“What is the meaning of all this ruckus?” Professor McGonagall approached their table, followed closely by Professor Flitwick.

“Sorry, Professor,” Theo Nott spoke up as the snickers continued, putting on a charming smile for the teacher. “Just a joke.”

“Oh?” McGonagall’s lip curled, decidedly not amused. “Was it also a joke when a group of students were discovered frolicking in the Quidditch stands at unseemly hours of the morning when they are most certainly not permitted to do so?”

“Were they?” Theo gasped, adopting a rather convincing expression of surprise. “How horrible! To disregard the rules in such a manner,” he shook his head, disappointed, “I simply can’t fathom it.”

Lea firmly believed they could have escaped any consequences with Theo’s performance if not for the giggles that erupted once more, two of the older boys from the Quidditch team shoving each other teasingly as they mocked each other’s ‘frolicking’.

The professor crossed her arms over her chest. “Quite.” She raised her voice. “All of you are to return to your Common Room where you are to remain for the rest of the day.”

Protests rose.

“But professor!” John Wilkes whined.

“Be grateful you are receiving no further punishment,” she said firmly, narrowing her eyes at the boy. “Though there is no doubt in my mind that further rules have been broken. Accept your punishment and return to your dormitories now. If you leave, we will know.”

Some students rose immediately, grumbling as they did so. Lea looked longingly at the food still on her plate.
“She can’t know exactly who it was,” Bri whispered to Lea. “As long as some people leave, we can probably stay, you know.”

Lea looked at her friend dubiously before gesturing pointedly at her attire and general state of dishevel.

“Indeed, Miss Potter,” Professor McGonagall said dryly. “And please do refrain from instigating toasts in the Great Hall in the future.”

She sighed, but stood, deciding to take her plate with her. They couldn’t deny her food.

“Oh, sorry, Professor.” She gave the teacher a wide, charming smile. “Couldn’t help but celebrate Severus coming out of a sulk with a new purpose and everything – it’s a proper miracle.”

“Hey,” Sev protested weakly, but he was already getting swept up by his housemates who were leading the charge back to the Common Room.

“As that may be, we cannot allow for such behaviour in the Great Hall,” McGonagall replied, though Lea could swear she could see a tiny smile. She could swear.

“Oi, Le, pick me up some toast, would you, babe?” Daisy called from the end of the table near the exit, already half out of the room.

Lea frowned. “Get your own fuckin’ toast, Dais, I’m busy!”

Nikki nudged her sharply and Lea floundered, eyes widening, as she remembered who was stood in front of her. “Sorry, Professors!”

McGonagall’s mouth definitely twitched that time. “Go back to your dorm, Potter. I expect to see you bright an early tomorrow morning and no sooner.”

“Absolutely.” Lea nodded, smiling widely at both the teachers in front of her and reaching for Nikki’s hand while she balanced the plate in her other.

“That’s returning to your own dorms, Miss Lee,” Professor Flitwick called as they began.

“Aww, Professor Flitwick,” Nikki whined, winding an arm through Lea’s more firmly.

Bri laughed from behind them. “Best fucking decision, I won’t be able to deal with the two of you when the hangover kicks in, honestly.”

“Oh, fuck right off, Brianna,” Lea replied, looking over her shoulder and narrowing her eyes at Bri and Evan who had an arm around her as they walked. “Look at the two of you – if I get a peek at Evan’s dick one more time today I’m hexing it the fuck off no matter how much the two of you cry about it.”

“Hey, I never said anything!” he protested weakly.

“Oi, I’ve copped a look at your balls at least four times in the last twelve hours do not even start with me.”

“They’re kind of pretty, aren’t they?” Bri mused.

“Most definitely not!” Lea disagreed vehemently.

Lea bid Nikki farewell in the dungeons, giving her a parting kiss, a firm promise to discuss her
worries soon, and a stern order to try and relax as best she could.

She didn’t get a chance to fulfil her promise anytime soon – Nikki had commitments every evening during the week and whatever time she could spare she needed to get homework done or sleep. They ate meals together, Lea making sure to radiate positivity as best she could and give Nikki’s lots of hugs, and held on until the weekend only to find out the seventh year Hufflepuffs had planned a full weekend retreat in an unknown location within the castle to rejuvenate.

It was probably for the best, Lea thought as the next Saturday rolled around, seeing as the girls in her dorm were facing their own crisis.

“I did it,” Daisy announced, bursting through the door to their room. It was barely eleven in the morning and the rest of them had gotten back into their pyjamas after breakfast, collectively deciding to ignore the gloom of the rain falling outside their window. Lea was sitting up in her bed, flipping through her Charms textbook (but really going over theories as to what could have cause Severus’s recent good mood – he was borderline *giddy* these days), Laury was sitting by their window, penning a letter to her parents, and Bri was almost completely hidden in her bed.

“Did what?” Bri intoned, head half covered by her quilt.

“Dumped Tommy,” she replied airily, flipping her long, dark hair over her shoulder. She hadn’t returned to the dorm the night before and was still wearing the floral dress she’d worn to Hufflepuff yesterday. If Lea didn’t know to look for the signs – the slight puffiness around her electric blue eyes, the wrinkles in the skirt of her dress, the slight tremor in her hands – she would have thought Daisy was as composed as ever.

As it was, Bri, Laury, and Lea were all on their feet immediately, encompassing Daisy in a tight hug.

“My sweetheart,” Lea said sadly, rubbing a hand soothingly across her friends back as they all retreated slightly.

“What happened?” Laury asked, tugging on Daisy’s hand and leading her to sit on Lea’s bed.

“I just,” Daisy looked skyward, blinking furiously, “I just wasn’t expecting him to get so upset.”

“Upset?” Bri frowned. “Did he get angry?”

“No, no.” She rubbed her eyes, smudging her mascara rather aggressively. “He...he cried. And it just. It made me feel so horrible and, like, why am I doing this anyway? Because I’m bored? It just doesn’t seem worth it.”

She was properly crying now, tears falling freely and shoulders shaking with the force of her sobs. “He’s – he’s such a nice person and I like him so much, I really do! And I can’t – I can’t believe I hurt him so much for such a pathetic reason!”

“It’s not a pathetic reason,” Lea said softly. “Maybe it sounds like that when you say you were bored with it but, really, it would be worse in the long run if he kept on thinking you two were serious and your whole heart wasn’t in it, right? It’s better to have done it now.”

“How am I supposed to face him after this?” Daisy sobbed, covering her face with her hands miserably.

“We’ll face him together,” Bri said easily. “You don’t have to do anything alone.”
“We’ve got you, my love,” Lea agreed. “We can do this.”

Once Daisy had showered and gotten into her pyjamas, the four of them squashed themselves into one bed and held their friend tightly as she worked through her pain. Somewhere in the late afternoon, Bri rolled out of bed to find Evan and convince him to bring them some food from the kitchens (which he did) and they readjusted so they could eat properly.

“Okay,” Laury began hesitantly, “I have an idea.”

“Let’s hear it, then,” Bri prompted when the other girl said no more, waving a strawberry in the air encouragingly.

“In Transfiguration the other day, I heard something.” She paused again, looking directly at Lea. “Your brother and Sirius Black. They were going on and on about ways out of the castle – into Hogsmeade. Trying to figure out how to sneak in alcohol after the next Quidditch game.”

“Laurena Kama, you party animal, you,” Bri laughed, bumping shoulders with her friend teasingly. “Want to sneak out, do you?”

She shrugged. “I was just thinking it would be nice to party somewhere else for a change – somewhere people don’t know us, you know? To properly relax.”

“Won’t have to worry about drunken mistakes following you around in next week’s gossip,” Daisy snorted.

“Exactly! Once we get to Hogsmeade I figured we could take the Knight Bus into town? It should be easy enough to transfigure some identification.”

“I have a ton of muggle money,” Bri added, getting genuinely excited now that a plan was forming. “If we need more it should be easy enough to duplicate.”

“I am so in,” Daisy said, looking brighter than she had all day.

As one, the three of them turned to Lea.

She hesitated, thinking back to the last time she’d seen James and Sirius. It had been weeks since the confrontation and while Lea’d expected some sort of hostility after the fact, at least from Sirius if not James, she’d received nothing past a few hard stares during class and the occasional pondering expression. She wouldn’t pretend to know what they were thinking, especially if they were directing curiosity more than resentment at her, and she’d been enjoying ignoring them for the most part.

But one look into the pleading gazes of her friends and she couldn’t even pretend to consider otherwise.

She sighed. “I better go find a way into Gryffindor Tower, huh?”
Finding a way into Gryffindor Tower turned out to be easier than expected when, after putting on the tightest dresses they could find and doing their faces up all nice, the other girls began sorting out their ID and money and Lea ventured out into their Common Room. Surveying the room, she wondered where to begin.

“Lea!” Barty Crouch called from a table where he was sat with Regulus.

“Hey, you two,” Lea said, dropping momentarily into a spare seat. The two of them were lounging far too lazily to actually be doing something with the textbooks that lay open in front of them, and a bemused smile crossed her face. For a Ravenclaw, Barty really was quite unbothered about his studies.

“You wouldn’t happen to have an opinion on how to go about finding out the password to Gryffindor, would you?”

“Interesting,” Barty said, long fingers stroking his chin thoughtfully. “One Cecilia Potter, dressed up all nice but trying to hide it, looking for a way into the lion’s den. How curious.”

“Oh, hush, Barty,” she laughed, lightly slapping at the hand stroking his chin. The drama queen. “I have to acquire some information from my dear brother, is all.”

Regulus narrowed his eyes at her as Barty laughed uproariously. “Information?”

“I don’t have time to explain in detail right now,” she told him, “but I promise I will soon. Basically, the girls and I are in the middle of a crisis and I need some details James has to resolve the crisis. Nothing life threatening.”

Reg nodded, taking her at her word. It never failed to make her heart soar when he displayed his trust in her.

“Try Theo Nott. If he hasn’t got it, one of the other boys will.”

Lea beamed, blew Reg a kiss, cackled at the horror that crossed his face, and approached Theo Nott, lounging on the sofa by the fire with some other older boys.

“Theo,” Lea said, taking a seat on the arm of the sofa he was sprawled across.

“Lea,” he grinned, sitting up slightly. “What brings you here on this lovely afternoon?”

Lea didn’t have a lot of experience with Theo Nott, save for a few drunken conversations in passing and a couple of shared ‘cheers’ as they skulled more drinks, but she’d always gotten a mostly trustworthy vibe from him. He was charming, unbearably so, but there was something in the way he displayed those pureblood manners so often found in Slytherin that made them seem more genuine than the others.

“I have it on good authority you might be able to help me with something,” she said, tilting her head and watching him carefully. Yes, she thought he could be trusted, but there was still a certain way things were done.

“Oh?”
“Mm,” she nodded, “I’m looking for a way into Gryffindor Tower. Nothing sneaky, just the password will do, and apparently, you can tell me what it is.”

Theo’s smile widened. “I can indeed.”

Lea rolled her eyes. “Don’t be coy, spit it out.”

“It won’t cost you much,” he promised, “just the truth about what you’re going to be doing in Gryffindor on a Saturday night.”


He paused, studied her carefully, but relented, “Tinsel.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s not even that close to Christmas.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Theo agreed before waiting expectantly.

“I have to get some information out of my brother,” Lea said. “He owes me something.”

He groaned, flopping back down onto the couch. “Thanks for nothing, Potter, I was hoping for some juicy gossip.”

“You didn’t really believe I’d give it to you even if I had any, did you?” she said, as she stood, feeling victorious.

“Not even a little bit,” he admitted, “but the password’s due to change at midnight anyway so it wasn’t that much of a loss.”

“Thanks, Theo!” Lea called over her shoulder in parting, swiftly making her exit.

She made sure to stop by the Great Hall, check through the window at the Quidditch grounds, and even scan the Library to make sure James wasn’t there before heading up to Gryffindor Tower. She wasn’t surprised that he was inside – almost everyone had retreated to their dorms as a result of the day’s gloomy atmosphere, and the castle was mostly empty as she roamed the halls.

The portrait of the Fat Lady was busy chatting with another portrait a little bit down the hall and barely payed any attention to Lea as she gave the password, swinging open before she had finished forming the word. Grinning to herself, she climbed through the portrait hole and was brought face to face with an astonishing amount of red.

She had to blink a few times. To adjust to it, you know.

“Uh, Lea?”

Of course, it only made sense that the person sitting at the table closest to the room’s entrance was Lily Evans. Any thoughts of making it through the room unnoticed disappeared when suspicious green eyes latched onto her accusingly.

Lea put on a winning smile. “All right, Evans?”

Lily frowned, pushing a few strands of her vibrant red hair away from her face. “Very funny.”

There were textbooks and notes sprawled over the table in front of her, and Evans looked as if she was swiftly losing her patience with whatever she was doing if the white-knuckled grip on her quill was anything to go by.
Lea’s grin fell into something more natural as she shrugged. She was quietly ecstatic to see Lily Evans – her main competition for Head Girl (and sometimes, she felt, life in general, especially when Lily would make some sort of revolutionary, creative breakthrough in Potions) – struggling, or, at least not happy with her school work. “I thought so.”

“Is there a reason you’ve come to visit?” That was Marlene McKinnon, sitting next to Lily, proud as ever. McKinnon had enviously perfect posture and disgustingly perfect eyebrows, both of which worked with her already tall frame to create a beautiful and intimidating figure that Lea pettily despised.

“As a matter of fact, there is, McKinnon, thanks ever so for reminding me.” She started to move past them and towards the arch at the far end of the room labelled ‘boys’, wiggling her fingers at them in a patronising imitation of a wave.

“I think she meant it in more of a ‘tell us why you’re here’ kind of way,” Lily called after her.

“Now that’s just getting a little bit too personal, Evans, at least buy me a drink before you ask me to spill all my secrets,” Lea murmured under her breath, not bothering to turn back around. It would do no good to get distracted so early on.

She weaved through room efficiently, making her way up the stairs until she found the door with her name on it. She took a deep breath. Knocked.

There was a moment of silence in which Lea witnessed flashes of Sirius Black’s sneering face, him and James standing side by side, wands drawn and rage on their faces, and there was a second when she thought *what the fuck am I doing here* but –

“Who the fuck is that?” Sirius’s voice was unmistakable even muted by a door.

“If you open the damn door, Black, maybe you’ll know.” Remus, ever the voice of reason.

“Well, shit, I’m not getting up,” was Sirius’s reply.

“You’re the one who wants to know who it is,” Peter chimed in, “only makes sense you go answer the door.”

“Well, someone has to answer the door, this really isn’t polite,” James added matter-of-factly.

Lea rolled her eyes, emotions settled at the sound of her idiot-brother’s voice, and pushed the door open herself. “As if you’ve ever given a shit about being polite, Jamie, don’t pretend.”

The way the four of them startled – hard enough that they physically jumped – brought Lea insurmountable amounts of joy. She took stock of her surroundings, wrinkling her nose at the laundry strewn all over the floor, but almost laughing at the way the boys were unwittingly mimicking the general positions of herself and the other girls – Remus was by the window, seemingly writing some sort of note; Peter was completely tucked into his bed, his head barely visible; and Sirius and James were sat next to each other in another, a large piece of parchment open in front of them on the bed.

It was that very piece of parchment that Sirius and James both tried to viciously hide under the blanket but managed only to flail pathetically until it fell on the floor.

Lea raised an eyebrow.

“Lea!” James said, standing up quickly and kicking the parchment under the bed. “What a
“surprise!”

“How did you even get in here?” Peter asked curiously, mousy brown hair peeking out from under his covers.

“Relax,” she said dryly. “I have no interest in discovering any other little secrets you lot are hiding,” she looked pointedly at Sirius, who was still on the bed, scowling. “and I came in through the front door, duh. I just want a word with you, James.”

“Oh, sure,” he said, looking at her curiously. “Just let me find some shoes.”

Lea frowned, looking around the room as he did. “I honestly cannot understand you live in all this red. Like, the whole house thing aside – this is a lot of red for one room! I’ve never been happier in my life that I wasn’t sorted into Gryffindor like I wanted to be.”

James snorted, tripping a little as he tried to slip on shoes while standing. “Oh, yeah, remember that?”

“You really wanted to be in Gryffindor?” Remus asked, tilting his head curiously. The gentle sunlight from the window made the green of his eyes warmer and the blonde of his hair lighter, softening his features.

Lea smiled. “Oh, yeah. Dreams as an eleven-year-old, you know? It was family tradition.” She smiled even wider. “By the way, hi, Remus! How have you been? Good term so far?”

He frowned curiously, forehead creasing with suspicion. Lea winked at him.

James made a noise in between a groan and wail, the sound drowning out the soft snickers that left Peter. “You’re so fucking embarrassing, Lea! Let’s go right now, I’m ready.” He moved to wrap a hand around her arm. “Come on, move, move, move.”

Lea laughed, throwing up her middle finger at James and stepping out of his reach, stepping outside on her own. “You’re so fucking easy, Jamie, relax a little, would you? Can’t a girl ask after a boy’s health? It’s only polite.”

James slammed the door shut behind him, cutting off the eyes still gazing after them inquisitively. “Not like that! You winked.”

“Only because I know you’re a sensitive little thing,” she snickered as he pouted. “Come on, Jamie, I was only teasing. Walk with me?”

James groaned again, but relented. “What do you need? The Cloak?”

She shook her head. “Wait until we’re outside.”

She slipped an arm through one of James’s as they walked through the Gryffindor Common Room, Lea waving cheekily at Lily and Marlene as they passed. Horrifyingly, James actually tried to stop at their table.

“All right, Evans, McKinnon?” He reached up with his free hand to tousle his hair.

It was Lea’s turn to groan, tugging him away before the girls could say anything and shooting them an apologetic look. “How can you say I’m embarrassing when you pine after Lily Evans so persistently despite her thinking you’re the biggest wanker ever. It’s important to know when to quit, you know.”
“Hey, that’s not the same at all,” James argued, stepping out of the portrait hole and holding out a hand to her. “This is love. You’re just being annoying.”

She accepted the help even as she rolled her eyes. “It’s not love, James, oh my gods.”

“You don’t know anything about this, just leave it.”

Lea sighed, running a hand down the front of her robes to straighten them out and looking at James exasperatedly. He was being ridiculous but this wasn’t her goal. “Consider it left.”

He nodded, sparing her half a grin, and they set down the corridor.

“So…”

“Yeah.” Lea took a deep breath. “Basically, there’s a crisis with the girls and Laury told me she heard you and Sirius talking about passages into Hogsmeade and I need one.”

James stared at her. “Okay, I’ll admit that wasn’t what I was expecting. A couple things: what’s the crisis, why Hogsmeade, and I feel like I should make you beg for it a little bit?”

Lea scowled. “I’ve never begged a day in my life and I’m not starting now. The correct way to do this is to exchange information for information which I could be open to doing. So, if I were to tell you the crisis and the extent of our plans in exchange for knowledge of a passage we would be even.” She paused, considering. “But also, I’d probably tell you anyway, if that was something you wanted to know. That doesn’t negate the fact that we would be even, though.”

“That seems kinda heavy.” James rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully. “I get it, though, I probably would have just told you too.”

“That’s sweet.”

Lea was struggling to understand where the conversation had gone, but she thought they were reaffirming the strength of their sibling bond? It didn’t mean she was about to forgive him for being a dick – especially considering the incident with Severus had only been a few weeks ago and everyone had yet to acknowledge it – and it was severely unlikely he would suddenly overlook the colours of her robes, but it was nice to know both of them understood some things were more important.

“So, the crisis?”

“Daisy and Tommy broke up,” Lea said grimly. “It’s the first major break up for us – a defining moment, really – and Laury had the idea of getting out of the castle for the night to have some fun with people we don’t know, you know? Less stressful that way.”

James considered this. “Uh huh. And Hogsmeade?”

“We can go anywhere from there.”

He raised an eyebrow, impressed. “Brooms?”

“Knight Bus.”

“Clever.”

“Gotta account for the hair, you know. Flying always messes it up so bad.”
He rolled his eyes. “There are multiple passages. Preferences?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Anything that requires the least amount of crawling.”

James glanced around them, making sure no one was within hearing range before yanking her to a stop. “There’s a mirror on the fourth floor. It leads to the cellar underneath the WWN headquarters. It’s one of the easiest to deal with because once you go up the stairs, the back exit out of the shop is right there and, odds are, you’re not going to run into anyone since they only keep old records that no one uses in the cellar.”

“Show me?” Lea asked, eyes wide with the information. James nodded and redirected them towards fourth floor.

The mirror was partly obscured, hidden behind a tall suit of armour, but was a long, rustic looking thing with dull, foggy, bronze-tinged glass. Its position might have been odd, had the fourth-floor corridor not been full of armours and paintings and portraits, half of the landscape not magical at all. Whoever created the passage must have taken the wandering eyes of the paintings into account, the clever person.

“It opens like a door,” James told her, “but you really have to be careful about the armour. Honestly, you don’t want to knock that thing over.”

He tugged lightly on the gold frame of the mirror and opened it slowly, taking care to watch the distance between the armour. The mirror didn’t open very far, but it was enough for the girls to slip through. Lea pulled her wand from under the sleeve of her jumper and lit it with a soft *Lumos*, sticking it into the passage and eyeing the tunnel critically.

“It’s a little long,” he continued, closing the mirror as Lea stepped away. “And it’s a little dusty and pebbly and stuff, but it’s the biggest one we’ve found. All the others are a little more claustrophobic. The door on the other end is smaller but the passage stays comfortable to stand. It looks like a safe on the other side but it’s not, obviously.”

“Thanks, Jamie,” Lea said gratefully, a nervous sort of excitement settling in her bones as the plans to leave the castle solidified before her eyes. Gods, what had she been doing worrying about her grades when there were passages like *this* waiting to be discovered in the castle?

James shrugged, looking suddenly sheepish. “I remember when we were going to look for all the passages together.”

Lea sobered, looking away. James was certainly nostalgic today, bringing up their eleven-year-old plans to be Gryffindor pioneers every other second. “Yeah. I guess our priorities changed, huh?”

“I guess so.”

An uncomfortable silence settled between them for a few seconds.

“You know there’s a party in Hufflepuff tonight, right?” James said, slicing the tension. “You don’t have to go to all this trouble if you’re just looking for a drink.”

Lea snorted, turning to look at her brother again. “There’s a party in Hufflepuff every other weekend, Jamie, don’t tell me you didn’t know. Besides, it’s the anonymity that’s the key. You’re going tonight?”

He nodded, a sort of exasperated fondness crossing his face. “Sirius took up with Emily Bones, got us all in.”
“Huh.” Emily Bones was a gorgeous girl, small and curvy with bouncy blonde curls. She was also surprisingly intimidating, for someone so small with such a gentle voice, and was known for having some sort of problem with the Fat Friar – they were always arguing loudly in the halls. “It’s probably for the best we’re skipping tonight, I don’t know how much of a party it would be if your friends caught sight of me.”

James frowned. “What do you mean?”

Oh, he didn’t know? Interesting. “Nothing, Jamie, it’s just that we seem to have core differences and I’m not sure about how those differences would mix with alcohol.”

“It would be fine,” he said, waving a hand in the air flippantly. “All of you barely know each other, anyway. If you did, I’m positive you’d get along just fine.”

“Uh huh.” She looked at him doubtfully. “Either way, it’s a worry for another night. Thank you for helping me out.”

“Yeah, Lea, anytime.”

They parted ways, Lea returning to her friends who were practically vibrating with excitement, successfully forged IDs and stashes of muggle money ready to go. As the sky darkened, they quickly and quietly made their way to the fourth floor, narrowly escaping an altercation with Peeves (who was taunting a furious Mrs Norris) and stumbling through the passage behind the mirror. It was a long walk, but their anticipation helped them push through and made the darkness more bearable.

“Cool,” Lea breathed as she pushed open the door at the other end, exposing a dark room, lit only by the tip of her wand, with stacks and stacks of papers and film.

“Shove up, you nerd.” Bri pushed Lea forward gently, creating enough room to let the others into the nerd. “Yes, yes, we know, all the possibilities!”

Lea shoved her back. “It’s true! Think of how much information is in these papers alone – every key event for who knows how many years is documented here!”

“Okay, we can cry over history some other time,” Daisy intervened. “Let’s get out of here.”

True to James’s word, the rear door exit was just to the right of the entrance to the cellar, and before they knew it, the girls were in the cool, open air of Hogsmeade Village. They walked around the building to the front, taking stock of themselves on the edge of the street.

“Okay warming charms,” Laury said, and the girls performed the cursory charms on themselves before tucking their wands away.

“It’s still kind of early,” Bri said, looking up at the dark blue sky. They sky was almost completely dark but it was only about six in the evening.

“More time to get drunk before hitting the dance floor.” Lea stuck out her right hand, wand held firmly.

The only warning they got was a distant sound of a horn beeping before the Knight Bus came to an abrupt halt in front of them, shooting a gust of wind so harsh everyone’s hair and skirts flew backwards. Or they would have, if they weren’t skin tight and controversially short to begin with.

The door slid open, revealing an old, portly lady who looked to be in her fifties or sixties. Her grey
hair was pulled unforgivingly into a bun and piercing green eyes lit up her whole face.

She peered down at them, smiling brightly. “Good evening! My name is Shira Simpers, I’ll be your conductor this evening. Where are you ladies heading tonight?”

“You wouldn’t happen to know of a nice pub in Inverness, would you?” Lea asked, putting on her most charming smile. “We’re not fussy as long it’s muggle, warm and they’ve got a solid pint to offer. Preferably on the cheaper side.”

“Oh, honey, do I ever!” She moved further into the bus, gesturing for the girls to get onboard. “Eleven sickles each for the trip, thirteen for hot chocolate, and fifteen for a hot water bottle and a toothbrush.”

They paid their fare and managed to take a seat just as Shira knocked on the glass separating the driver from the rest of the bus. “That’s to Johnny’s!”

“To Johnny’s!” the man replied jovially, stepping on the gas and causing the bus to lurch forward.

“Now, it’s not a long trip,” Shira told the girls, somehow managing to lean comfortable against one wall of the bus while the girls were tightly gripping onto each other as well as their seats to stay upright. “And they have the best muggle whisky in the Scottish Highlands, that I promise. A lovely little place. Live entertainment too! Where are you girls from?”

“We live in Hogsmeade,” Lea said, trying to keep her hold on Laury as Daisy and Bri slipped away from her slightly. “Graduated from Hogwarts last year and weren’t quite ready to part from the beautiful Scottish Christmas just yet.”

“And rightly so! There’s nothing quite like the crispness of Scottish air to find your true self and cleanse your spirit.”

“She sounds like you,” Bri snickered, nudging Laury.

“A wise woman,” Laury managed, keeping her composure through the heavy jolt that ran through the bus.

Shira passed on some more wisdom to the girls about the healing properties of fresh air and a good whiskey (“children these days just don’t get out as much, how do they expect to build their strength if they can’t handle a firm drink?”), and the girls tumbled out of the Knight Bus giggling hysterically, thanking Shira profusely for her help.

Johnny’s turned out to be more than a little place – it was a bustling space, packed full of people and lit up with live music. It was probably a good sign that it wasn’t even that late and the place was full.

The girls shared an excited look as a thrill ran through them and they finagled their way to the bar.

It was easy, Lea thought, to ignore the sudden worry that flashed through her as she momentarily remembered that she was a prefect and they had just left the fucking school and *Merlin and Morgana if Mother and Father heard about this* when she saw her friends loosen and relax in front of her eyes. She herself could admit there was an added sense of ease that came with not recognising any of the people around her – they could laugh freely, dance freely, without having to think twice about who was watching and the implications of getting a little too comfortable.

It was easy, then, to lose themselves to the familiar routine of drink and dance, effortlessly following the well-travelled path, and let the hours disappear.
Lea couldn’t quite remember getting back to the castle, although if she really focused she could recall the distinct feeling of nausea that the return trip on the Knight Bus instilled in her. All she knew, really, was that she somehow woke up safely in her bed with a solid hickey on the side of her neck that was very much visible as her now shoulder-length, wavy hair left most of her neck rather exposed.

She also discovered it was horrifyingly early in the morning, and she had only just managed to get roughly three to four hours of sleep.

The reason for this early awakening was the arrival of her period, loudly announcing her presence in the form of aggressive stomach cramps and red-stained pyjama bottoms, leaving Lea no choice but to get in the shower and sort out her bed sheets and clothes.

Once clean, she decided to head to breakfast even as all her friends remained fast asleep, but not before catching sight of her textbooks stacked neatly by the foot of her bed which consequently set off a beautiful, dull ache in her temple to go with her cramping stomach and still-drunk fuzzy state of mind. Homework didn’t wait for hangovers or period cramps.

Now in a worse mood than before, she sat at the Slytherin table silently chipping away at some chocolate she had pulled from her trunk. There was peace for a few moments, during which her mind was trying to organise the events of the night before in her head though the fuzzy haze clouding her every thought.

She remembered events up to the hair cut relatively fine, as well as the girls travelling to another club after that. It was somewhere on the dark dance floor of the second place that she lost her way slightly, especially considering she didn’t remember getting back to the castle at all but could vaguely remember loudly insisting everyone brush their teeth before going to bed once back in the dorm, and Bri giggling uncontrollably while trying to make a joke about the dick Lea’d had in her mouth.

Oh, Merlin.

_They were reconvening for another shot at the bar when Lea said it, “I’m gonna blow that guy.”_

_“WHAT?” Laury blurted. “What guy?”_

_“That one,” Lea said, pointing back at the dancefloor at the tall, dark boy she had been dancing with for the past little while. He’d tried to go in for a kiss a few times but Lea had evaded, wanting to confer with her friends first._

_“What about Nikki?” Bri asked, frowning in confusion._

_Daisy snorted, bobbing on the spot to the music that was pounding hard enough to be felt in their bones. “Lea and Nikki aren’t like that! Do it! Obviously.”_

_“It’s true,” Lea said, reaching for Bri and Laury’s hands earnestly. “She won’t mind if I do other stuff. Blow him. Thoughts?”_

_“He’s beautiful,” Laury said, eyeing him critically, throwing an arm around Lea’s shoulder._
“He’s sexy,” Lea corrected, “Believe me, if you’d been feeling what I’ve been feeling pressed up against him, you’d hop on that dick too. I just want to do it so badly. So. Badly. Bri?”

Bri looked at her friend, gaze sharp even in the dark and through the drinks. After a moment she grinned, “Well, what the fuck are you doing over here, then?”

Lea laughed, throwing her arms around her friends and pulling them in for a loose group hug. Back on the dance floor, Lea gleefully threw her arms back around the boy’s neck, pressing her body flat against his and happily going in for the kiss he’d been trying for.

“I have a plan.”

Lea startled slightly, raising her head to see Sev and Regulus sitting across from, Regulus looking like he didn’t want anything to do with Severus. That in itself should have been the first warning sign for her.

“Before you say anything more,” she managed to say through the memory still replaying in her head, “I want you to know I really don’t feel well right now and am super hormonal and not in the best mood so if you wouldn’t mind benching this for now and coming back tomorrow?”

“I won’t take long,” Sev insisted, looking far too excited and determined for this early in the morning. Unhappy, she lowered her gaze back to her chocolate. “I’ve just figured out a way to make Lily speak to me again. I have to prove to her that I can offer more to her than any of those idiots in red, especially because one of them is an actual threat to the safety and wellbeing of society and shouldn’t be allowed to be at this school.”

Lea looked up, frowning, turning to Regulus. “Did he just say that? Did I just hear what I think I heard?”

Reg shrugged, already seemingly done with this conversation.

She nodded, breaking off more chocolate and pointing at Severus with a piece. “Yeah, sorry, you need to leave right now. I just – there is no way I can deal with what you just – that was the most idiotic thing that has ever left your mouth and I don’t want to look at you again until you figure out why that was the stupidest thing in the world and have felt sufficiently embarrassed about what a fool you’ve made yourself out to be. Get out. Immediately.”

Sev’s mouth twisted in anger, not having expected to be turned down so bluntly. “You really weren’t joking about the hormonal thing, were you? I didn’t realise you were so...mentally impaired that you couldn’t even hold a conversation. There’s no need to be so emotional–”

Frustrated, Lea snapped, “Well, I fucking told you I wasn’t in the mood for idiocy and that I’m not feeling very patient right now and then for you to come and literally vocalise the dumbest thought you could possibly think of and, on top of that, get upset because I’m not feeling up to dealing with your emo shit right now is the literal most annoying thing you could do –”

Unwittingly, her voice had risen as she spoke and Severus’s pale face had grown increasingly flushed. “Will you calm down? There’s no need to get so worked up –”

Lea felt like screaming. “I just told you I wasn’t in the mood and not only did you blatantly ignore what I said, you’re now trying to make me feel like I did something wrong? I fucking told you I didn’t want to do this right now –”

“Miss Potter.” Professor McGonagall had come down from the head table.
“Yeah, yeah, I’m leaving anyway,” Lea said shortly, unable to shake off her frustration and standing sharply, leaving all her chocolate behind.

She had taken two steps away when she heard a familiar sneer, “Thank Merlin, I thought she was going to bite my head off –”

She spun on her heel and spat a sharp, “Fuck you,” at Severus, tightly gripping her wand and putting all her energy into not raising it.

Before McGonagall could do more than send her a disapproving look, she swiftly left the Hall, rage running through her veins and somehow making her vision blur as tears of frustration began to fall. Feeling helpless, she rushed into the nearest room she could find, blindly slamming the door behind her and covering her face with her hands.

“Lea.”

Annoyingly, she sobbed harder, completely unable to control the pain of her emotions.

She turned into the familiar arms of her brother as he enveloped her in a hug.

Rare as it was, she was no stranger to James’s comfort. He could be the most caring and conscious person if he wanted to be, and – despite their disagreements – their relationship was underpinned with an unspoken solidarity she had never and probably would never experience with anyone else. It was the kind of unconditional thing that told her no matter what differences they had, if push came to shove, they would both snap their wands before raise them on each other.

He held her for some time, letting her cry, and when she seemed to have regained some semblance of control, he spoke, “You left this.”

She moved away to have him pull out her block of chocolate from his pocket. “I have some extra as well, if you like. We always keep some on hand for Moony.”

She accepted it with a weak smile. “Save Remus’s stash for emergencies. I’ll be okay.”

He nodded. They stood in silence for a second, just watching each other.

“So.”

Lea shook her head, averting her eyes. “It’s just been a shitty day – look at it, it’s pouring rain outside and there’s so many homework questions to do and I got my period and I drank too much last night. You know when you just drink so much and get no sleep and wake up, like, still drunk but not fun drunk anymore? And then I ran out of hangover potion and I just don’t want to be in this state right now. I just want to be awake and properly sober so I can deal with what I have to deal with and move on but I just feel like shit and then fucking Severus decides to be an extra dumb cunt –”

That made James crack a smile. “I love it when you say things like that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, you hate Snape, Snape hates you, blah blah blah.”

He laughed. “Agree to disagree, right? But it seems today there’s nothing to disagree about. Glad you’re seeing the dumb cunt for the dumb cunt he is.” Lea would have protested, if she didn’t feel like all the energy had left her body post-cry. Besides, Sev had been a dumb cunt today. “Anyway, I can help with you with approximately half of your problems.”
He threw an arm around her shoulders and led her back out of the classroom and down the corridor. Lea, both familiar with her brother’s generally restless personality and also too exhausted to care about where they were going, didn’t comment, but instead set to breaking off a few blocks of her chocolate, offering some to James silently.

He accepted, an introspective expression already on his face. “There’s not much to do about your period, unfortunately, or about you drinking too much last night. And, I probably could do something about the weather but that might not be a good idea because it’s still kind of experimental magic, and I absolutely could do something about the dumb cunt but I’m going to assume that won’t necessarily improve your mood at this time,” he paused thoughtfully, “Actually, if we’re thinking like that I could probably do something about your mistakes last night but, again, experimental magic.

“The rest, though,” James continued happily, “is easily remedied. I’ve got hangover potion, lots of chocolate, and I can scrounge up some answers for the homework from somewhere.”

Despite herself, Lea relaxed a little. She was still infuriated, yes, but it didn’t feel as uncontrollable as it did a few moments ago. “Jamie—”

“You look like shit, by the way, did you really get no sleep at all?”

She swatted at him weakly. “Hey, fuck you. No, I didn’t, I woke up really fucking early with cramps and then couldn’t go back to sleep.”

He frowned. “Have you taken something for the cramps?”

“The idea of being any sort of inebriated right now makes me want to chuck up this block of chocolate.”

As they turned the next corner, Lea realised they were probably heading to Gryffindor Tower. “Are we going to your dorm? James, I really don’t think I can deal with all that red right now, like, visually it’s just a lot—”

“Oh, shut up,” he said brightly, the arm around her shoulder tightening so that it almost mimicked a choke-hold. “I’m going to help you.”

“James,” she protested, tugging against his hold.

“You’re not sorry at all.”

As they approached the Fat Lady, Lea tried again, “James, I can’t walk into the Gryffindor Common Room looking like I’ve been crying. James! It literally goes against my every instinct—”

James raised his voice to speak over her, “Stop it, you look fine, just relax, I’m trying to help! I’m literally fixing all of your problems right now, please stop making this difficult.”

He muttered the password to the Lady who frowned disapprovingly at the Slytherin jumper Lea had thrown on with a pair of leggings that morning, and led her into the Common Room. It wasn’t very busy, given that it was a Sunday morning, but Lea still threw her hand over her eyes and groaned dramatically.

“It buuurrrrrns,” she whined as James pulled her through the room, unable to hide her giggle when he sped up a little in response.
“Would you quit your whining? It’s not like that hideous green on your shirt is something great to look at.”

“It’s actually just the sheer amount of red, you know,” Lea lowered her hand as they reached the stairs to the dorms, “that’s the real problem. Red’s actually a very pretty colour. So is green, by the way.”

“And together they make Christmas,” James agreed.

He paused in front of his door and rapped his knuckles against it sharply, “Be decent, boys, we’ve got a guest,” before pushing it open.

The three boys were huddled by the single desk in the room, not at all casually slipping a parchment out of view as James and Lea entered.

“Oi, Potter, good show this morning,” Sirius greeted. His jovial tone was probably the nicest she had ever heard from him, and it was still somewhat mocking.

“It was, wasn’t it?” Lea replied as lightly as she could, given James’s arm was still tight around her neck and he was yanking her to what she assumed was his bed. He finally released his hold but firmly pushed her so she fell on the red sheets.

“Is a shirt okay?” James asked her, frowning as ruffled through his trunk that lay at the base of the bed.

“Shirt for what, James?” Lea asked, lying down and throwing an arm over her eyes. She could feel a headache coming on, likely a mix of a lack of a balanced diet and post-cry congestion settling in her head.

He threw a vial with the familiar, clear hangover potion at her, the little bottle landing on her stomach. She raised her head to stick her tongue out at him and received an exasperated look in return.

“It’s Focillo, isn’t it?” he asked pointedly. “Is a shirt okay?”

Lea let her head drop back onto the bed. “I can never get the charm hot enough, Jamie, it’s no help.”

“I know that,” he said slowly, “but I don’t have the same problem. Take the potion.”

“What?” Lea sat up, looking at him with surprise.

“What?” Lea sat up, looking at him with surprise.

“Yeah, Le. Didn’t you know Papa had me practice it? I got a whole talk about all of it.”

“Are you,” she cut herself off, downing the potion like a shot and firmly ignoring the horrible taste, “are you trying to tell me that you’ve been able to do this charm for a good nine-ish months while I’ve just, like, accepted that’s not something I can have in my life.”

“If you’d just told me –”

“If you’d just told me,” she interrupted. “Merlin, Jamie, honestly. A shirt is fine but if you have a handtowel it’ll take better, I think.”

“Mm,” he agreed, disappearing into the bathroom and returning with said handtowel. “You’re so lucky it’s clean. Okay, look.”
He sat next to her on the bed and held the folded towel on one palm and his wand in the other. “Focillo.”

The towel adopted a slight orange glow as James held the tip of his wand to the fabric, steam rising as it got warmer and warmer. Then, when James decided it was hot enough, he pulled his wand back.

“I really don’t understand why you can’t do it,” he said, handing her the blessedly heated fabric. It was just leaning towards being uncomfortably hot and it was so perfect. “It’s a first-year charm.”

Lea shrugged, tucking the towel under her shirt and revelling in the warmth of it against her stomach. “I think it’s to do with intention. So, because I’m not the biggest fan of like heat and fire and all that stuff, I think my magic reflects that uneasiness even though I’m not actually scared of this one thing, and then my spell never holds for more than five minutes and it’s never this hot.”

“That’s interesting,” Remus said, moving from where the boys were still loosely huddled to sit on the bed next to James’s. “I mean, obviously intent is a defining characteristic of the majority of the spells you cast but generally the little ones are steady no matter how you feel, and Focillo is a very basic charm, really, so it’s interesting that your magic is sensitive enough to pick up on that.”

Again, Lea shrugged. “I’ve not noticed it with anything else. Like, sometimes my mood can affect my casting but that’s usually pretty manageable. This one never works for me. Not once.”

“Even then,” Peter interjected, “I feel like a warm towel can be easily found some other way? As in, this wasn’t your only option.”

“Yeah, but this is never my first option anyway, when I’m in pain, if you know what I mean,” she said to him, winking multiple times, making the movement as dramatic as she could and drawing a few snorts of amusement for her efforts.

The hangover haze was lifting from her mind, leaving her disgustingly aware of the cramps in her stomach and the exhaustion in her bones. Sighing, she fell back again, shifting so she was lying on her side, facing James and Remus but putting her back to Peter and Sirius.

“Mum is going to murder you for cutting off your hair,” James pointed out.

Lea closed her eyes. “Only if you snitch.”

She felt the bed shift as James stood. “Are you going to explain?”

“Promise not to snitch,” she insisted, sticking a hand in the air with her pinkie finger extended. She heard James grumble but, sure enough, a pinkie wrapped around her own.

“Promise.”

“It’s nothing dramatic,” Lea said, snuggling into the pillow further. “Something happened that got my hair really messed up and I was like ‘well, fuck I’m ready to chop it off at this point’ and Daisy was like ‘okay’ and she point me-d all the way to the only twenty-four-hour hair salon you’ll ever see in your life. Honestly, who knew those existed?”

“Not to, like, take away from this milestone in your life,” Bri said, linking her arms through Lea’s as the four girls strolled down the street some time later, “and, like, you’re still hot as fuck, but I’m also genuinely concerned about you bringing your hair back from this sex mess situation right now.”
“Yeah.” Lea tried to run her fingers through her curls but they got helplessly tangled and she clumsily tried to release her fingers from their grip. “Honestly, get me a pair of scissors and I’m chopping it off. I’m done with this long hair anyway.”

“I love it, let’s do it,” Daisy said loudly, “I want to go blonde, I think it’s time.”

“Babe, it’s like three-in-the-AM right now, what hair salon will be open?” Bri snickered.

“Who are you,” Daisy replied, looking at Bri incredulously. She pulled out her wand from where it was neatly hidden down her cleavage and held it out in front of her, “Point me.”

Within minutes, the girls arrived at an empty hair salon with huge neon lights blaring the message ‘OPEN 24 HOURS’. There was one lady lazily reclining in the seat behind the reception who eyed the girls suspiciously as they stumbled into the establishment.

“Hi,” Lea smiled brightly, leaning her elbows on the desk in front of the lady. “I was wondering if you would be interested in chopping off a solid chunk of this thing on my head? And my friend wants to go blonde as well. Like, a platinum blonde.”

“I could use some bangs,” Laury said thoughtfully, eyeing the posters of various models on the walls.

The lady stoically observed Daisy and Bri who were a few paces behind the rest of them, making stupid faces at each other in a mirror and sending each other into hysterics. She shrugged.

“Yeah, why not. Take a seat.”

“It’s probably for the best, I’d hate to imagine what the state of it would be if you did it yourself.”

Lea frowned. “Rude. You can fuck right off given that mop on your head. Not even a clean mop. Like, a dirty, shit stained, tangled mop.”

“Girls love my hair.”

“Mm,” was Lea’s doubtful reply. “How was Hufflepuff last night?”

Immediately, snickers sounded throughout the room.

“Hectic,” Peter offered.

“Magical,” Sirius corrected.

“The live entertainment really made the night complete,” James added.

“No,” Remus interrupted. “It was great, but I really have to draw the line at calling Sirius’s attempt at live porn entertainment.”

“No,” James agreed. “But when they fell off the couch and into Jerry Rivers who pushed over Kara Lowen who fell off her chair and into the snack table, drowning the poor girl in the good whisky and tossing the popcorn bowl all over Tina Briar it was a pretty fun time.”

“The seventh years weren’t there, were they?” Lea asked, mildly horrified at the mess the boys seemingly made everywhere they went. “They would never have allowed it to get that far. They have pretty strict rules about not making a mess for the house elves. It’s a respect thing.”
“A lot of people asked James about where you were,” Remus added, an edge to his voice Lea couldn’t quite identify.

Lea snorted. “Really?”

“It was a little annoying. I didn’t know you went often enough that you made a lasting impression,” James said, dropping something onto the bed and making Lea open one eye curiously. A stack of books was now on the sheets in front of her. “Homework.”

Lea felt warmth settle in her stomach. He really could be kind, sometimes. “Daisy and I are both involved with Puffs, Jamie. And it’s okay, I don’t actually need answers, you’ve already helped so much. I’m leaving now, I’ll get it done myself.” Despite saying this, she didn’t move, unwilling to let go of the momentary peace her body was feeling.

“What is this about, by the way?” Sirius asked, waving a hand in her general direction and immediately sending a wave of irritation through her.

“Lea’s shockingly hungover and also on her period,” Remus said lightly from where he was now leaning against the headboard of his bed, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles.

She frowned. “It’s true but you shouldn’t say it,” she chided him weakly.

He shrugged, his own eyes now closed and head tilted back. One finger rose to tap the side of his nose. “I can smell it.”

She looked at him incredulously, mildly horrified. “I don’t believe you.”

“Oh, that’s Moony’s game,” Peter informed her. “He insists he can smell everything from the food down in the kitchens to people’s emotions around the full moon. It’s completely barmy.”

“No,” Lea said, sitting up and facing Remus fully, even though he still wasn’t looking at her. “I don’t believe that at all. He’s trying to fuck with you. You can’t smell people’s emotions.”

“Lea, no,” James protested weakly.

“No, but even with animals,” she insisted over the wounded groan James let out, “even with animals it’s not the actual emotions they can smell, you know, it’s just the physical response to those emotions that they can then associate with a person’s mood and emotional state. So, even just saying that makes you a total liar because it’s not physically possible. If it were possible, I’d be more likely to believe you can smell the blood pouring out of my vagina rather than how I feel.”

“Fucking GROSS,” James wailed, this time echoed by Sirius and Peter.

Remus, however, only smirked. “Who said I couldn’t? I can still smell the alcohol on you as well.”

She narrowed her eyes. “See, what I don’t trust is that this is all information you could have gotten so many other ways, you know? So, I’m not really inclined to believe you.”

He shrugged, serene expression still in place. “Believe what you will.”

She stared at him, growing more and more suspicious.

“Is that a hickey?” James exclaimed, pointing accusingly at where her high-necked jumper had slid down her neck slightly and exposed the mark.
There was something—something about the buzz rolling through her veins, something about the darkness of the alley, something about the tingles this boy’s touch left on her skin—something about her falling to her knees in front of him and licking her lips as she unzipped his jeans, that made her wetter than she could ever remember being.

Lea had always thought dicks were kind of meh, like, just another part of the human body, not exceptionally fun to look at or anything (based on the images she had seen in a dirty magazine Bri had showed them), and she certainly was not expecting to love the feeling of looking up at someone through her lashes as she sucked one. She thought she was doing pretty well considering the way the hand in her hair was slowly gripping tighter and tighter as his head fell back against the brick wall behind him.

He whispered a warning as he came and Lea, in all of her drunken haze, thought why the fuck wouldn’t she just swallow and that was the only regret she had that night, cursing internally as she turned her head to the side and spit the sour taste onto the concrete. To his advantage, he didn’t seem fazed by her actions at all as he nudged her upwards and kissed her, carefully spinning them so she was trapped between the bricks and his body, the scrape of the wall only sending more shivers through her.

She was positively soaking when he lifted her so she could wrap her legs around his waist before he pushed her skirt up and slid two fingers inside the thin fabric of her underwear.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned. She bit her lip, trying to stay quiet as he slid fingers inside her and rubbed her clit with his thumb. His mouth was hot on her neck as she turned her face away and clamped her eyes shut, trying to control the tremors running through her body as she came.

Lea stood. “Oh, look at the time, I really should be heading back to my dorm. Lots of homework, you know, gotta start somewhere.”

She kept one hand on the towel to hold it to her stomach, but the moment she straightened, the ache started up again, this time settling in her lower back as well. Fuck, she would have to take something if that didn’t ease up.

“I thought the seventh-year Puffs weren’t around this weekend,” Peter questioned, taking advantage of the moment it took her to adjust to the change in position.

“They aren’t.”

“Did you break up?” James frowned.

“No.”

“Are you cheating on Nikki Lee?”

Lea snorted. “No.”

Remus had opened his eyes by now and was watching her in a way that made her feel entirely too exposed, green eyes tinged with more golden brown than she remembered them having. “I know what you did.”

She pointed a stern finger at him. “No.”

One side of his mouth lifted, amused. “No?”
“No. Not a chance.”

He was grinning now, a small, dangerous tilt of his lips. “Are you sure?”

She was retreating quickly now, his knowing gaze making her more uneasy than it had any right to given that she didn’t believe he could smell the truth on her.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said incredulously. “You don’t fool me, Remus Lupin, you filthy liar. Bye, Jamie, thanks for the assist. I owe you.”

James was still frowning after her. “Are you sure you don’t want the homework?”

“I can’t owe you that much,” came the reply before Lea slammed the door shut and exited Gryffindor Tower as fast as she could.
Chapter Thirteen

It was Tuesday and Lea was still feeling the effects of her weekend, her entire body heavy with a lethargy that made attending classes the most draining experience of her life. Monday was easy enough, gods bless, as her friends graciously carried her through Herbology, double History was a solid opportunity for a nap, and they only dealt with theory in Charms and Potions. Tuesday proved to be different from the get go.

“Lea, you have to get up now or you won’t get any food before class,” Laury insisted, nudging her sleeping form sharply. “Lea, come on!”

Lea opened her eyes as much as she could physically manage, blinking at the blurry form of her friend. “You go ahead, I’ll be up in a minute,” she groaned, rolling over and falling back to sleep immediately.

She did not, in fact, get up in a minute, and the next time she opened her eyes she found herself already five minutes late to Transfiguration.

“How kind of you to make an appearance, Miss Potter,” Professor McGonagall said, pausing during the lecture she had already started to draw the entire classes’ attention to Lea’s exhausted, rumpled, hungry state. Lea had never gotten dressed faster in her life, and the result was a half-arsed tie hanging halfway down her crumpled uniform shirt, severely untidy hair, and dark smudges under her eyes.

“Anything for you, Professor.” Lea attempted a charming smile and threw the teacher a thumbs up as she took her seat. She supposed it was for the best that she was forced to sit right at the back, all alone and left with nothing except her embarrassment.

Embarrassment that only worsened when McGonagall came around some time later to check homework that she hadn’t done.

“Perhaps it would be beneficial to pay more attention to the studies you are here to complete rather than other…projects that may take up your interest.”

McGonagall’s eyes flicked up to her new haircut meaningfully and Lea hoped someone would kill her before she’d have to be on the receiving end of McGonagall’s disappointment again.

“What, you don’t like it?” Lea tried for cute, lazily flipping her hair over her shoulder.

Her nostrils flared. “I can only imagine the mess you left for the house elves.”

“Oh, I would never,” she assured her, extremely thrilled about McGonagall just assuming she did it herself. “Is that not the whole purpose of Evanesco?”

“Quite. Detention this evening. Please bring the homework you failed to complete.”

Lea deflated, slouching in her chair. “Yep.”

She thought McGonagall lingered for a second, but her eyes were firmly trained on the notes in front of her. It was fine, obviously, to forget homework once in a while, but there was something about McGonagall and the effort Lea could tell she put into her students and her lessons to make sure everyone got the most out of their classes. It made letting her down all the more horrifying – especially because McGonagall was a Professor that consistently and explicitly set them questions
and tasks in preparation for their OWLs and that was something Lea was thankful for every single day.

She kept her head down for the rest of the morning, licking her wounds in peace, until another piece of evidence about her recent lack of alertness was brought to her attention during lunch.

“So, Lea,” Evan called from a few seats down. “What were you planning on doing about your detention and those prefect rounds we had tonight?”

Her heart sank. “Shit. Evan, I’m so sorry I completely forgot.”

“Don’t be silly, Lea, you can’t help McGonagall’s decision,” Bri said, throwing an arm around Lea’s shoulders and shooting Evan a sharp look. “Evan is a big boy, he can do the rounds himself.”

Balking slightly at the genuine distress on Lea’s face, Evan rushed to agree. “Yeah, of course, I was only joking.”

“I’m sorry, Evan,” Lea repeated. “You can take next round off, if you like.”

Daisy frowned. “It’s not like you’re just having a skip for fun, Lea, it is a detention.”

“Still my mistake.”

“Well, I’m not going to say no to a free evening,” Evan said, shrugging at the harsh looks directed at him by Bri and Daisy. “Speaking of free evenings,” he added, turning a smirk onto Bri, “You busy tonight?”

Bri scowled and threw the corner of the crust from her sandwich at him.

Potions required more concentration from her than usual given that she seemed to be dropping shit left, right and centre.

“Honestly, what is wrong with you?” Severus hissed at her, reaching out to snatch the mortar containing the ground Griffin claw from her hands. She had just caught it in time after knocking her elbow into it and making it teeter painfully on the edge of their bench.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Lea repeated, not for the first time that hour. Severus had been in a surprisingly good mood that day as well, an unseen amount of energy and determination evident in his actions, until a few minutes with her clumsy movements in his orbit. She supposed she should be grateful Slughorn had paired them together since he was probably the only one skilled enough to manage her mistakes and keep the Strengthening Solution on track as well.

“Maybe just read me the instructions and keep your hands away from everything,” he suggested, not unkindly. Lea, unhappy at the mistakes she had been making all day, twined her fingers together behind her back and quietly read the instructions to Severus as needed.

She was sulking and she knew it. Her poor friends knew it too, if their tip-toeing was anything to go by.

“Lea, you want some chicken?” Laury asked, offering her the dish. “Some pie?”

She shook her head, stabbing her fork rather aggressively into a pea. She’d been playing with her food rather than eating it, shame taking up all the available space in her stomach.
“Severus was really out of line, talking to you like that,” Bri tried, Daisy and Laury rushing to echo her.

“No, I was messing everything up,” Lea disagreed quietly. “He was right to step in or I would have really fucked something up.”

Silence fell as the four girls chewed awkwardly, eyes on their plates. Lea sighed, about to start making another round of apologies for bringing her friends down, when a hand touched her shoulder.

“Hello, ladies,” Nikki greeted them brightly as she slipped into the seat next to Lea. “How is everyone?”

It was like a switch flipped in her friends, and Lea watched as they brightened immediately, presumably grateful to not have to be the ones to deal with sour mood anymore, and returned Nikki’s greeting with joy. Lea herself found it extremely difficult to simply ignore the warm smile directed towards her by the Hufflepuff, and happily received the attention.

“How was your retreat?” Lea asked softly, leaning towards Nikki until the length of their thighs were pressed against each other.

“Enlightening.” Nikki bent her head slightly, bringing the two of them even closer and instantly making Lea feel like she was the only person in the room – the only person that mattered.

Nikki’s smile took on a sharp edge, something that managed to be both teasing and slightly provocative. “Not as enlightening as seeing your hair, though,” she lifted the hand from Lea’s shoulder to run the fingers through the waves of her shorter hair, “if there was ever a question about my sexuality it would now be resolved.”

“Oh, so you’re going to leave me for a man, are you?”

“Silly girl.” Nikki pressed a quick kiss to Lea’s lips. “So, what brought on this beautiful change?”

Lea was smiling now, pleased at the attention. “The girls and I snuck into town over the weekend. For a dance, you know?”

Nikki laughed, the pretty, soft sound making Lea smile even wider. “Just for a dance? Oh, I wish I’d been there.”

“I – uh – I actually have something to tell you about that.”

For all of her confidence that she and Nikki both understood they weren’t exclusive, actually telling her about it was making Lea nervous. She could have clarified before, especially considering the conversation they’d had about wasn’t really a conversation and Nikki had assumed Lea wasn’t interested in commitment before she’d even considered the idea herself, and Lea’d just ran with it.

In retrospect, it probably said more about Nikki’s preferences regarding commitment than it did hers, and it was a little bit unfair of her to have sort of thrown that label onto them – not that Lea said anything otherwise. Lea just wasn’t a fan of conversations that could potentially lead to significant change, so she happily took her assumptions and moved on.

Nikki waited, her expression so open and so calm, and Lea hoped and prayed everything was as she had understood it to be and that Nikki wouldn’t leave her after this.

“I sucked off a guy at the club,” she admitted quietly.
Nikki’s eyes widened in surprise, before darkening into something heavier. “Oh, now I really wish I’d been there.”

Startled, Lea let out a laugh, the movement causing her to move away a little.

“No, no, no, come back here,” Nikki said, a hand curling around Lea’s forearm to pull her back in. She had a twinkle in her eye, one that Lea was intimately familiar with by now, and her lips tilted into a predatory smirk. “I’m properly jealous now.”

She lowered her head so her mouth was right next to Lea’s ear and whispered, “My imagination can’t do justice to how good you must have looked with your mouth wrapped around a thick, hard cock. I mean, I don’t even care for them myself, but you...you’ve always been an enthusiastic little thing with your mouth,” Lea could feel the smirk even though she couldn’t see it, “I bet you were gagging for it.”

She had no doubt Nikki felt the shiver run through her with the way they were closely intertwined. Blushing and impossibly warm, Lea pulled away.

“Tease.”

“Says you,” Nikki retorted, grinning triumphantly but allowing Lea to open their conversation to the other girls, all of whom were graciously pretending to give them privacy.

Needless to say, Lea entered her detention in a better mood than she had been in all day.

This didn’t last, unsurprisingly, as McGonagall didn’t just leave her to do her homework in peace, but rather turned a concerned expression onto her, “This isn’t the first time you’ve fallen behind on work this semester, Cecilia.”

Ashamed, Lea nodded. “I know. I’m sorry.”

The professor shook her head and peered at Lea seriously over the top of her wire-framed glasses. “If you find yourself overwhelmed with the workload –”

“No, Professor,” Lea assured her, “I’ve just been making some mistakes with...time management. I didn’t mean to sleep in this morning either, I’m not sure what came over me.”

“There is help for you. If you ask for it.”

Lea looked back down at her work. She was okay, really. It was just a few nights of poor sleep and poor drinking choices. It would wear off. “I’ll be okay, Professor. Really. Thank you.”

McGonagall looked at her doubtfully. “Whether that may or may not be true, if you require assistance with time management or,” her eyes narrowed, “you find yourself unusually tired, perhaps it would be beneficial to see Madam Pomfrey.”

“If that happens,” Lea said, “I will be sure to do so.”

She could tell the professor wasn’t pleased, but she did leave it alone.

When she left the detention, she touched base with Nikki in Hufflepuff.

“We need to talk about this,” Lea announced as she entered her girlfriend’s dorm.

Nikki seemed to have her dorm to herself a shocking amount – most of her roommates preferred to
hang out in shared areas or in their significant others’ rooms – and Nikki was lounging on her bed, one hand tucked under her head and the other resting on her stomach. There was a book which Lea recognised as the seventh year Charms textbook floating in the air above her, the pages turning with the occasional flick of Nikki’s finger.

“Talk about what, babe?” Nikki’s voice was low and lazy and shivers shot down Lea’s spine.

Shaking her head to make herself focus, Lea put her hands on her hips and stood in front of the bed. “This exclusivity thing. It needs more discussion.”

Nikki was really good at recognising when things were serious – it was something Lea was eternally grateful for, especially after having grown up with James who inherently struggled with knowing when to stop – and she plucked the book from the air, set it aside, and gave Lea her attention.

“What did you want to discuss?”

“I don’t like it,” Lea blurted. “I mean – I liked you know – but I don’t like the way it made me feel when I thought about you afterwards. It made me feel like I betrayed you.”

Nikki reached for her, tugging at the hem of her skirt until she settled on the bed. “You didn’t betray me or my trust. I’d said it was okay with me and I meant it.” She smirked suddenly. “I am glad you told me, though. I’ve never much cared for boys but I find myself rather taken by the idea of you with one.”

Despite her inner turmoil, Lea blushed and smacked Nikki on the arm lightly. “Not the point, Nik.”

Nikki was already leaning forward, her hand creeping up Lea’s thigh and under the hem of her skirt, but Lea wasn’t done yet. “Have you been with someone since we’ve gotten together?”

“No,” Nikki replied easily, halting her hand and meeting Lea’s eyes. “As you know, I’ve not had a lot of time these days to spend with you, let alone anyone else. I’ve not wanted to, either, but I would tell you if I had.”

Lea had asked around about what was known about Nikki’s past by then (which was surprisingly little considering how social Nikki was) and knew there had been a handful of other girls that Nikki’d been with for extended periods of time before her. There had been such little information or controversy – which was for the best as Hogwarts gossip had a life of its own – and Lea had resolved to just ask if she ever wanted details, especially as she wasn’t enjoying the aftermath of her tryst like she thought she would have and was struggling to understand how Nikki did it.

Evidently sensing her confusion, Nikki sighed and removed her hand altogether. “I genuinely, honestly am not upset with you, Lea. I don’t get jealous about these things and I never want you to feel trapped or bound to me.”

Out of nowhere, hurt flooded her chest which was ridiculous because what was she upset about? Nikki not wanting to own her? Lea pushed the feeling to the side and took a deep breath before scanning her striking features. She seemed calm and sincere. Her deep brown eyes met Lea’s gaze with no hesitation and her posture was relaxed and open. There was really no reason for Lea to doubt her.

“I’m not going to make you feel like that either,” she said finally, winding her fingers through Nikki’s and bringing her hand back to her thigh. “But I don’t think I’m going to be with anyone else again.”
“Lea –”

“We don’t have to label ourselves as exclusive,” Lea interrupted, trying to make her smile as reassuring as she could. “But I didn’t like the way it made me feel after the fact. If you want to be with someone else, I’m not going to stop you, Nik, or get upset about it.”

She didn’t think she would, at least, but apparently how Lea actually felt was turning out to be different from how she thought she’d feel. She didn’t think she could see herself doubting the way Nikki felt about her – especially when the older girl reminded her with every touch, every softly spoken words of endearment – but would she truly know how she would react until she was dealing with the situation?

Nikki didn’t look consoled either, and her full lips turned down grimly. “I’m sorry I’m complicating things so much.”

Surprised, Lea shook her head and tightened her hold on Nikki’s hand when she tried to move away. “What? Nik…I know this has something to do with something that happened to you in the past. If this is how you feel then we can make the effort to make it work. And it’s not like it bothers me, love, it’s just a learning experience and it might take a few tries until I figure out exactly where I stand.”

She softened, putting her palms on the sheets on either side of Lea’s hips and leaning forward until Lea was flat against the bed, legs parted for Nikki and nose brushing against hers.

“Thank you,” were the words whispered against her lips. “She just…she took being committed to a whole other level and I hated it. I didn’t see it or know any better until it reached a point where she was dictating everything from what I wore and who my friends were. I don’t want to feel like that again and I don’t want to make anyone feel like that, either.”

Lea pulled away slightly, meeting Nikki’s eyes and curling a hand in her hair. “You know not everything has to be that extreme, right? It’s not always all or nothing.”

Nikki nodded, shutting her eyes and Lea, who had never seen Nikki this worried, gave in to the urge to press her lips against hers, kissing her softly and trying to pour all the comfort she could into it. She moved away to press her lips against Nikki’s cheek, feeling her heart ache when she tasted the saltiness of tears. Lea wrapped her arms more tightly around Nikki, pulling her down so she was half on top of her, face buried in Lea’s neck.

“We do pretty well,” Lea said into the silence that fell. “I’m proud of us.”

“I’m literally crying on you right now,” was Nikki’s dry response.

“But the communication – no one does it like we do. And Daisy said I repressed my feelings.”

Lea turned her pleased smile into Nikki’s hair as she snickered.

She left before curfew feeling confident in the belief that she’d made Nikki feel better, but also restless and unwilling to return to her dorm. Instead, she headed to the kitchens for a while and graciously basked in the comfort of the tea served by the elves.

She’d had her Transfiguration books still with her, so she remained by the fire and flipped through her book, getting ahead enough in her reading that she should be set for homework for the next few weeks. The house elves had retired long ago to wherever they slept, but they had left the kitchen warm and cozy in a way that reminded Lea of the comfort she associated with her kitchen at home.
and, with that, her mother.

It made her heart ache.

She wasn’t sure how long she stayed there, unable to shake off the restlessness in her bones, knees jumping up and down and fingers tapping against the wood of the table, but she left eventually, after multiple refills of her tea cup and a solid chunk of her textbook now well-read.

She ventured out of the dungeons, pleasantly surprised to see the sky already lightening outside, and resolved to head higher in the castle to catch the sun’s warmth as it rose.

Lea could feel her jittery nerves in the shake of her hands and fast pace of her heart, but she couldn’t for the life of her understand why she was so upset. Of course, a little embarrassment and stress was to be experienced for her homework failures but to this extent? So much that she wasn’t able to move past it even a little bit? She was just hoping that her body would reach a point of exhaustion and she would be allowed one restful night of sleep. Or, day of sleep, rather.

She had reached the fifth floor, and though she had the intention of going up to the Astronomy Tower to get the most sunlight she could, as she passed the door of the music room she found the call of the well-cushioned window seats and the piano too strong to resist.

As she pushed open the door to reveal the expansive, sun-lit room, she also came face to face with the curled-up figure of James, huddled in the same window seat she had mentally designated her own.

“James?” Lea frowned, shutting the door behind her. She blinked, adjusting to the light. “James.”

Her books fell to the floor as she rushed to his side, heart clenching in her chest as James looked up at her, eyes rimmed red and cheeks wet with tears.

“Lea.” He scrubbed his face with his hands.

She wrapped her arms around James, pulling him against her, relieved when he returned her embrace.

“What happened? Are you okay?” Lea took stock of the situation: James had his knees pulled up to his chest and was dressed in a pair of jeans and a shirt. Lea could see no visible injuries, though that meant nothing as his arms were currently wrapped around her waist and his face was pressed into her stomach, obscuring a good part of his torso and all of his face from her perusal. There was a large parchment unfolded on the cushion in front of him, a neat outline of what looked like Hogwarts printed on it, as well as little moving footprints of…the castle’s inhabitants?

When James didn’t answer, Lea framed his face with her hands and pulled away slightly, forcing him to meet her eyes.

“Are you okay?” she repeated more firmly.

He nodded.

“Emotionally?”

This time, he hesitated. Lea nodded, moving to fold up the parchment neatly and move it to the side, benching that one for later, and took a seat opposite him, stretching her legs out in the space between James and the window.
“Let’s hear it.”

Again, he hesitated.

Lea started small. “Are you hurt at all?”

“A few bruises. Some small scratches.” He held out his arms to show said minor wounds and allowed Lea to assess them until she was satisfied.

“It was a full moon tonight,” Lea said, “I don’t suppose everyone was finally ready to transform with Remus?”

Though Lea had consciously acknowledged the night to be one with a full moon earlier in the day (she had a rough idea of when they would all be for the year), it was only in this moment that she considered that to have been the source of her anxiety. She had been pretty sure the other boys weren’t ready to transform yet and for that reason, she tried to actively ignore the consequences of the full moon and tried to take comfort in the fact James was unlikely to be with Remus, however disgusting it was to blatantly place her brother’s safety over Remus’s.

“The others haven’t gotten it,” James said, though there was a bitter cadence to his voice Lea didn’t have much experience with.

Silence fell. Lea’s heart sank.

“It’s still to do with Remus, isn’t it? Is he okay?”

James’s mouth twisted in anger and more frustrated tears fell from hazel eyes. “Remus is safe. *Sirius,*” he spat the name, hands clenching into fists, “told Snape where to find Remus during full moons. He could’ve *died* –”

Horror flooded Lea’s chest. “*Snape*?”

“He was sniffing around,” James was *furious*, agitation rolling off him in waves, “trying to find something to expose Remus, and *Sirius* decided to drop hints about where Remus went to transform, thought it would be fun, you know? Cute, to scare Snape. Warn him off so he’d get off our fucking backs and leave Remus be. Never mind that Remus *isn’t Remus* because he’s a *fucking werewolf* who is more than capable of *killing* –”

“What?” Lea reached for James’s hand blindly.

James deflated slightly, letting her grip his forearm. “*Sirius* started bragging after we saw Remus off. The moon had just started to rise. I got Snape out of there but he saw it all.”

“Severus is not going to tell a fucking soul.”

“He won’t,” he agreed, “especially after Dumbledore’s done with him.”

“You said you got him out of there in time,” Lea said, feeling nausea start to build in her stomach, “What happened to you?”

“I distracted Moony, for a little while. He lost interest eventually and I slipped out.”

“James.”

James looked away, looking as if all the fight had left him. “He didn’t hurt me. After the initial excitement of a human scent nearby wore off, he was just playful, and then he relaxed. Merlin,
Lea, I can’t – I can’t tell you how much it hurts to see him like that. He’s one of the best people I know and –

“Sirius could have made him a murderer.”

Lea bit her tongue sharply, turning her own gaze into the blinding light of the sun and blinking rapidly. She took a deep breath. Exhaled slowly.

“Everyone’s okay.”

He tilted his head back, closed his eyes. “Remus won’t be. He already hates what he his. I thought Sirius understood.”

Lea tried to understand herself, tried to wrap her head around her what each of them could have been thinking to make so many poor decisions. Sirius must not have thought his plan through, must have been so unimaginably caught up in his hatred, Severus must have been so caught up in his hatred.

She tried, “Something must have happened for Sirius to go this far.”

“You would think that,” James agreed, bitterness dripping from his words, “but there was nothing. Nothing except his idiocy and selfishness.”

Silence fell again.

“What’s going to happen now?” Lea whispered, trying to think of where Remus stood after all of this.

“Dumbledore’s sorting it out,” James said, a tiredness lining the angles of his face, “He said he would be the one to tell Remus what happened. Snape went straight to Dumbledore after we got him out and Dumbledore got a hold of the rest of us,” rage tinged his tone, “on the grounds. Having a disagreement. He took Sirius to his office and sent me and Peter to Madam Pomfrey even though we were fine.”

“Where did Peter go after Pomfrey let you leave?”

“To the dorm.” James softened slightly, meeting her eyes once more. “He was a bit shaken up.”

“Merlin and Morgana,” Lea cursed, “what the fuck is this whole thing.”

James made a soft noise of agreement. “I’m waiting for Dumbledore to tell Remus. I’ll go see him after.”

He reached for the map, unfolding it and refolding it until the Hospital Wing was visible. Pomfrey brought in Remus a little while ago.

“Pomfrey brought in Remus a little while ago.”

Lea was itching to ask about the map but she knew James knew this too and refused to give him the satisfaction of asking.

Sure enough, there was a ghost of a smirk when he saw her looking at the parchment. “We made a map of Hogwarts.”

“No shit,” Lea scowled playfully, ecstatic to see him teasing her. “It tracks everyone inside the castle?”

He nodded. “It has all the hidden passages and rooms we could find but it’s still a work in
progress. We haven’t been everywhere yet.”

“How did you get it to track everyone?” Lea noted, accepted, and tried to let go of the jealousy she felt at her brother and his friends for having performed such an impressive piece of magic.

“A true wizard never tells his secrets.”

“Hey, fuck you, Jamie.”

James snickered, and though it was soft and weak, Lea had never been happier to hear the mischievous sound in her life.

“See.” He tilted the page so Lea could indeed see the footprints marked ‘Remus Lupin’ as well another set labelled ‘Poppy Pomfrey’ by his side. James tracked his finger along the corridor leading into the wing, showing the labels ‘Albus Dumbledore’, ‘Sirius Black’, and ‘Severus Snape’ making their way towards the room. In another room just off the corridor, she could see her own footprints, right next to James’s.

“Wicked.”

“Yeah. It also means I knew you were in the kitchens for most of the night. Care to explain?”

“Just couldn’t sleep. Felt a little jittery.” She mustered up a wry smile. “It was probably the full moon.”

“Funny. You should go. Get some rest.”

“That’s hilarious, James. Really.”

He frowned. “No, really. There’s not much else to be done here, it’s just a matter of waiting.”

“So, I’ll wait with you,” she said firmly. “I’ll wait while you go talk to Remus and I’ll hang around quietly until you’re ready to go back to your dorm.”

“Lea.”

“Shut up.”

“Fuck! Fine.”

But he was smiling, and Lea felt herself settle – properly, finally – for the first time in days.

It was rather horrible, she mused, having to wait as Remus was delivered some pretty life-changing news; watch from behind a tall stone pillar as Sirius, Snape, and Dumbledore came back out of the hospital wing, the two boys looking worse than Lea could have ever imagined. Severus looked shaken, though there was an underlying anger in his eyes that made something unpleasant churn in Lea’s stomach.

That didn’t bode well for anyone.

Sirius looked as if the guilt was physically weighing him down, shoulders sagged and head bent, his wavy hair falling into eyes that were trained firmly on the ground. There was something shattered about his demeanour. Defeated. At least one of them seemed to understand the weight of their actions.

The most heart-wrenching part of it all, however, was watching James square his shoulders,
looking the most serious she had ever seen him, and walk into the hospital wing, shooting one last unreadable expression at Lea.

It was then that she sat, hidden in the shadow of the fire-lit pillar, and waited.
Chapter Fourteen

She didn’t remember closing her eyes but she had apparently managed to drift off to sleep, only waking when James gently shook her.

“I told you to go back to bed,” he said, a tired, wry smile pulling at his lips. “I wasn’t even gone that long.”

“Who’s tired? I’m not tired.” Lea yawned, rubbing her eyes before accepting James’s hand to stand. She shook off the post-nap haziness as best she could and turned an expectant look on her brother. “Well?”

James’s smile gave way to something more sombre and he took a step to the side, revealing none other than a hollow-looking Remus Lupin stood just outside the Hospital Wing.

He offered her the weakest smile she’d ever seen and said, “Hey, Lea. I don’t suppose there’s a chance you don’t know what happened?”

Lea, completely understanding the urge to keep trauma private, gave him the brightest smile she could manage. “What happened? I was just up late catching up on homework and took an early morning stroll through the castle. Little did I know my exhaustion would choose to consume me just as I was walking past the Hospital Wing and I would need to sit down for a nap right here. Crazy, huh?” She tilted her head innocently. “What brings you here, Remus?”

His smile turned into something more genuine. “Oh, just needed a Pepper Up from Pomfrey. Had a little tickle in the back of my throat, you know?”

She nodded seriously. “I hear the flu’s going around. Best be careful.”

James laughed, looking as if he himself was surprised by the sound. He threw an arm around Remus’s shoulders, still grinning, and said, “Well, how about we finally get that sleep all of us need?”

“Brilliant,” Lea grinned, already moving down the corridor, “I’ll walk you two young lads to your dorm, eh? Make sure you get home safely and all that.”

“She’s,” James protested.

“For all the protesting, James and Remus followed well enough and the group fell into a comfortable silence until they reached Gryffindor Tower.

“Well, this is goodbye,” Lea said, eyeing the boys with blatant nerves as they stood at the portrait
James pulled one of his rarest moves and leaned down to press a kiss to her cheek. “Get some sleep. Please.”

She rolled her eyes even as she pulled him into a hug and held on rather desperately. “You first.”

When they separated, Lea took one look at the sullen, exhausted lines of Remus’s face and wrapped him in a firm hug as well, ignoring his initial surprise and holding him through his stiffness.

When she pulled away, she put a hand on his cheek, unable to hide her worry. “Did Pomfrey give you a Sleeping Draught? Because if she didn’t I can –”

“She did,” Remus told her, looking mildly amused at her antics despite everything. “And a muscle relaxant and pain relief,” he glanced at James, “not that I need the latter this time round.”

It took physical effort for Lea to leave them and return to her dorm, arriving just as her friends were rising.

“Nikki?” Bri asked, throwing a teasing look at Lea as she beelined for the bathroom.

“Drama,” Lea corrected, crawling into her bed. Merlin, she felt as if she’d not been in it for years. “I’m not making it out of bed today, I’ll fill you in later.”

The moment she said it she realised she would not, in fact, be able to fill them in on this and would now have to make something up to satiate their suspicion.

“McGonagall won’t get off your case if she catches wind of you skipping today,” Daisy said worriedly, approaching Lea’s bed and carefully placing hand on Lea’s forehead not entirely unlike the move Lea had pulled on Remus not minutes earlier. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Sleepy,” Lea managed through a yawn. She twisted under covers, turning so her face was firmly buried in her pillow. Voice muffled and half asleep already, she added, “Something tells me I’ll be the least of McG’s worries for a while.”

“Now, the Draught of Peace is notoriously difficult to brew and students have been known to misread or simply miss a few steps,” Slughorn announced, clasping his hands together and looking way too excitedly at the class. “For this reason, I have divided up students into pairs to increase the likelihood of success and also as a bonding experience! Inter-house unity for all! So! We begin with Olivia Rivers and Marlene McKinnon…”

Lea was barely listening, reading through the steps for the position interestedly and wondering whether or not it was a good idea to try and mix some weed into the draught for ultimate exam time de-stressing, and was brought back to the classroom by Daisy nudging her.

“You’re with Sirius,” she hissed, collected her things and standing.

“Oh.” Lea blinked a few times, wondering what to do with that information.

“I’m with James,” Daisy whispered, a slightly predatory look in her eyes, before leaving to join said boy.

Lea spun in her seat to look at James who was blatantly trying to avoid Daisy’s gaze. “Merlin bless
the poor boy,” she snickered, turning back to her book as Sirius took the seat next to her. Daisy had been trying to slowly work her way into the good graces of the Gryffindor after having recently decided on her next person of interest. It had only been one full day of her smiles being thrown at James and he was already extremely unnerved.

Lea, on the other hand, found herself rather unbothered about being paired with Sirius, after finally feeling somewhat at peace after the dramatic events that took place earlier in the week.

“Oh good, she lives,” Bri intoned as Lea sat at the Slytherin table. She’d only just made it out of her bed for dinner after having slept like the dead for the entire day – and was much better for it as well. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt so calm and rested.

“You look better than you have in days,” Laury said, reaching across the table to place a warm hand on Lea’s own. “What happened last night?”

Floundering for a moment, Lea tried to come up with something to say that wasn’t too complicated to remember or back up. “Oh! It wasn’t really anything – I was up late having a study after McGonagall let me go and accidently stayed up all night. Not on purpose I swear!” She tried to make her words as genuine as she could when Laury narrowed her eyes. “But anyway – I went for a stroll when I realised the sun was just about to rise and ran into James on the fifth floor. Turns out, he was having a bit of a tense night as well and I just had a chat with him about it.”

“What does he have to be tense about?” Bri snorted. “Zonko’s running out of fanged frisbees?”

Though she knew Bri was only teasing, Lea couldn’t help the scowl she shot at the girl. “It was actually something rather important, I’m sure you understand that I would like to respect his privacy by not telling you but still – it’s insanely fucking lucky I caught him when I did. He was in a bad place.”

“Of course,” Laury agreed, squeezing the palm still in her gentle grip. “And I don’t think it was luck that brought you to him in his time of need. Things like that happen as they are meant to.”

Bri scoffed and Lea almost did the same before pausing abruptly. It was rather convenient that the one time she had happened to be up and about at obscene hours of the morning was the same time James had experienced what was likely the most traumatic event of his life. And the music room? What were the chances?

Seeing Lea ponder her words, Laury smiled brightly and continued, “It explains why you were feeling so restless for so long – there was nothing tangible to explain that was there? And now you’re not?”

Horrified for genuinely entertaining Laury’s theory but still very much entertaining it, Lea swallowed nervously. “This isn’t – like, this doesn’t have some higher meaning or anything, does it? About, like, my psyche or something?”

Bri looked at her incredulously. “You don’t honestly –”

“Probably not.” Laury shrugged. “Just that some things are meant to be and sometimes certain things have to happen so other things can happen. You had to be upset about the homework and then get twitchy and stressed so that you could help your brother.”

“Why are we helping her brother?” Daisy asked brightly, having only just returned from chatting up her latest infatuation – Frank Longbottom. Lea was mildly disturbed that her attention was
drifting towards Gryffindors now (she had always thought there was some sort of unspoken rule in Slytherin about not taking a dip in the red and gold pond), and spared a fleeting thought for what she would do if her friend took her interest in any Gryffindors she was acquainted with. Like James.

“James Potter was apparently having a stress last night,” Bri said, “and Lea was up consoling him the whole night.”

“Oh?” Daisy was barely paying attention at all, interest completely held by the jam she was spreading on her toast, and Lea dismissed her worry completely. Daisy wouldn’t go there. “Well, like brother, like sister, I guess.”

Lea frowned. “Rude.”

She brightened even more. “Hey, do you think your brother could put in a good word for me with Frank?”

“Remember to read every step carefully!” Slughorn was saying over the bustling of students. “Happy brewing!”

Lea spared a glance for Sirius, extremely confused about how to deal with him, and ran a finger down the page of her textbook, skimming the steps. “We need a fuck ton of powdered moonstone – do you want to crush or shall I?”

Her heart still ached every time she caught a glimpse of any of the four boys, of course – a feeling only made worse because they were visibly tense and unhappy. Peter took to sticking with Sirius in classes (although he himself seemed uncharacteristically short-tempered, glaring and snapping at Sirius whenever they had to interact), and James never left Remus’s side. All four of them were subdued, never talking back to a Professor or causing distress of any kind, and if they didn’t sort it out soon people were definitely going to notice.

She was unsure about how to make things better for them. It seemed the only way things could be fixed was for them to forgive Sirius (and for Sirius to be properly remorseful) but that wasn’t anything she could help with. Instead, she had sent a tiny request at the bottom of her last letter home that suggested her mother send some care packages to all four of them, and was pleased to see them all receive copious amounts of sweets that morning.

It was only Remus that thought to catch her eye across the Great Hall, and she quickly turned away from his raised eyebrow, trying to hide her pleased smirk.

When she received only silence in return, she turned to look at Sirius properly. “Well?”

He looked like he hadn’t slept in days – dark smudges under his striking eyes and an absence of his usual confidence and swagger. He really did need that chocolate. “You’re not going to say anything?”

Deciding to cut him some slack, she sighed. “Am I supposed to?”

“You’re tight with Snape, aren’t you? He’s probably had a lot to say lately.”

Lea snorted. “Don’t let Sev hear you say that. And actually, he’s not said anything about anything, I’ve heard more from James than anyone else.”
Severus had indeed avoided her expectant gaze at all costs, and she had found she didn’t really care for his excuses. So, it was with a short explanation to Regulus (he was mildly horrified at both Sev and Sirius’ actions but was more astounded by the sheer idiocy of the situation) that she officially dumped the task of dealing with Severus onto his lap.

Instead of looking relieved, Sirius seemed even more shattered at her words. “I don’t believe you don’t have an opinion. Come on, get it out of the way.”

She was not enjoying this. “I’m sure you’ve heard enough opinions. You know what you did was wrong.”

If possible, Sirius deflated even more at her words. “Yeah.”

“Look.” Lea was grasping for something to say to make this better. “You’re doing everything you can to earn back their trust and that’s all you can do. Remus will forgive you eventually.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t,” she said bluntly, suddenly upset that he hadn’t doubted the fact that Remus would, in fact, forgive him. “If I were him and my best friend had almost made my biggest fear a reality, I wouldn’t forgive that for anything. But Remus is a better person that us mere mortals and you’re so fucking lucky that he is.”

“Fuck.” Sirius rubbed his eyes. His bottom lip quivered for the briefest second.

Lea stared at him for a moment longer before deciding to switch tactics. “Not to trivialise your feelings or this situation but do you think Slughorn will notice if I stir in some weed in the Draught?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

It was like she could see his mind switch gears right in front of her eyes. He raised an eyebrow.

She nodded, sighing. “You’re right, I’ll figure it out later. Probably not the best idea to mix marijuana with that much moonstone anyway.”

“The Draught of Peace is one of the most precise potions in the world – you’d put yourself in a coma.”

“Still better than taking the fucking OWLs,” she muttered, turning away with her textbook to collect the ingredients from the storeroom. “Sort out the cauldron, would you?”

She took a deep breath as she waited for space to clear out in the storeroom. She really didn’t know what to do with Sirius Black. What the fuck was he doing – just assuming Remus’s forgiveness was a given? It made her stomach churn with that same unpleasant feeling she had felt when she saw the anger in Severus’s eyes. If anyone was going to lack remorse about the entire situation, she had thought it would be Severus. She wasn’t so sure anymore.

Sure, Sirius looked terrible, and he was obviously guilty. But genuine remorse? Enough to make him think twice before doing something as reckless as this again? She hoped Remus wouldn’t give in too easily. Maybe that would reinforce the severity of his actions.

“Hey.”
James had come to stand by her side just as three people came out of the store, emptying it enough for the two of them to enter.

“Hi, Jamie. All right?”

He nodded, although even he looked worse for wear.

Waiting until the one other person in the store left, she asked quietly, “Remus?”

“Better, I think. I don’t know. How can I know if he won’t say anything? He’s already prone to self-hate more than the average person thanks to his fuckwit of a father and –”

Lea’s heart clenched. “Oh, Jamie.”

James just shook his head, moving to pull out all the ingredients for both himself and her as well, dropping them neatly into her arms.

“What –” she cut herself off, searched for some courage, and started again, “What has he been doing? I mean, to make up for it? If you don’t mind me asking.”

He looked at her with surprise – an expression she was becoming rather familiar with. “Of course you can ask, Lea, what’s that supposed to mean?”

She pouted slightly – she couldn’t help it! James had been keeping secrets from her ever since they started Hogwarts, she was more than valid in her hesitation to be shot down again.

“He – he apologises every day, whenever he can. Does all the things he knows Moony hates when he doesn’t do – like not shove his clothes under Remus’s bed when his own gets too packed, or not leave his wet towel on the floor in the middle of the room. Organised Moony’s books for him this morning and put everything neatly into his bag. Set his tea for him at breakfast. Does it all without saying anything too, other than apologising every so often.”

“Is Remus…?”

James’s jaw clenched. “Like I said, I can’t be sure. But I think all of this stuff he’s doing is going to get on Moony’s nerves soon enough and he’ll at least start speaking to him again. I –”

He paused as he held out the final ingredient to Lea, who took it while never taking her eyes of her brother, worry very much evident on her face.

“I don’t know if I’m ready.”

Lea frowned. “Remus isn’t going to just forgive and forget tomorrow, is he? It’s not happening straight away. And you’re more than entitled to your own emotions regarding this. You’re the one who had to go clean up after him and if you don’t want to forgive him as quickly as you think Remus will then don’t.”

He shrugged, moving out of the room. “I’m thinking on it.”

She followed him out, incredulous and worried. “Don’t, James. Just – give yourself this? Just this one thing?”

The smile he gave her in parting did nothing to make her feel better. Gods, she hoped he didn’t sacrifice this for his friends as well. Not after giving them so much already. Not after giving Sirius so much already. For all her jealousy regarding James and Sirius’s friendship, she was well aware
of the strength and support James offered as a friend. As a brother. And fuck Sirius for fucking it up.

The boy in question was leaning against the table, arms crossed over his chest and the ghost of a smirk present on his face as she returned, looking like he was ready to say something teasing.

Suddenly irritated that he had the gall to look even mildly amused, she snapped, “What’s your punishment, anyway? For making the biggest mistake of your life?”

He sobered immediately, straightening to help her set down the ingredients she had stacked in her arms. It only served to irritate her further when she noticed he was putting them down in order of use, the competent wanker.

“Banned from this Quidditch season,” he said quietly, “and detention every night for the rest of the term.”

Her jaw fell open. “That’s it? The term’s only, like, another month! That’s nothing!”

He flinched, unable to meet her eye. “I know. It’s not enough. Nothing’s going to be –”

“You’re damn right nothing’s going to be enough,” she hissed, snatching up the mortar and pestle and aggressively crushing moonstone. “You received a month of detentions for getting in a fucking Dungbomb war with Peeves, you really think that equates to risking someone’s life?”

“I –”

“No,” she said firmly, pausing abruptly in her task to meet his eye and make sure he understood. “This one isn’t your fault. You weren’t the one who decided on detentions were you? This is bigger than that. Fucking Hogwarts.”

Fucking Dumbledore.

Sirius looked supremely uncomfortable and very much intimidated. Lea’s irritation fell away.

“Never mind that,” she said, much calmer now that she felt she had managed to get someone to listen to her. “How much has to go in at the start?”

Sirius was a disgustingly good partner and the two of them managed to brew one of the three passable Draughts of Peace in the class – Lily Evans and Severus Snape being a part of the other two pairs. He didn’t make conversation with her after that, instead working attentively on their brewing and speaking only in relation to their work. Lea, happy to end all discussions of the incident on a high note – for her – was more than happy to oblige him, especially because she was ecstatic to be partnered with someone that seemed to take just as much care as her in terms of being excessively precise with following the instructions.

The irony was not lost on her.

The smile Sirius shared with her when they were victorious didn’t hurt either. She didn’t think she’d ever been on the receiving end of such a positive expression from Sirius Black before.

She was rather taken by it.

“Lea, there’re three more weeks of term and you’ve been sorely missed in our Common Room. Come tonight?”
Nikki always did that thing to Lea – the thing where she approached her (usually in front of large crowds), sat close enough for her to feel the heat of her body, angled her head just so to make it feel like she was the only person in the room, and whispered sweet things to her.

Of course, more often than not, the sweet things were followed by requests such as the one she had just made.

It took a second for Lea to understand exactly what was being asked of her. “I mean it depends –” she glanced up at the rest of her friends, all sitting around her, happily engaged in conversation of their own, and smiled. “Oi, ladies. Puff’s tonight?”

Daisy gasped, standing abruptly. “Great idea! I’m going to go ask Frank.”

“Doesn’t she know Frank Longbottom is practically engaged to Alice Mowry? Though the Gods know the two would never admit it,” Laury mused, “Perhaps Daisy will be the push they need to go public. Hufflepuff tonight sounds lovely.”

“I’m in too,” Bri added, twisting in her seat to try and spot Daisy. “I hope she doesn’t get herself hexed messing with someone else’s man.”

“They’ve never said anything about being exclusive,” Nikki assured her, “so, Daisy can’t be in the wrong, not really.”

“Still.” Bri’s eyes were narrowed on who Lea assumed was Alice Mowry – a short girl with long blonde hair and a scowl etched on her pretty features. “I’ve no issues with setting some boundaries on who can and can’t be hexed around here.”

“Frank should have the guts to tell Daisy the truth,” Lea said, shrugging. “Otherwise it’s all fair play.”

Nikki nodded, leaning down to brush her nose against Lea’s before dropping a chaste kiss onto her lips and moving into a more appropriate position to be seated in in public. “If Frank doesn’t tell her soon, I’ll be led to believe he’s using her to make Alice jealous. He’s really a sweet guy but he’s very much a Gryffindor – stubborn and cocky. Alice is lovely, though. I feel like she’ll see the game for what it is.”

Bri nodded. “Like I said; if she doesn’t, I’m down for a tussle.”

“Speaking of,” Nikki’s smile took on the edge Lea had come to associate with the thrill of acquiring fresh gossip, “Will Evan be making an appearance tonight?”

Trying and failing to school her expression, Bri’s cheeks took on a pink hue as she glanced down the Slytherin table to where Evan was seated. “How am I supposed to know? He can do whatever he wants.”

“Are you not still together?”

“So? We don’t have to go to everything together, do we? I’m still very much my own person.”

Nikki raised her hands in defeat as Bri glared.

“You will ask him, won’t you?” Lea pushed, slightly taken aback at Bri’s defensiveness. The two had been doing rather well, last she knew.

Bri shrugged.
Lea narrowed her eyes. “Has he done something?”

She sighed, but said nothing.

“I think she’s just getting cold feet,” Laury said, not even blinking at the force of the scowl Bri sent her way. “Evan got her roses this morning, for no reason other than he wanted to, apparently.”

“That’s lovely!” Nikki exclaimed.

“It’s terrifying,” Bri countered. “Daisy told me the other day there are some flowers that can be interpreted as courting gifts. What the fuck is that? Evan doesn’t say anything like that but he made an insinuation about possibly meeting each other’s family one day in the future the other day and I don’t know what to do with that.”

“I’m pretty sure roses are just roses,” Lea said, amused. “And he insinuated about possibly meeting families one day in the future. I don’t really think that screams severe commitment.”

“I don’t think you would know anything about commitment, little miss open relationship,” was the snappy reply, “And I’m not afraid or anything –”

Lea raised an eyebrow.

Bri made a noise of frustration, throwing her hands in the air. “Evan!” she half-yelled down the table, ignoring the way half the students turned to look at her. “You’re coming with me to a party tonight!” She swivelled back to Lea, triumphant. “See!”

Evan look mostly unfazed, shrugging as his friends burst into laughter, but the smile of agreement he offered to Bri was sweet enough to be dripping honey.

“He really is a lovely boy,” Laury noted, catching his smile the way Lea had. “Properly cares about you, Bri, and treats you right too.”

“What about you, Laury?” Nikki asked, laughing over Bri’s grumbling (though there was a definite blush there as well). “Planning on bringing someone?”

“Oh no,” Laury’s generally serene features took on a slightly predatory edge, “my plus-one’s are going to be there anyway.”

Lea was laughing, still pretty sure Laury didn’t know that one boy’s name, and was caught off guard when Nikki’s voice dropped to ask, “And you?”

“What?” She blinked rapidly, staring at the older girl while she waited for an answer. “Oh no, who would I…?”

Lea’s eyes slid up to the end of the Slytherin table, an idea forming. She smirked.

“What. The fuck. Is this.”

Regulus looked as if he might be physically ill as he was faced with the strong presence of yellow in the Hufflepuff Common Room. Lea didn’t think it was that bad herself, especially because the lighting in the room was dim and the yellow looked so much better when it was only visible in firelight and Lumos-lit lanterns. The atmosphere was already buzzing, students laughing everywhere and music playing softly in the background as people knocked back drinks.

She laughed, linking an arm through the taller boys. “No take-backsies!”
“I’m sort of into it,” Barty said thoughtfully from Reg’s other side. “It’s a strong statement – I can respect that.”

Lea cackled gleefully. “That’s the spirit! Come, children, let me make introductions.”

“Don’t you pull a fucking Cissa on me, Potter,” Reg muttered as she dragged him further into the room, Barty only a step behind.

The other girls had left before Lea as she needed a few extra minutes to deal with Reg’s last-minute attempts to ditch her, and were already huddled around one of the tables near the fireplace, as were the majority of the guests.

“Lea!” Daisy called, “Impeccable timing. Oi, Johnny, pour us three more, would you? Look who’s arrived!”

Greetings were called out from every direction as the three of them moved through the crowd to reach Daisy, Nikki, Johnny, and a couple of other boys from the year above. Daisy looked to be doing rather well even though she was being forced to deal with her ex-boyfriend and his friends but then again, Daisy had started drinking before she’d left the dorm.

“Regulus Black, as I live and breathe,” Nikki said dreamily, making space for the three of them as Johnny poured out three more shots and handed them out. “I never thought I’d see the day you entered my Common Room – not that’s it’s not a wonderful surprise, of course.”

“Believe me, the feeling is mutual,” Reg muttered, though the smile he shot the girl was as charming as ever.

“And Barty Crouch!” Nikki beamed, turning to the Ravenclaw. “I’m glad you could make it! Professor Sprout’s always going on about how everyone should take lessons from you in Herbology. Hopeless, the rest of us are, compared to you.”

Barty flushed slightly, shooting the girl a modest smile of his own.

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re perfectly adequate at growing the only plant we need,” Tommy announced, raising his drink in the air when he was met with laughter and calling out a, “Cheers!”

The sentiment was returned by the room as drinks were chugged. Lea grinned as Reg and Barty shuddered, riding through her own shivers as the Firewhisky slid down her throat. Mild noises of disgust sounded before the larger group dispersed, taking seats and settling down comfortably.

Nikki left momentarily to join Sai Khanna – a fellow seventh-year – in rummaging through a large box on the floor by the fireplace.

“Thank Merlin.” Evan appeared next to Barty looking supremely grateful to have the two of them there. “I thought you two would never show.”

Lea almost laughed at the way Regulus relaxed at the sight of his friend, posture slipping into something more casual and smile becoming more genuine. She reached over to poke Evan in the shoulder. “Oh, don’t be like that! It’s really lovely here, I promise. It’s not that different from what goes on in Slytherin, to be honest.”

Evan scrunched up his nose, but his eyes were twinkling. “It’s just so much yellow.”

“I hate to be the one to say it,” Barty replied with a cheeky smile, “but the green where you live isn’t exactly flattering either.”
All three of them gasped.

“You take that back, Barty Crouch Junior!” Lea demanded.

“And to think we were going to make you one of us.” Evan shook his head, disappointed.

“I look amazing in green,” Reg protested.

Barty rolled his eyes fondly, “You look amazing in everything, Reggie, don’t play coy.”

Regulus smirked, looking rather pleased with himself. “True.”

“Lea!” Nikki called, gesturing for Lea and the others to join her where she and Sai were sitting on the rug by the fire.

They each fixed a drink before they sat, Lea holding one for Nikki too. Daisy, Bri, and Laury were already part of the loose circle that had formed on the floor, as well as some sixth and seventh year Hufflepuff boys and Nikki’s roommates. Lea couldn’t help her smirk as people immediately shifted to let her sit next to Nikki and were subsequently forced to make space for Regulus and Barty too. Evan gleefully went for Bri who, already tipsy after helping Daisy with drinks earlier, received him generously, curling into his side immediately.

“Hands up for spliffs.” Sai grinned when his words were met with cheers and hands flew into the air. Nikki had achieved one of her many goals when she was voted keeper of keys of the Hufflepuff marijuana stash along with Sai Khanna, and she was positively beaming when she handed Lea a joint.

“Share with me?” she asked softly, smile taking on that edge as she slipped the joint between Lea’s lips and Lea nodded, winking at the older girl.

“Want a smoke?” Lea offered Regulus and Barty, both of whom were frowning at her, though Reg’s was more disapproving than Barty’s look of contemplation. When they shook their heads, Lea nodded and took the spliff from her mouth. “I wouldn’t usually, either – but, well, it is what it is.”

“That is the most blatant lie you’ve ever told,” Reg said flatly.

Lea smiled bashfully. “Yeah it was a second of my trying to preserve my image but then I realised who I was speaking to.”

“How disappointing,” he drawled, making her scowl and reach over to pinch him teasingly.

She offered the joint back to Nikki when she was done handing the others out, leaned back on her palms, tossing her hair back with a flick of her head and watched her girlfriend cup her hands around the spliff, seeing a small flash of blue as she lit the tip. She inhaled deeply. Exhaled slowly. Put it back between Lea’s lips.

Lea hadn’t been lying when she said spliffs were never her first choice – she strongly disliked smoking – but, in that moment, there was something perversely satisfying about the burn of the inhale and the release of the exhale.

She shuffled on the floor until she was half lying on Nikki, back pressed against her arm, so she could face Regulus and Barty fully and try to get properly comfortable. Spotting a familiar figure, she handed the joint back to Nikki and cupped her hands around her mouth before calling out, “Oi, Anthony! Turn the music up, would you?”
Anthony Lowkas, another seventh-year Hufflepuff, was probably Lea’s favourite person at these things specifically because he knew how to create the perfect atmosphere for a party. Even then, he smirked and shot her a thumbs up before doing as she asked, he raised the volume to the most perfect level where it was just loud enough that you couldn’t ignore it, but still soft enough to comfortable hold a conversation. He knew.

“Oh, it’s that kind of night, is it?” Nikki teased, taking a hold of one of Lea’s hands and curling their fingers together.

Lea grinned. “Hell yes. Reg is here, isn’t he? He’s going to dance with me later.”

“What?” Reg said, alarmed, and Barty snickered. “No, I’m not!”

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously not now, silly, but we’ll talk again after a few drinks, okay?”

It really was that kind of night.
Chapter Fifteen

In retrospect, Regulus should have known it would be a messy night.

The first disappointment occurred when Nikki left the party half-way through because Alexis, one of her dorm-mates, had gotten herself sick and she was the only one in their dorm still sober enough to monitor her. At this point, Lea was well drunk – as were Reg and Barty – but still okay.

The mistake occurred when she kept drinking after that.

The other girls (and Evan by extension) had disappeared to get lucky somewhere by the time Lea was falling over, leaving a hysterical Barty and a drunk-but-not-drunk-enough-to-be-dealing-with-this-shit Regulus to take care of her.

“Don’t make me silence you, Barty, I swear to Merlin,” Regulus cursed as Barty cackled and pointed when Lea knocked her arm painfully into the wall, only managing to stay upright through Reg’s grip on her other arm. She was giggling uncontrollably with Barty, amused by her own inability to walk as they made their way back to their dorm. “Lea, stand up straight!”

The look of exasperation of Reg’s face sent Barty into another round of laughter, this time stifled by the hand he clamped over his mouth when he got glared at. Lea pressed her lips together tightly, and curled both her arms through one of Reg’s, latching onto him sharply.

He sighed but didn’t shake her off. “Salazar, the two of you will be the death of me,” he muttered, curling the fingers of his free hand around Barty’s forearm and dragging him forward as he continued his journey.

He wasn’t really upset – how could he be when the two of them looked like they were having so much fun? – but it was still a fucking chore to have to half-carry them back to the dorm.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” Lea said, halting abruptly and jerking them backwards. “KITCHENS!”

“Ssshh,” Regulus hissed. “We are not going to the kitchens right now!”

“But Barty was sold. “Reggie, cake! We have to!”

They sat in silence, plates and plates of bread and bacon and cheese and cake spread on the table in front of them. He didn’t even feel bad, really, because there were not a small number of students scattered throughout the long tables of the kitchen, most of them recognisable from the event in Hufflepuff, and there were a handful of house elves already up and keen to serve. Lea and Barty were leaning on each other, both of them silent as they savoured their food, and even Reg, seated opposite them, couldn’t deny the sheer experience of a hot meal after a night of dancing.

Oh, and dance he had. Lea brought the topic up again after a few drinks and her exuberance mixed with the loud music and buzz of the room had convinced him to join her and the others, and once he was up, he didn’t sit back down. He had – dare he say it – a good time.

“What are you smiling at?” Barty’s voice was much quieter now, and his own lips quirked up as he met Reg’s eyes.
“Am I?”

“Mm.”

“I don’t know,” Reg admitted, “Just happy, I guess.”

Lea’s smile was blinding, even through a mouth full of pizza. She swallowed before saying, “I’m glad, Reg.”

“I don’t think I ever told you,” Barty said to Lea, turning his head slightly so he was practically speaking into her hair, “but it’s awesome that you’re dating Nikki Lee.”

Lea softened even further. “I know. She’s pretty awesome, isn’t she?”

“She’s leaving this year, right? Do you…do you have plans for that?”

Regulus idly wondered if Barty hadn’t told him something.

“We’re not really like that,” she seemed to deflate a little, “I mean, yes, we’re together, but we’ve never really been exclusive, if you know what I mean?”

“You mean you see other people but you’re still dating?” Barty seemed fascinated, vibrant eyes wide.

“I’ve only done it once,” Lea admitted, “but yes, that’s the general gist of it. So, in that sense I think we’ll be okay with…breaking up, I guess. I won’t lie and say it’s not going to suck coming back here without her, though. She’s a pretty important friend.”

Then she blinked rapidly, like she had just come to this conclusion herself, and Regulus almost laughed. She was ridiculously oblivious sometimes.

Barty wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her even closer to him. “We’ll still be here, you know.”

She smiled. “I know.”

Silence fell once more. Regulus watched with exasperated fondness as Barty and Lea gradually became droopier and droopier, fatigue settling in quickly. The idiots.

“Thank you for bringing us tonight.” It took Regulus a minute to realise the words had come out of his own mouth.

“Anything for you, Reg,” was her easy reply. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself.”

That was the thing with Lea, Regulus realised – she really meant it. Right from the beginning when she had decided to approach him in search of shared understanding, she had been prepared to offer him friendship in the truest form he’d ever experienced, save for what he’d had with Sirius before they’d been separated. She hadn’t come to him with any higher motive except for maybe a quiet hope for empathy but even when he hadn’t offered her any of that at the start, she seemed happy enough to live without it. Regulus hadn’t even realised how important it was to him to have her behind him until things started to escalate at home and he decided, on a whim, to tell her about it instead of worrying alone.

He had others now – Barty for one – but he would be lying if he said it wasn’t exhausting to deal with people using him for more than just his friendship. He knew that’s what it was with almost
everyone, even if things grew to become more genuine later on as they had with most of his housemates, but he knew it would always remain at the back of their minds, too. He couldn’t even blame them. He understood how suffocating pressure from one’s parents could be.

Shaking off the thoughts, Reg stood, hands on hips, and looked at his friends. “Okay, up you get. I know the dorms aren’t far but it’s still me who’s going to have to carry you two back if you pass out right now.”

“Who’s passing out?” was Barty’s defence, although the severity of his words was noticeably hindered by the yawn that followed.

“Come on,” Reg said fondly, pleased when they listened, both of them steadier than they were before.

Lea wound an arm through his, as she was wont to do, but this time Barty repeated the gesture on his other side, making something warm and fuzzy settle in his stomach. It really had been sort of amazing to see them enjoy themselves that night, especially all together.

They made it to the Slytherin dorms in one piece and it was only then that Regulus realised Barty’s bed wasn’t even on this floor let alone in this dorm. He’d barely had a moment to process his next step before Lea disentangled herself from him, sighed happily, and started making her way up the stairs to her dorm. When she realised neither of them had followed, she turned back and raised an expectant eyebrow.

“Well? Are you coming or not?”

Regulus and Barty shared a bewildered look before simultaneously shrugging and doing as they were told.

“I didn’t know you could get up to the girl’s dorm in Slytherin,” Barty mused as the stairs held their shape when they moved.

“Lucius told me once it has to do with intent and/or permission,” he replied, shooting his friend an amused look. “Have you tried going up to the girl’s dorm with dirty thoughts in your head, Barty?”

Regulus relished in the way Barty flushed, a pink hue colouring his high cheekbones. “No,” he insisted, reaching out to shove Reg in the shoulder, “Tony Boot once tried to follow Leona Edgecombe up the stairs to get some notes from her and he just slid right back down.”

“Like I said: intent.”

Barty’s nose scrunched up in distaste. “Men really are creeps, aren’t they?”

Lea led them into her dorm, making a soft, happy noise under breath at the sight of her bed. The room was empty, Regulus realised, so Barty could stay here.

He was pleased to note the size and layout of the room was exactly the same as his own, if not minutely neater and decorated with a good number of crystals that his most certainly did not possess. Whatever mess there was in the room was limited to the desks and window sill, and mostly consisted of open books and ruffled stacks of parchment.

That wasn’t to say the other spaces were empty – the walls were decorated tastefully with various posters of both magical and muggle bands; multiple empty packets of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans were stacked neatly on one bedside table next to an embarrassingly tall pile of chocolate boxes; makeup was precisely organised in a small square on a corner of the desk; and there was...
even a large colour-coded timetable stuck onto the door that led to the bathroom.

There were certainly things, it was just that the things were all kept precisely where they were meant to be.

“Take my bed,” Lea threw out to no one in particular, already rummaging through her trunk – presumably for her pyjamas. Reg didn’t even have time to look before Barty let out a blissful groan of his own and planted himself face first on the bed behind the trunk she was looking in, fumbling to kick his shoes and socks off before rolling over to unbuckle his belt.

“Don’t look,” was the only warning the boys got before Lea turned her back to them and whipped her shirt off, unbuckling her bra in a practised motion and slipping on her pyjama shirt. Barty was gawking at her bare back, hands frozen mid-action on his belt, and Regulus cleared his throat pointedly, looking away from Lea and glaring at Barty to do the same. Just in time too, if the tiny squeak that escaped Barty at the sight of Lea’s jeans giving way to a glimpse of red fabric before eyes managed to look away was any indication.

Regulus hovered uncertainly as Barty regained some semblance of control and threw his belt on the floor, tossing his own shirt off and getting under the covers of Lea’s bed, twisting and turning to get comfortable. Lea grumbled under her breath and picked up Barty’s discarded belongings, neatly folding them and placing them on top of her now-closed trunk and stepping around Regulus to get into the bed next to her own.

She was in the middle of pulling the sheets back when Reg turned to go and Barty’s tired voice mumbled, “The fuck are you doing, Reg? The lady said to take her bed, so come take her damn bed.”

“Why on earth would I do that,” he felt obligated to point out, “when my own is just on the other side of the stairs?”

Barty twisted again so he could look at Regulus, dark hair already rumpled, sheets a tangled mess, and blue eyes bleary as he frowned at him. “Because the lady said so. You can’t just ignore her, can you?”

“Get in the bed, Regulus,” Lea repeated, already settling under her own covers, “I’d like to turn the lights out sometime this year, thanks ever so.”

Reg glared, eyes flitting between the two of them, lingering on the space Barty had left him on the right side of the bed. It really wasn’t big enough to comfortably fit two people, he thought as he removed his own shoes and socks, taking care to tuck them carefully just under the bed, but it could fit them. It helped that Barty was still rather small, even though he looked like he was going to be a kicker at the very least.

And really, Regulus continued to himself as he took off his own belt, it would only be right to make sure my two excessively inebriated friends didn’t do anything stupid like choke on their own vomit or anything…oh, who was he kidding? He just didn’t want to be left out while his friends had a damn sleepover and that was the fucking truth.

He supposed he wouldn’t have missed much, really, because all Lea did was turn out the lights with a flick of her wand the moment Regulus was safely under covers and Barty started snoring almost immediately after, the line of his back pressed snugly against the length of Regulus’s arm. He half-heartedly reached out a hand to close the bed curtains but gave up when it required too much movement. Resigning himself to his fate with a sigh, he settled more firmly into the comfort of the bed and the warmth of his friend. His head felt like it was spinning much more rapidly than
it had been a minute ago but he thought he rather liked it.

Across from him, Lea turned in her bed to face him and he didn’t have to see her to feel the warmth of her smile, even though her eyes had likely shut the moment the lights were off too. He felt his own mouth curl into one in response.

“Goodnight, Regulus,” came the barely-audible whisper.

“Goodnight.”

When Regulus drifted back into consciousness, it was to the sound of the door slamming shut.

“It’s almost noon,” Daisy Parkinson’s unmistakable voice assaulted his ears. “Time to get up, everyone.”

“Why are you all shoved into two beds?” Laury Kama’s much softer tones questioned. “There are two more empty ones, you know. Everyone could have had a bed to themselves.”

“Didn’t know if you’d come back. Didn’t want to take your bed,” Lea mumbled from Reg’s left. Her voice was low and rough with sleep. “Don’t ask me what the fuck Bri was thinking.”

Regulus rolled onto his other side so his back was pressed against a stirring Barty’s, facing Lea. He didn’t remember ever sleeping as deeply as he just had and he didn’t think he was enjoying the lingering heaviness in his head either. It took him a moment to work himself up to opening his eyes but when he did he was greeted with the sight of Brianna Hale sharing Lea’s bed, an arm thrown across her stomach and her face buried in Lea’s shoulder, still wearing the clothes she’d been wearing the night before, shoes included. She hadn’t even made it under the covers.

Regulus was mildly alarmed that he hadn’t noticed at all when she’d come in.

He began to sit up, positioning himself against the headboard and letting his head adjust to the change in position. It was after he’d taken a few deep breaths and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes that he noticed Daisy and Laury stood between the two beds. Both were still dressed in the clothes they’d worn the night before but appeared relatively neat for what Regulus thought they’d been out doing.

Daisy had her brow furrowed and was staring at the form next to him, barely visible under the quilt.

“Bartemius Crouch the Second, is that you?” she asked, voice thick with amusement.

“No,” was the muffled reply.

“It is you!” Daisy was grinning from ear to ear. “What would your father think if he saw you like this?”

Barty threw off the sheets abruptly, standing up way too fast and looking as if he had just come to the same realisation. “It’s a good thing he isn’t here, isn’t it?” was all he managed before turning terrifyingly pale and rushing into the bathroom.

Daisy wrinkled her nose as the unmistakable sound of vomiting floated through the open door.

“Oh, poor Barty,” Laury said sadly, though even her mouth was twitching with amusement. She stepped closer and opened the drawer of the bedside table next to Lea’s bed, revealing circular
rows of potion vials held in one of those extending stands that could be lifted up to display each row properly. She carefully extended said stand by a little metal hook in the centre of the circular rows before selecting two little vials from the now six shelf tall storage, both of which there seemed to be an extensive stock of amongst the remaining potions.

“Hangover Potion?” she offered Regulus, holding out a vial with clear liquid. “You aren’t nauseous, are you?”

Regulus shook his head and accepted the potion gratefully, smiling his thanks. She pulled another of the same before heading into the bathroom, speaking in low, soothing tones to Barty as he groaned.

“It’s best had with food,” Daisy told him, “to get rid of the taste, you know. Chocolate?”

Regulus uncorked the vial, scoffing. “At this time of day?”

And then he tossed back the liquid in one go, barely managing to swallow it before he started coughing uncontrollably as his tongue burned. It was spicy. Daisy laughed, walking around the beds to the other bedside table where the sweets were stacked.

“Is that the sound of Hangover Potion?” Bri asked, finally raising her head from Lea’s shoulder to blink at Regulus’s pained, hacking form. “I need one.”

Next to her, Lea was frowning, rubbing her own eyes and rolling into a sitting position, legs hanging off the edge of the bed. Her usually messy waves were in an even more shocking state (they had only gotten worse when she’d cut her hair short) and smudged layers of makeup framed her glassy eyes. “I think I might still be drunk.”

Brianna snickered, sitting up herself but resting against the headboard as Regulus was, accepting the square of chocolate offered to her by Daisy as Lea reached out and got her a potion. “I’d be surprised if you weren’t after the amount you knocked back last night.”

“Not that it wasn’t magical seeing you dance on the tables,” Daisy added teasingly, offering Regulus chocolate of his own. He took it graciously and could have cried at the way it soothed his tongue almost immediately. His eyes had been about to start watering, for fuck’s sake.

Lea looked mildly horrified. “I got on the tables?”

“But worry,” the blonde continued, “Alex Finley was right there to catch you when you fell off.”

Her frown deepened. “The Ravenclaw? Which slag let him –”

“He’s very handsome,” Laury interrupted, walking back into the room arm in arm with a much more reasonably coloured though still terribly dishevelled Barty. He flopped back onto the bed but stayed upright next to Regulus this time, pulling the covers up and over his bare chest. “In a classic sort of way, you know? Academic sort of handsome. Scholarly.”

“And you were thoroughly distracted by Reg and Barty’s dance moves for the rest of the night,” Daisy finished, “so even though he couldn’t take his eyes off you, he didn’t get any more of your time.” Her smirk became sharper, “And can I add: seeing you three maintain your three-way waltz through the entirety of Bohemian Rhapsody was the highlight of my night and I got given head so –”

Barty’s surprised bark of laughter sounded at the same time as a gagging noise from Brianna as she choked back her potion and inhaled her chocolate. “Wait,” she gasped, shaking her head sharply.
“Merlin, why does that never get better? Really gets your sinuses, doesn’t it? Okay, I’m ready now. Debrief time, let’s go from the top.”

Laury and Daisy each sat on a bed. Regulus respectfully bent his knees so Daisy could cross her legs comfortably even though he had no idea what the fuck was going on. He supposed he should just be grateful the other girls weren’t screaming at the sight of the two of them in their dorm and found himself feeling rather grateful for the Slytherin tendency to adapt. He didn’t think his poor head could take the dulcet tones of teenage screams of terror this early in the day.

A quick glance at Barty showed that he, too, was confused but insanely curious about the inner workings of the girls’ dynamics. Regulus rolled his eyes fondly. Predictable Ravenclaw Barty, always in search of some sort of answer.

“From the top,” Daisy repeated, tossing her head back to look at the ceiling as she mused. “Well, I was happy when Bri was nice to Evan, for one.”

“I’m always nice to Evan!” came the immediate protest.

“You’re not mean to him, I suppose,” she corrected lazily, “but I wouldn’t say you’re always nice.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Laury assured a pouting Brianna, placing a consoling hand on her leg, “It just means you need some time to work through your feelings which is okay because you’re actually working through them.”

“I disagree,” Bri said firmly to the snickers of the other girls. “Next.”

“Jerry Rivers was making eyes at me pretty much right from the start,” Daisy continued lightly, grinning when protests sounded immediately, “I think he likes my new hair colour.”

“Another Ravenclaw?” Lea demanded, reaching out a leg to try and kick Daisy but falling miserably short. “Another one? What the fuck is that!”

“Liv Rivers will have our hides if you fuck with her kin,” Bri added furiously, “I don’t have the time to deal with enemies that live right next to us, thanks ever so.”

Daisy scoffed, blue eyes lowering to meet Brianna’s brown. “Don’t act like I couldn’t take Liv Rivers.”

“You could absolutely take her but she’s in our house. In our year. We have practically every class with her! It’s just exhausting.”

“Relax, okay?” Daisy had softened. “He just went down on me, it was only a bit of fun. Besides, Frank didn’t accept my invitation so what was I supposed to do? Mope? I don’t think so. Next.”

A final round of glares was exchanged before Laury suddenly smiled brightly. “The Hufflepuff’s name is Sammy.”

Gasps.

“What do you mean it’s Sammy —”

“– you have to lead with that —”

“– it’s been a year —”

Next to him, Barty frowned. “Sammy? Sammy Finch? What about him?”
Lea, Brianna, and Daisy gaped at him while Laury smiled sagely.

“You know him?” Bri demanded. “How can you know him? It’s not possible.”

“What on earth do you mean? Why can’t I know him?” Barty shot back, confused. “He’s in Charms Club. I helped him strengthen his Reparo last year. He’s very nice.”

Suddenly, Lea burst into laughter. “To think – to think we could have just asked Barty all this time,” she managed in between giggles.

“Ask me what?”

“What his fucking name is!” Bri exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. “Laury’s been seeing him – loosely – since fourth year and we couldn’t figure out his damn name! He never wrote it anywhere we could see, none of the professors said it in any class, and none of his dumb friends seemed to say it either! It was a fucking conspiracy and you’re trying to tell me you knew all along?”

Regulus couldn’t help but be highly amused that four witches of above-average intelligence were unable to learn someone’s name.

“Actually, I only found out when Barty greeted him last night,” Laury added. Bri groaned, banging her head against the headboard in frustration as Lea laughed harder.

“Next,” was Bri’s only response and Lea struggled to control her mirth as all eyes turned to her.

She wiped away tears, still smiling. “Well, I’ll admit I’m struggling to remember details but it was fun, right? And we,” she gestured to Regulus and Barty, “went to the kitchens before bed and can I honestly say I think eating that food is the only reason my stomach feels so steady right now because let me tell you – my head does not.”

“My stomach and I are going to have to respectfully disagree,” Barty said pointedly, scowling playfully at Lea.

She rolled her eyes just as lightly. “You didn’t have any pizza, did you? That’s the damn secret.”

“Pizza?” Daisy said, pouting. “You had pizza without me? I want pizza.”

“You can ask the house elves whenever you want,” Regulus felt obligated to point out. “Although if I remember correctly, they’ve got one elf who specialises in making pizza – some other students were talking about it last night – but it’s a shame, I can’t seem to remember his name…” he trailed off with a wry quirk of his lips.

Daisy pouted in mock disappointment as Lea burst into laughter once more. Bri shook her head at him, muttering, “Too soon. It’s just too soon.”

“Okay, your turn,” Daisy said to Regulus and Barty once Lea’s laughter had died down.

“Our turn?” Barty’s eyes widened and he twisted to look at Regulus desperately. “What did we do last night?”

“You drank a stupid amount,” he said pointedly, grinning at Barty’s pout. “Other than that, I don’t think I have much to say.”

“Well, I have something to say,” Bri said haughtily, the smirk on her face putting Regulus on the
defensive immediately. “I’m really happy the two of you came last night. I feel like it makes people hate us less when they see Slytherins like you mingling.”

“I’m not a Slytherin,” Barty pointed out, although he was smiling at the discomfort in Regulus’s suddenly stiff frame.

“You’re practically a Slytherin. I can’t remember the last time I walked into our Common Room and you weren’t there.”

“I’m glad you came because you’re my friends and you danced with me while these slags ditched me for hook-ups,” Lea added, her smile much more knowing than Regulus was comfortable with.

“And don’t worry. Yes, you partied with Hufflepuffs but you’d be surprised at how many Slytherins you find down there every so often. It’s just a good time, Reg.”

And Regulus knew this and Lea had given him this speech the night before when she’d convinced him to go in the first place as well, but there was still a little ball of nerves that knotted in his stomach, a bit of apprehension at the consequences if his mother found out what sort of company he’d kept.

“Either way,” Bri continued, barrelling through the obviously sensitive topic, “it’s good for us. For our image.”

He caught the speculative look Lea threw at her friend and wondered himself why Brianna was so keen on a shift in image; who she was trying to impress. He knew she was a half-blood and, while not ideal, she was still protected within their house and was certainly not the only one either. Outside of that, Regulus always believed Bri to be well-liked – well, as liked as she could be given her generally aggressive temperament – and couldn’t think of anyone that wouldn’t be willing to look past her house, if that’s what needed to be done. Other than maybe the occasional Gryffindor, he supposed, but even most of them were pretty okay with anyone who didn’t actively look down on them. It was like that with all of these girls, save for a few exceptional circumstances with Lea.

“That’s sweet and everything,” Daisy said, idly inspecting at her nails, “but I thought you were going to mention how Charlie Everett couldn’t take his eyes off Barty all night.”

“What,” Barty half-screamed as Lea frowned deeply and muttered a disgruntled, “Ravenclaw.”

Regulus felt something unnameable flit through his chest. He raised an eyebrow at Daisy. “Proof?”

She smiled at his demanding tone, unfazed. “I saw him. What more do you need?”

He scoffed, unnerved by the glint in her eye but unwilling to show it.

“What do you mean he couldn’t take his eyes off me?” Barty seemed to be working himself up into something of a panic. “What does that even mean?”

“Means he likes you,” Daisy said bluntly, “maybe in a more-than-friends type of way.”

Barty was gaping, mouth opening and closing and eyes wide, as he looked between Daisy and Regulus. Regulus himself had his eyes narrowed on Daisy, trying to discern what exactly it was she was saying. Barty started to fidget in the silence, leg beginning to jiggle under the cover and Regulus put a hand on his knee, making him still immediately though his nerves remained palpable.

Regulus turned to Lea.
“Who’s Charlie Everett?” If his tone came across as more aggressive than was considered appropriate for the current conversation, she said nothing. Instead, her eyes shifted from where they, too, were fixed on Daisy in speculation, to meet his hard stare.

Her mouth lifted into the ghost of a smirk. “Ravenclaw. Fifth year. Pretty.”

“He couldn’t take his eyes off me?” Barty said again, awed.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, but you’re quite pretty yourself, sweetheart,” Lea drawled, smirk becoming firmer when Barty squeaked under the attention. Regulus was rather annoyed, though he wasn’t entirely sure why. Maybe it was the incessant chatter about romance – it was disappointing to find out girls really were as simple as everyone assumed them to be.

Whatever the reason, it was because of his irritation that he spoke without thinking, “Don’t involve yourself until I know more.”

Lea made a soft noise of amusement while Daisy outright burst into laughter, Laury and Bri both looking as if they were holding back their own. Barty turned to him incredulously and he silently cursed his own stupidity.

“Excuse me?” Barty had always been shockingly expressive, no matter what the situation, and it was one of the things Regulus had found endearing about him all the way back in first year. It made it easier to trust him, trust his intentions, and even now, when his confusion at the situation turned into astonishment in the space of a second, Regulus could read every emotion in the arch of his eyebrows, the lines of his mouth, and the perpetual wideness of his eyes.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Regulus said honestly, lowering his voice (conscious of their audience) and hoping Barty would see he was sincere. “I just meant it won’t hurt to be careful and I could ask around about him, if you want. Only if you want.”

He softened almost immediately, although some level of incredulity remained. “I’m not going to do anything about Charlie Everett,” he said just as lowly, amusement tingeing his voice. “Though I suppose it’s nice to know you care so much.”

Regulus attempted to hide how pleased he was. “Don’t be stupid. You’re one of us.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of the blinding smile Barty gave him.

Lea cleared her throat and it was only then that Regulus realised he and Barty had twisted towards each other, heads bent rather close together in an attempt to gain some semblance of privacy.

He turned to her, raising an eyebrow. She raised one right back, though it looked like she was fighting off a smile.

“Perhaps everyone should get dressed,” Laury suggested in her gentle tone. Even she looked entertained. “Lunch should still be on.”

Regulus nodded, standing up and trying to shake off whatever mood had settled over him, as Barty rolled out of the other side much less gracefully to pull on the clothes he’d removed the night before. As Regulus pulled on his own shoes, Lea stood too, groaning as she gripped the headboard and took a moment to get her bearings in the new position. She reached for a Hangover Potion and tossed it back in one fluid movement, not even flinching.

When Barty stared at her before demanding, “How?” Regulus found himself equally as impressed, feeling as if the spice was burning his throat once more just watching her drink the liquid.
She smirked. “I’m Indian.”

“She’s crazy,” Daisy corrected primly, giggling as Lea swatted at her lazily.

“Okay, boys, off you go,” she said jovially, moving into the bathroom. “Reg, make sure Barty makes it back safely, would you? I’ll see you both later.”

Regulus frowned, unable to determine what exactly that edge to her voice was.

“Listen to her, yeah?” Daisy added as she saw them out of the room. “Make sure Barty gets back all right. We don’t want him feeling all sick again and vomiting in the halls, do we?”

“But I feel fine –” he started to protest.

“Don’t be silly,” she interrupted with a final, pointed look at Regulus before she shut the door in their faces.

Regulus and Barty stared at each other for a minute, bewildered, before Barty shook himself. “You really don’t have to, you know, I really do feel better.”

Regulus suddenly felt like everything caught up to him – all the drinking, dancing, and laughing of the night before, the sheer contentment that settled in his chest at the sight of Lea and Barty blearily inhaling greasy food as they leaned on each other for support, the comfort in the line of Barty’s body as it settled against the line of his. He was happy.

In a rare show of affection, he threw an arm around Barty’s shoulders, offering the smaller boy his most charming smile. “Don’t be silly,” he repeated. “Let me change my clothes quickly and I’ll walk you back.”
“Did you see Bertha Jorkins knock pumpkin juice all over that poor first-year?” Daisy was snickering, “honestly you can’t help but feel bad for someone so severely socially inept and incapable of controlling their own limbs. It’s so embarrassing –”

Lea wondered if she should ask if Daisy’s sudden dislike for Bertha Jorkins had anything to do with the rumours that she was making moves on Tommy Cross.

“Miss Parkinson, while I believe disdain for Miss Jorkins’ accidents can be universally agreed upon, I implore you to keep your gossip to locations other than my classroom,” Professor McGonagall was stern as the last of the students took their seats and she stood, commanding the attention of the room.

Daisy blinked innocently. “But don’t you want to hear about who was snogging who behind the greenhouses yesterday, Professor?”

The professor’s nostrils flared. “If you’re referring to Miss Edgecombe and Mr Binder, I assure you that, despite my best efforts, I’ve heard it all.”

The class burst into laughter and Daisy’s smile was impressed as she graciously accepted her loss, miming zipping her lips together. McGonagall began her lecture – the theory behind Geminio really was rather complicated and Lea was not keen for the theory behind vanishing and conjuring if duplication raised all these philosophical questions. She settled in for a long session of note-taking, slouching in her seat with a sigh and holding her quill poised.

Daisy had other ideas, though, and she turned her body almost completely to Lea, lowered her head conspiratorially and whispered, “Bertha was slagging off about me, did you know? When she knocked over the juice. The bitch is spreading rumours about how terrible I was to Tommy and how she’s spent days consoling him and mending his broken heart.”

Lea frowned. Some problems were to be expected post-breakup for Daisy and Tommy, especially considering they had been rather besotted with each other and the feelings were very real between them. Lea knew this – it was why she was ready to deal with a few days of bickering about Bertha Jorkins (after all, it was only natural to despise the girl that came after you), but the knowledge of that same bickering going the other way didn’t sit quite well with Lea.

“You know the truth of what happened,” Lea reminded her friend under her breath, doodling a mindless pattern on the corner of her page to look busy, “and he knows the truth of what happened too. Don’t let it get to you.”

There was a second where Daisy’s expression became affronted and Lea’s eyes widened, realising her words may have come across as more dismissive than she had intended, but it didn’t hold.

Daisy softened almost immediately. “It’s getting to me,” she admitted, her mouth twisted with frustration and regret. “I know it shouldn’t – I know I did the right thing – but it’s getting to me.”

Lea sympathised. “Don’t be hard on yourself,” she said gently, putting a hand on Daisy’s knee, “You have to give yourself some time to stop hurting, you know? It’s not been that long and you’re allowed to be bothered.”

Daisy attempted a smile and nodded. “You’re right. You’re so right. It really hasn’t been that long, has it? It’ll be fine. Besides, Tommy always did have good taste, there’s no way he’s going to let
himself get pulled by Bertha Jorkins.”

Lea snorted, gleeful that some of her friend’s melancholy had been chased away. “Bertha Jorkins can suck my dick – there’s no chance anyone’s going to look at her after they’ve been with you. I’d like to see the slag try to say another word against your character. Merlin knows if I catch wind of that I’ll hex the compensation padding right out of her bra –”

Daisy elbowed her sharply just as McGonagall cleared her throat. Horrified, Lea looked up to find most of the class’s attention on the two of them with the professor’s impatient glare at the forefront. Many of the students were snickering, Bri’s laughter loudest at Lea’s back, and it was with a sigh that she resigned herself to the fact that maybe she hadn’t been speaking as quietly as she thought she had.

From a few rows even further back came Evan’s teasing, “Know all about compensating bra padding, do you, Potter?”

She scoffed, sitting up and twisting in her chair to retort, “You wish you could get close enough to my tits to find out, Rosier. Besides, it’s not like your girlfriend was complaining when she was in my bed the other night.”

“Oh, it was you who was in my bed,” Bri protested as snickers around the room increased when Evan mimicked taking an arrow to the heart and slumped back in his chair dramatically.

“That’s quite enough!” Professor McGonagall interrupted, silence falling almost instantly when she spoke only to turn into groans when she continued, “Five points from Slytherin and as Miss Parkinson and Miss Potter seem incapable of keeping their chatter outside of my classroom, I think a change in seating arrangements are in order.”

“Boo,” Bri called loudly, throwing a crumpled-up piece of paper at the back of Daisy’s head and missing. “Can’t keep the gossip down for a second, can you, you minxes?”

Lea snatched up the paper from where it landed on the desk and threw it back at Bri in Daisy’s defence. “It was important, you cow.”

“Do not make me hand out detentions,” McGonagall said sharply. “Slytherins sitting on my right of each desk please stand and swap with the Gryffindor on my left of the desk parallel. If any of you decide to play stupid about not knowing which seat this means you are to take, I will take ten points per second I am kept waiting, as well as a detention per minute. Move.”

There was no rule that said Slytherins were to sit on one side of the classroom and Gryffindors were to sit on the other, but when desks were organised in neat rows as they were in the Transfiguration classroom, that was just the way students had arranged themselves. This division wasn’t as clear in Charms or Potions – simply given the layout of the classroom and Slughorn’s preference for shifting students based on skill level respectively – and it was even more blurred when the class wasn’t made up of only Gryffindors and Slytherins. Nevertheless, the routine of sitting separately had been in place for years and the grumbling that occurred at the change in said routine wasn’t quiet in the least.

Lea herself had a moment of sheer panic when she realised the many potential pairs that could be made up through McGonagall’s random orders and then immediately forced herself to ignore it. There was nothing she could do about it and she wasn’t in the mood to hyperventilate in the middle of Transfiguration. So, she slouched even further as Daisy packed up to move and kept her eyes firmly on her books as people shifted.
“It wasn’t until the soft, familiar, “Hi,” was offered to her that Lea lifted her head to give Remus a small, pleased smile.

“Hi, yourself,” she said. “Do you think I should look to see who got paired up with who or will it just make me burst into stress-induced hives?”

Remus glanced around the room for her. “I think you’ll be okay. I mean, your friend Daisy’s looking at James a little bit like she wants to eat him but I think that’s the worst of it.”

Lea snickered. “Oh, is she? Poor James.”

They quietened as McGonagall continued their lecture, this time no-one was brave enough to make the slightest of sounds until she was done and they were told to work in pairs to answer the questions she had written on the board.

“Not to encourage your stress-induced hives or anything,” Remus started conversationally as the two of them wrote down the questions and began answering them, “but Peter’s got this look on his face that I’ve come to associate with soft explosions – the kind that tends to take even Peeves by surprise – and he’s got his eyes on Hale’s book bag.”

Lea made a noise of amusement. “Do these soft explosions happen to come out of his unusually pert backside as well?”

“Unusually pert – did you just make a fart joke, Miss Potter?”

She laughed, straightening in her seat and twisting to face him, resting her elbow on the back of her chair casually. “Don’t try and pretend that wasn’t what you were going for.”

Remus’s mouth twitched in amusement but he held his affronted expression. “I was not! How dare you imply something so untoward? By soft explosion, I meant the kind that usually leaves some substance other than fire and ash behind, generally something rather sticky and difficult to wash off. It’s Peter’s specialty, you see.”

“Should you really be telling me such intimate secrets?” Lea mused, stifling her giggles and glancing over her shoulder to where Peter was, indeed, eyeing Bri’s bag with not-entirely-innocent curiosity. “I am a prefect, after all.”

Remus snorted. “So am I. Knowing something is a far cry from being able to prove it and besides, Peter’s proclivities are hardly a secret.”

She rolled her eyes. “I think we both know your interpretation of what consists of prefect duties is extremely independent from mine.”

“Is that why you can be found drinking and smoking in the Hufflepuff Common Room every other weekend?”

Lea blinked innocently, looking up at Remus with wide eyes. “Whatever do you mean? What’s wrong with drinking pumpkin juice with some friends?”

“Oh? And the smoking?”

“Smoking?” she said incredulously, “Oh no, no, no, you must be confused! The only smoke in that room comes from the incense.”

He was properly smiling now. “Incense?”
“Oh, yes. To stave away the negative energy, you know. It’s more of a spiritual support group than anything else. Extremely progressive. Very healing.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Remus agreed, smirking. Suddenly, his eyes flitted to something behind Lea and then back to her. “Peter definitely slipped something into her bag.”

Lea wasn’t overly concerned about said thing ending up going off in class because if Peter had the balls to piss off McGonagall when she was already in such a poor mood then he would have much more to worry about than an infuriated Brianna.

“I’d wager he’s going for something public,” he continued, tapping the end of his quill against the desk as he hypothesised. “He’s been a little restless lately. I think he’d go for maximum shock value, especially because this looks to be a solo mission.”

“I’m feeling a little bit like it’s extremely suspicious for you to be telling me this,” Lea pointed out, narrowing her eyes at his thoughtful expression, “and you’re going into quite a bit of detail about how this is supposedly a solo-Peter moment. Makes a girl wonder.”

Remus shrugged, his green eyes going wide and innocent the way hers had just moments before. “I’m just trying to help. I don’t want my friends to cause chaos and mischief but I can hardly prove anything, can I? So, I’m voicing my opinions so you can be better prepared in the potential scenario that something was to occur.” There was a ghost of a smirk on his face as he finished, “I couldn’t possibly let this kind of behaviour go uninvestigated, you know, since I am a prefect, after all.”

She raised an eyebrow disbelievingly even as she grinned and reached out to poke him lightly in the ribs for his teasing. “No, of course not.”

Filing away the information and her suspicions for later, she sobered a little and asked, “Got any plans for Christmas, Remus? Should I be warding my possessions in case you’ve a sudden urge to investigate my shenanigans?”

“Are you involved in any shenanigans that need to be investigated?” he countered. “Honestly, shame on you. A prefect of your stature? Engaging in unbecoming behaviour such as shenanigans? Head Girl Clearwater would have a heart attack. But no, there’s no need to worry yourself about my investigative prowess. I’ll be returning home to my parents for Christmas.”

“Oh, be quiet, Remus, everyone knows Josephine Clearwater adores me. I could throw a party in the prefect’s bathroom and she’d be pleased as long as I invited her. So, there are no plans for you boys to meet up, then?”

Lea knew she wasn’t being very subtle and from the way Remus’s smile dimmed a little, he knew it too. He was either too polite or too kind, however, to just tell her to fuck off. “No, not at the moment,” was his curt reply. “I don’t think we’ll manage anything these hols, unfortunately. Everyone’s parents expect them home.”

“That’s unlucky.”

“Mm.” Remus re-focused on his work, a tense silence falling between them. Lea was just about to let it be when he spoke again, though less warmly than before, “And you? Any plans for Christmas?”

Lea took the escape, accepting that, for all her sympathy for him, they didn’t actually know each other that well and if he didn’t want to talk about what was a painful and major event in his life, he
was well within in his right to keep it to himself. “Oh, not much. As you said, my parents expect me home. I’m looking forward to getting out of the castle for a little while, though. Lately, I feel like I can’t escape reminders of our impending OWLs no matter where I look.”

Remus looked at her again, a teasing lilt to his lips again when he said, “Oh, yeah, I forgot you were a bit of a swot. Worried, are you?”

The affronted noise that escaped Lea’s mouth caused his smile to widen. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged unapologetically. “We’re only in first term, you know, there’s still a long time before —”

“Oh, I am aware of when exams are, thanks ever so,” Lea interrupted indignantly, “And you watch your mouth, Remus Lupin —”

“Or what?” He was properly amused now, a striking, mischievous glint in his pale green eyes. Lea was feeling rather pleased that she had brought it out in him.

She narrowed her eyes playfully. “Oh, you don’t want to know.”

Remus’s smile took on a sharper edge but before he could reply, a piercing, “Miss Potter!” was thrown her way.

Lea turned away from Remus, face already schooled into something innocent. Professor McGonagall was approaching her desk, disapproval drifting off her tall frame. “Yes, Professor?”

“This doesn’t sound like an academic discussion.” She held out her hand for Lea’s parchment and proceeded to read over her mostly-complete answers.

“I would beg to differ, Professor,” Lea countered, “any discussion I have is extremely academic. Remember that time we had tea? I was the epitome of an intellectual conversationalist.”

“Whether or not this is true, please understand there is a time and place for every conversation,” she said, handing the paper back and tapping it with her forefinger. “Finish your work. Quietly, please.”

“Yes, Professor,” Lea said, smiling brightly. “Anything for you, Professor.”

Lea would swear she saw a brief smile flit across the teacher’s face before she moved on.

“Swot,” Remus said under his breath, a laugh playing on his lips.

She looked pointedly at the paragraphs he had written under his own questions. “Says you,” she muttered before complying with McGonagall’s request.

“Okay, I’m going to punch Bertha Jorkins in the face,” Bri snapped, slamming the door behind her as she entered the dorm. There was only about a week and a half left until the term was over, and Laury and Lea were getting ready for bed, both of them having finished dinner earlier than Bri and Daisy. “No. I’m going to punch her in the tit.”

“What did she say?” Laury asked, frowning. “She can’t still be on about Daisy and Tommy —”

“Oh, she can and she is,” Bri said darkly. “Daisy had just left to go meet Slughorn about her grade and the moment she stepped out of the hall, Bertha fucking Whore-kins goes off about how she thinks it’s so disgusting that some girls use men for sex and attention and how shameful it is to
have so many partners in such a small amount of time and how she would never be caught dead sluttling around like that with such a low self-esteem that she feels the need to break the hearts of poor men who just want honest love and connection –” she took a huge breath, “– No, I want people to see the black eye, I’m going for the face.”

Though her own frustration was rising, Lea felt obligated to point out, “There’s not a single person who believes a word out of Bertha Jorkins’ mouth, Bri, it’s not worth getting detention over.”

“It makes Daisy feel like shit,” Bri retorted. “We can’t just let her –”

“Daisy’s rising above it,” Laury interrupted, “and it’s even been genuine, these past few weeks.”

Daisy had, in fact, been getting rather good at not letting it get to her as she had resolved to do a few weeks previous. Lea, on the other hand, had found it getting to her more and more over the same period of time, especially because Bertha Jorkins tended to only get louder when Daisy wasn’t around. While she was gradually losing her temper, she also didn’t want to give the Ravenclaw the satisfaction of rising to the bait. To be honest, the one time Lea had managed to catch Bertha’s eye threateningly, the older girl had shut right up and the amusement she’d felt in that moment had kept her going for a long time.

“I mean, Tommy practically runs away whenever she approaches him!” Bri continued ranting. “You’d have thought she’d taken the hint by now!”

“Who?” Daisy asked, a bright smile on her pretty face as she practically skipped into the room.

Bri opened her mouth but shut it with a click when Lea and Laury glared at her. She deflated almost immediately, lowering her head and dropping onto her bed sullenly. “No one,” she mumbled into her palms.

Daisy looked her with confusion for a moment but dropped it, obviously eager to tell them some news of her own. “Frank agreed to go to Hogsmeade with me on the first weekend back!” she squealed, flopping onto her own bed and beaming at the ceiling.

“That’s great!” Laury exclaimed, moving to give her a tight hug.

“Finally wore him down, did you?” Bri said, lifting her head and looking at Daisy with amusement. “I’m surprised he lasted so long, honestly.”

“Me too,” Lea snickered, stopping to give Daisy a congratulatory kiss on the cheek before getting into her own bed and pulling her tall stack of textbooks from her bedside table onto her lap to make sure she’d done all the reading for the next day’s classes. “Why was it he was saying no again?”

“I think he just didn’t know me well,” she said dismissively. “Reckon the attention made him nervous.”

“You sure it wasn’t to do with his infatuation with Alice Mowry?” Bri asked innocently.

Daisy scoffed. “They’ve never been official. In any capacity. Obviously, something isn’t working there. Whatever it is, I get to reap the benefits.”

Suddenly, Lea let out a distressed noise. “I think I left my Potions textbook downstairs,” she groaned. Turning pleading eyes onto her friends, she was met with three scoffs. “But I’m in my pyjamas!”

“Not valid,” Bri said dismissively. “Everyone lives here. Everyone’s been in their pyjamas around
the castle at least once. It’s just the Common Room.”

Grumbling, Lea shoved off her bed covers and stood. “If Severus sees me like this I’ll never hear the end of it.”

She received no sympathy from her friends as they looked her up and down, taking in her sleep-worn black track pants and humongous, thick, long-sleeved white pyjama top with tiny snitches all over it.

“Wear a robe,” was Bri’s flat advice. Scowling, Lea did as such and muttered disgruntledly all the way down the stairs. Thankfully, the Common Room was mostly empty by now – it was a Wednesday, after all, and people tended to simmer out towards the end of the term.

Unable to find her textbook at first glance, she tightened her robe around her and moved closer to the couch near the fireplace – the last known location of the aforementioned textbook – and frowned some more when she saw it was occupied by a male figure. Said figure was initially unidentifiable, sprawled artistically in the dimmed, evening lighting as he was, but could be later be recognized as none other than Regulus Black.

Lea felt significantly less embarrassed about her state of dress when she saw it was him, largely because she became distracted by the deeply pensive expression on his face.

“Are you all right?” she asked, amused. “Something has to be hurting with how hard you’re thinking.”

He blinked up at her, surprised to see her standing over him. “Rude. Yes, I’m perfectly okay. Are you all right?”

It was her turn to be bewildered. “Yeah, I am. Why?”

He smirked. “Oh, it’s just that you’ve got your robe on inside out and only half your hair is braided.”

Horrified, she reached up to find that her hair was, indeed, only half tied, and her robe was also inside out.

“Gods, I don’t even care,” she groaned, sitting on the edge of the coffee table next to the couch. “For real, you look worried. What is it?”

He looked at her exasperatedly. It wasn’t uncommon for Lea to see Regulus as he was – casually dressed, casually sprawled – especially in the Common Room – but to see him alone was less frequent. More specifically, to see Regulus reach such a state of calm – to the point he was lying across the couch, one arm tucked behind his head and one foot casually resting on the floor while the other leg stretched out over the cushions – without Barty nearby was uncommon. Lea had always assumed that Regulus needed someone trusted always semi-alert with him if he was to drop his guard as he had.

“It’s nothing, Lea.”

“Is it Christmas? I bet it’s Christmas. You’re going home, aren’t you?”

“It’s not Christmas.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay, but I want you to know that if it is Christmas you should consider staying at the castle. Why put yourself through emotional turmoil if you don’t have
to? I’ll stay with you. Hell, Barty will probably stay with you too.”

Regulus’s face did something Lea had never seen it do before – his cheeks turned pink, the colour a pretty, warm tone on his pale skin in the firelight. She subtly pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t hallucinating.

“It’s not Christmas, Lea,” he repeated firmly, unable to meet her eye.

She stared at him. “Well, okay then.”

He nodded in agreement and shifted a little, getting comfortable, before closing his eyes.

She continued staring. “I’ll just go, I guess. Have you seen my potions book? I swear I left it somewhere here…”

“I haven’t seen it.”

Lea frowned at him and stood, reaching over him to look under cushions.

“Hey!” Regulus protested sharply as his position was jostled by one rather forceful snatch of a cushion. “Watch it, witch!”

She looked at him incredulously and hit him with the cushion. “Don’t you dare speak to me like that, Regulus Black!”

“I already did,” was his muffled retort, barely audible under green fabric.

She lifted a knee and pressed it into his stomach. “What was that?” she asked dangerously.

He gasped in pain, shoving the pillow away. “I said I’m sorry and I won’t do it again!”

Lea removed her knee and returned the cushion to where it was. “Thank you.”

He continued to sulk as she continued to search, finally finding her book under Regulus’s head of all places.

“That’s what I get for lying on the couch and studying,” she sighed, smoothing out the corners of the pages that had creased under prolonged pressure.

Just as she moved to leave, he blurted, “You know people think we’re courting.”

Lea turned back slowly. “I…knew that was the impression we gave off with the photo in the paper. I figured it was okay to let people think what they wanted, considering the real reasons I was with you at the party.”

Regulus was blushing again and Lea suddenly wondered if this was a romance thing. “I knew too,” he admitted, “but I don’t think I really knew.”

“Okay,” she said, drawing out the word. When he said nothing more, she admitted, “I’m not sure where this is going. Is there – is this a problem? We know it isn’t true, and so does anyone else that matters.”

“So they, though?” He looked like he regretted the words as soon as they’d left his mouth and Lea’s eyes widened in understanding.

“Say, Regulus,” she started teasingly, “Is there someone you want to tell me about?”
He groaned and lifted a pillow, covering his face with it. “No,” he mumbled into the fabric.

“No?” Lea sat back down on the edge of the coffee table, crossing her legs and resting a palm under her chin, trying to cover her smile with her fingers.

“No.” This time it came out more firmly, and Regulus shoved the pillow away before sitting up, perching himself in such a way that he was facing Lea fully. Lea recognised the act of forcing one’s self to relax, and she watched with amusement as he forcibly dropped his shoulders and softened his posture before aggressively meeting her eyes.

“I was just thinking,” he continued, “that if I were to choose to court someone, having to dissuade them about any relationship between us would be bothersome.”

Lea snorted. “I’m in a relationship, Reg, I don’t think anyone really thinks we’re together. And it’s not courting, for Morgana’s sake, call it dating like a normal person. What are you, a hundred and eighty?”

“But our parents – did you know my father gave me the sex talk after he saw us together at that party?”

She properly laughed at that. She couldn’t begin to imagine what it had been like.

“Except,” he said over her laughter, “it wasn’t just about safe sex or anything – it was about what to do if I accidentally got you pregnant and we had to deal with it quietly. I was given a list of potions I could give you – as well as the names of multiple stores that would owl them inconspicuously – and a firm lecture about how you weren’t an acceptable spouse for a wizard of my stature but you may prove to be in the future and I should very firmly keep our relations discreet and promise no commitment until he and Mother deemed you an appropriate match.”

She wasn’t laughing anymore.

“I didn’t even think anything of it at the time,” Reg drawled as if he hadn’t just stunned her into silence, “because we weren’t together, were we? And I had other things to worry about. But now I can’t help but wonder – who would be considered a good match? Who am I going to have to live with for the rest of my life? What’ll happen to you if Mother and Father decide you aren’t worthy of my attention anymore? Will we even be friends?”

Okay, hold on,” she interrupted, trying to regain her footing. “But nothing’s happening right now, is it? Reg, you can’t worry about these things before they’ve even happened. You’re not going to get a single moment of peace ever if you do that.”

He began to protest but she shook her head, speaking over him, “And in terms of telling people we aren’t together – if you ever have to prove to someone…important to you that we’ve never dated then it’ll be easily explained, especially considering we’ve never been together and it’s not even a discussion, really.”

Regulus crossed his arms over his chest and jutted his chin out stubbornly.

She sighed. “Gods, and to think I just came downstairs to get my fucking book,” she muttered as she stood and plopped herself down on the couch next to him, leaving the textbook on the table so she could wrap her arms around his stomach freely and try to project warmth and positivity as much as she could. He froze under her touch for a second before relaxing and settling an arm around her shoulders, settling against her more comfortably.

After a few moments of silence, she asked quietly, “Are you sure there’s no one you want to tell me
He hesitated, but ultimately shook his head. “No. I’ve just been thinking.”

“You’d be better off thinking about literally anything else,” was her dry response. “This isn’t a now sort of problem. It’s more of a repress and maybe deal with later but most likely just repress again sort of problem.”

“It’s so lovely having a friend who gives me such practical and actionable advice in the face of my adversities.”

“Fuck off, Reg. And what do they mean not an appropriate match for a wizard of your stature? I’m a fucking lady.”

“I’d say the sticky variation of Dungbomb you let off in front of Peter Pettigrew during dinner last week might be an example of your less-than-pure character.”

Lea was rather proud of herself for that, both for the look of sheer surprise on Peter’s face and also for not getting caught. She’d thrown a stasis charm on Bri’s bag as soon as she could, explained the situation to them, figured out when the thing was ready to go off (it turned from a calm, pale blue to a deep, royal purple), and managed to speedily sneak it into the fruit bowl in front of the boy and remove the stasis charm without being noticed.

The most rewarding part of her action was the way Sirius (who had been sitting opposite Peter) also got doused in the gooey, black substance that exploded and the way James and Remus, who were a few seats down, had been the first to burst into uncontrollable laughter.

“I have no idea what you mean, Reg. If anything, it demonstrates my intelligence even more because I wasn’t even a suspect – the only reason you know is because I told you. I’m one hundred percent wife-material. High society wife-material, at that.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the institution of marriage. Why are you fighting with me? Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Fuck off, Reg.”

Lea walked into the Great Hall on the last day of term with a mug of tea and a single white carnation in her hands.

She couldn’t remember the last time she woke up as excited as she had, and she’d been in a fantastic mood all morning, ready for the last day of term and keen for the light lessons the day was likely to bring. She’d even woken early enough to take a morning walk around the greenhouses as she nursed the cup of tea she’d picked up from the kitchens on her way out. She was ecstatic to see her parents tomorrow, and there was an unshakeable feeling of eagerness that flowed through her veins at the thought of sleeping in her bed again.

She was also still riding the high from the fantastic grades she’d gotten on the Potions and Charms essays that’d been handed back.

The girls had only just started to rise when she’d left, but they had all made it to breakfast, although they seemed to be in some sort of mood if the scowls on all their faces were anything to go by.

Lea approached them happily, a bounce in her step that hadn’t been there since before Hogwarts if
she remembered correctly, pausing only in front of Regulus who was surrounded by Severus, Evan, Travers, and – a rarer companion – Theo Nott.

“Regulus,” she greeted with a bright smile, tossing the white carnation onto the table in front of him. “For you.”

There was a moment of silence as the boys stared at her, stunned, before Regulus looked slowly from the flower to her, raised an eyebrow, fought a smile, and shrugged.

Lea’s smile widened.

“The polite thing to say is ‘thank you’, Regulus. Wherever have your manners gone?” Theo drawled, shaking off his surprise and grinning at Lea.

Regulus rolled his eyes but relented, giving her a quiet, “Thank you,” which was laced heavily with amusement.

“What, no carnations for the rest of us?” Evan quipped lightly, looking up at her through his lashes.

“Oh, I think lilies are more Severus’s style,” she returned without pause, smiling when the boys snickered and Severus glared. Oh, how she had missed his grumpiness. “Besides, white would clash terribly with Theo’s hair.”

“Isn’t it a little forward of you to be handing out carnations?” Travers asked. His words were a little mean, but his tone was more curious than anything else.

“Don’t be jealous, Travers.” Theo rolled his eyes, smirking at the younger boy who looked immediately bashful at being reprimanded. “This is likely the best day of Regulus’s pre-pubescent life. A younger boy, Lea? I would’ve thought you’d go older for sure.”

“Reg and I are the same age, actually.” Lea returned his smile, shooting a wink at Regulus and moved to continue down the table. She spared a fond glance for the Hufflepuff table, spotting Nikki sitting with her Quidditch team-mates. “But yes, I would say that’s a fair assumption.”

Her amusement gave way to suspicion as she reached her friends, their irritation obvious even before she took her seat with them.

“What is it?” she questioned, eyes flitting between each of them with curiosity. None of them answered. Bri and Laury were sat on the outside of the table, both of them glaring at something behind Daisy and Lea.

Then she heard it.

“…Did she just give a carnation to Regulus Black? Isn’t she dating Nikki Lee? Honestly, I’m not surprised, with friends like hers that sort of behaviour must be pretty standard. I’d never be caught dead juggling so many people like that – without a care for their feelings! Girls like that should be so embarrassed – but I suppose it isn’t their fault, is it? They must have such low self-esteem that they can’t be satisfied with just one person’s love and affection. They crave power and attention –”

Lea’s eyebrows had risen towards her hairline, mildly impressed that Bertha Jorkins had the sheer audacity to say that while sitting a literal four seats down from the girls. She’d never done it so close before (not that it mattered since the girl redefined what it meant to have a voice that ‘carried’) but not being told to shut up by anyone had obviously given her new-found confidence.
We’re ignoring it,” Daisy said sagely, putting her hand on Lea’s shoulder and turning her back around so she wasn’t looking at Bertha anymore. “It doesn’t bother us.”

“It doesn’t,” Lea agreed – and meant it, too – but, “but it bothers us a little that she feels comfortable doing it so close to us, right?”

“No.” Except this time Daisy’s resolve was weaker and Bri’s eyes had brightened (dangerously) and Laury’s scowl became a soft (scary) smile and Lea twisted in her seat, stretched her legs out in the space between the Slytherin and Ravenclaw table, crossed one ankle over the other, leaned back on her elbows, and tilted her head.

“Hey, Bertha,” she said – she didn’t have to raise her voice in the slightest, that’s how close they were sitting for Merlin’s sake. And the Hall wasn’t even that busy! There was barely any noise! Honestly, Lea felt like she could have comfortably taken points from the girl just for causing a ruckus and no professor would question her. “Talking about us? We’re right here, you know, you can come say it to our faces. We wouldn’t mind, would we, ladies?”

“Oh, not at all,” Laury agreed from behind her.

“We love a good discussion,” Bri added, “We really value different opinions around here. Very open-minded, we are.”

Lea wanted to laugh at the way Bertha’s blue eyes had widened dramatically at being addressed directly. The girls she had been talking to didn’t look the least bit worried for their friend but instead adopted severely interested expressions, eager for how the drama would progress.

When Bertha did nothing but gape, Daisy finally turned to look at her. That seemed to jolt her enough to blurt out, “Oh no, I wasn’t saying anything about you! More of a general commentary of young girls in our society these days.”

“Honey, we are the society,” Daisy looked like she hadn’t meant to say the words – trying to stick with not engaging, no doubt – but Lea beamed.

“Indeed,” she said, grateful she was able to hold her laugh back, “so go ahead, Bertha, tell us what you were saying.”

“Uh –”

Lea was rather enjoying watching Bertha flounder in the face of confrontation – and it looked like her own friends found it amusing too (it must have been annoying to listen to the same rant for weeks on end) – but she was also in a good mood, and wanted to have this dealt with so she could enjoy her Christmas without worry.

“Because you see,” she said lightly, idly playing with her necklace (the same anklet her mother had given her all that time ago lengthened with a gentle extension charm on the chain), “it’s really not in your best interest to start things you can’t finish say, for example – ordering an entire roast chicken when it’s only you at dinner –”

“Telling McGonagall you’ve just left your books in the dorm and have to run back to grab that essay you’ve absolutely not written,” Bri added.

“Telling someone you’re a fantastic dueller even though you’re eleven and just got your wand yesterday,” Daisy contributed.

Laury nodded. “Telling your mum that you weren’t the one that finished that cake even though
you’ve got chocolate all over your mouth and she’s about to lecture you into the next century.”

“– talking shit about someone – loudly, obviously – and then not having the balls to admit it when you’re confronted,” Lea finished. “If you’re going to be obnoxious, Bertha Jorkins, then at least fucking own it and stand up for yourself.”

Bertha Jorkins really was a pretty girl – all blonde hair and blue eyes, flawless skin, petite frame, pretty features, that whole thing – but anger did her no favours. Her skin flushed rather dramatically as her hands balled into fists, and her long, straight hair became frizzy as it crackled with magic.

Lea felt a dark sort of satisfaction at seeing her speechless, and she straightened in her seat, looking at the Ravenclaw table with interest. “Is that Nutella? We never have Nutella!” She stood and moved to stand next to Bertha, resting a knee on the bench between her and one of her friends as she picked up a slice of toast and made a show of spreading Nutella on it carefully and generously.

“You see,” she continued, lowering her voice so only Bertha and those in their immediate vicinity would hear, “we sort of decided unanimously that we wouldn’t give you the satisfaction of responding to your slander, but then I was like – mm, I think she’s getting too comfortable – you know, because you just got louder and louder and seemed to decide we were just going to roll over and let you walk all over us, so you could come and practically sit on top of us, and continue to slut-shame and spew your jealousy all over our breakfast.”

She stared at Lea indignantly. “I’m not jealous –”

“So, you haven’t been defaming Daisy’s character for weeks because you want to get in Tommy’s bed?”

“No, I –”

“And you haven’t been calling all of us – especially her – sluts because we may have engaged in intimate acts with more than one person?”

“Well –”

“Because you know it’s disgusting when that happens, like, at all. But for a woman to do that to another woman? Do you know how many times girls are shamed and shunned for engaging casually in sexual acts when boys can do the same – and more – and not have a single word said against them? We don’t do that to other girls. We can’t because then that means there’s not a single chance of breaking the cycle.”

Lea dropped the knife she was holding onto a plate with a sharp clatter and lowered her head so her words wouldn’t go past Bertha’s ears. “Fuck you for doing that to us, Bertha Jorkins. Remember, sweetheart, you can spread rumours all you want and maybe people will listen if you speak loud enough. I, on the other hand, have access to the kind of people who’ll not only listen to what I say but make it law if I so wish. You better hope none of us catches wind of you talking shit again or you’ll be lucky to show your face again in that society you value so much.”

She straightened suddenly, a bright smile back on her face while Bertha continued to gape. “See? We love a good discussion.”

Bri took her turn at lunch, and Laury at dinner. Daisy had apparently managed to catch her in the bathroom between third and fourth period and said the older girl had almost looked like she was going to apologise for a second. Lea almost felt bad for being so dramatic, especially when Bri said
it looked like Bertha was going to start crying when she had her chat.

But it was the genuine affection and gratitude on Daisy’s face when she noted how none of Bertha’s friends came to her defence, the honest fondness in Bri and Laury’s eyes when Daisy truly relaxed for the first time in weeks, that sent Lea home for Christmas with a warmth that lit her from the inside out, safe in the knowledge that she was very much in love with her friends.
“Darling, I’ve just got to pick up some owl treats and we can leave,” Dorea was saying, one hand clasped around one of Lea’s as she dragged her through the crowds and into the Magical Menagerie.

Lea was in a piss-poor mood. She should have known it would be a terrible idea to agree to go to Diagon Alley so close to Christmas, but her mother insisted there was shopping that needed to be done.

Holidays had only just begun but she was already losing her patience at being in such close quarters with James again, especially because he had decided he was in the mood to go out of his way to annoy her. In the two days they’d been home, he’d hidden around corners in the house and jumped out to successfully scare her five times, poured water on her head the morning their mother had asked him to wake her up, thrown his snitch into her yoghurt and splattered it all over her clothes, and taken to coming into her room while she was reading in bed, turning all her lights on, and leaving.

It seemed her good mood had been contagious, though it translated differently in James than it did in her. She just wanted to sleep in and bake with Twitchy and read her historical tomes well into the night and James was making it impossible.

“Honestly, Lea, why did you even come with me if you were just going to sulk the whole time?” her mother asked disdainfully as they entered the (blessedly) quieter store. There was a soft buzzing in the air, likely from the wings of the pixies floating in their enclosures, and the occasional croak from the toads lazing in their own tanks. The cats roamed free, although most remained perched on their elaborate scratching posts, and a tiny, tiny kitten began following at Lea’s heels the moment she stepped inside.

“I didn’t think it through,” she mumbled, helplessly smiling at the animal as she tried not to step on it. “James has been getting on my nerves like nothing else, I just wanted out of the house.”

Lea could hear the frown in her mother’s voice when she asked, “Are you two still not being nice to each other? I would have thought you’d have known better by now, my love.”

Lea tried not to get too annoyed at her mother – that was something that was never received well, especially since her mother was still somewhat livid about Lea’s haircut – but she tried to project an aura of dismay at her back as she followed her to the shelves of owl treats. “Mum.”

“What, darling? Don’t whine, it’s unbecoming.”

“It’s not my fault he’s so obnoxious,” she muttered, wanting to argue but not wanting to get into trouble.

Dorea stood in front of the shelves with her hands on her hips, perusing the options critically. “Don’t talk about your brother like that. You know he just has a different definition of what constitutes as amusing than you. It’s best to just not take it too seriously.”

She stopped a few paces behind her mum, frowning at her back. “Have you ever said anything to him? Why do I have to be the one to just suck it up?”

The kitten had risen on its hind legs, pawing at Lea’s calves. Sighing, she bent to pick it up, and stroked its brown-streaked fur distractedly, taking comfort in the gentle purrs that rumbled through
its small frame.

Her mother turned to look at her with something unreadable in her eyes, paused for a second, and then looked down. “That’s a pretty kitten.”

Abruptly, Lea’s frustration grew so sharply she thought she might start crying. As she blinked furiously and bit the inside of her cheek, the kitten in her arms shifted until its front paws were on one of her shoulders, and rubbed its face against her cheek, the purrs increasing significantly in volume. She laughed suddenly, surprised, and rubbed her cheek back against the kitten.

“Yes, she’s rather lovely, isn’t she?” A salesman had approached them with a bright smile. “She was a stray – we just found her a few days ago in an alley. Very well behaved, very intelligent. Wouldn’t be surprised if she had some Kneazle in her. She’s certainly seemed to take a liking to you, hasn’t she, young lady?”

“She’s very sweet,” Lea agreed, scratching the kitten behind her ears and admiring her striking icy-blue eyes.

“When did you get in this stock of Premium Owl Bites?” Dorea questioned, effectively bringing the salesman’s attention back to her.

Once the attention was off them, the kitten leapt out of her arms, trotting excitedly to a tall, purple scratching post. When Lea didn’t immediately follow, the cat looked over her shoulder with what could only be described as a look of disdain, and she – trying not to laugh – allowed herself to be led to a pile of yarn at the base of the scratching post. The kitten didn’t even pause before leaping into it unabashedly, rolling around and nipping at the loose strings. Lea sat on the floor cross-legged and watched her with a mix of fascination and amusement, not hesitating for a second to scratch her chin when she rolled onto her back.

“You wouldn’t try to silence me, would you? Or unapologetically shove double standards down my throat?” she asked the animal quietly, smiling when it purred in agreement. “No, you wouldn’t betray me, you sweet thing.”

There was nothing Lea hated more than when her parents – knowingly or unknowingly – put James above her. They were generally good at treating them equally. Yes, Dorea tried to instil proper manners and etiquette into Lea, but James was subject to most of that as well, and it was never as if her parents had forbidden her to do things like play Quidditch (until an incident when Lea was eight, but that was different) or go into the muggle town on her own when they let James do it. It was changing, though, or maybe Lea was just noticing more and more how they didn’t take her as seriously as they took him sometimes. The worst part was that she couldn’t even properly disagree with them; if she dared take on an argumentative tone against her parents they would likely remove all her privileges before she could say the word ‘unfair’.

Lea was jolted out of her thoughts by a hand on her shoulder. “Come, darling,” her mother said softly, a gentle look in her eyes as she watched the kitten nip at Lea’s fingers.

“Goodbye, my sweetheart,” Lea cooed, giving a few parting scratches to the now-meowing animal and feeling her heart break a little when the kitten followed her to the door and had to be picked up by the salesman before she left with Lea.

“Gods, why was that so painful?” she said in surprise, accepting the hand her mother held out to her.

“Kittens are the most efficient manipulators in this world,” Dorea said dryly, “and if she really was
part Kneazle, it makes her even more dangerous.”

“Mm,” was her sad response, grimly allowing herself to be apparated back home. She moved past her mum, scowled at James who was lying on the couch, tossing his snitch up in the air again and again, and went straight up to her room to mope some more until dinner.

James surprised her the next day (and not in a horrible way) by making polite – some might even say pleasant – conversation with her during breakfast.

“What did you think about that last essay Flitwick handed out? A little rude of him to ask for two rolls when he knew we had that test for Herbology and the quiz for History,” he mumbled around his mouthful of egg.

Twitchy appeared by his side suddenly, thwapping him on his arm with her dishtowel. “Young Master is not to be speaking with his mouth full!”

“Ow!” James protested, rubbing his arm. He pointedly swallowed his mouthful. “Gone! See?” He opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out.

Twitchy thwapped him again. “Good. But Young Master is to be improving his table manners or Twitchy will be jinxing the chair to shock him every time he forgets!”

Then she disappeared just as quickly as she arrived, returning to the kitchen to clean up the mess from making breakfast.

“Bloody menace,” he muttered grumpily as Lea stifled her laugh.

“Flitwick was rude,” she agreed, making sure her own mouth was empty before speaking. “But he graded easily on it, I think, which makes it better.”

James snorted. “Yeah, it didn’t make much sense that I got an E even though I was a good inch short.”

“Flitwick’s never been that bad about length, he’s rather lovely like that.”

“There’s a terrible joke just begging to be made somewhere there.”

“Don’t do it, Jamie, I’m the only one here and I won’t laugh.”

“Mean,” he retorted. “Anyway, I don’t think this is worth keeping a secret – Mum gave me this huge lecture about being nicer to you and refused to listen to me when I insisted we weren’t fighting or anything – we aren’t, are we?”

Lea thought about it for a second before saying, “No, I suppose we’re not. I’m fucking annoyed at you for the scaring and the water and the lights, though.”

He snickered. “Yeah, but that’s not fighting. But Mum wouldn’t listen to me, is my point. So, I figure if we play nice with each other for a few days until she eases up then we can go back to minding our own business again, right?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I guess. What do you mean by play nice?”

James beamed, hazel eyes growing wide with excitement behind his glasses. “I’m glad you see my vision, dear sister. Well, I think some conversation at meals, maybe some games of Exploding Snap, one or two trips into town together should be enough. We’ll work on it.”
She pondered his words and weighed up her options. If she really sat and dissected her emotions, she felt like she was more upset with her mother’s assumptions than she was with James’s actions. A break from the hypocrisy certainly held appeal, and spending time with James when he wasn’t actively trying to annoy her wasn’t always terrible.

“Okay. We can work on it.”

So, they started spending more time together.

It was fucking freezing outside – as was standard around December – so they began with spending time together inside. Their parents came home for lunch (both had left early that morning for work and to complete Christmas-related tasks) to find them jovially helping Twitchy set the table. Lea and James led the polite conversation through the meal and neither missed the proud, surprised (and slightly suspicious) looks they received for their trouble. As Dorea and Charlus turned to leave, they high-fived each other behind their parents back. It was a strong start.

“Does this whole talking to each other more thing mean I can finally ask you about that map?” Lea questioned late one evening. The two had spent the day helping Twitchy prepare for Christmas lunch the next day. There were only four of them, but Twitchy never liked to cook for less than fifteen, so while most of the meal would be prepared the next morning, the baking was more than enough to occupy their time.

James groaned, rubbing at his eyes under his glasses. He was spread out on the couch, taking up the whole thing, and Lea was lying on the carpet in front of the fire, her head resting on a cushion and her eyes on the ceiling.

“You really can’t mention that to anyone,” he stressed. “None of the others know you know – I broke the literal most important rule of being a Marauder by letting you see.”

She scoffed. “Honestly, Jamie, Marauder? You lot are so dramatic.”

“Don’t pretend you aren’t a little bit jealous.”

“I’ll be the first to admit the map is a fine piece of magic but I can swear on my fucking grades that there’s not a single part of me that wishes I was a part of your boy band.”

“Whatever you say, Lea,” he intoned, grinning when she threw up her middle finger in his direction. “A fine piece of magic, you say? Well, I can tell you it was no easy feat and a lesser group of wizards couldn’t even dream of achieving it –”

“Even if you do say so yourself, right?” she finished dryly.

“I love it when you see things my way,” he sighed happily. “But yes, you aren’t supposed to know about it so please don’t speak of it ever, to anyone, except me maybe – but only if there’s no one else around. Thank you.” Despite his insistence about secrecy, Lea was sort of getting the vibe that he wanted to talk about it. “So, what did you want to ask about?” She wasn’t really sure what gave her that impression. “It’s origins? What exactly it does? How it’s been utilised?” It was really only an inkling.

“How about we start with origins?” Lea said diplomatically – or at least neutrally. If she didn’t manage to quite hide her smile, then that was her business.

“Well you see the idea was born in first year when – as fresh, young, innocent minds – we kept getting lost in that safety-hazard of a castle,” he answered brightly, “and then it really solidified when we started finding secret passages and shortcuts. We started with a list of them, you see, to
always remember our options – seeing them written was a great way to visualise all the possibilities –”

“Possibilities for what?” Lea interrupted, bemused. “Getting to class?”

“Amongst other things,” he agreed airily, waving a hand dismissively in the air. “Anyway, from there it went to ‘oh, we should draw a diagram to really remember where things are’ – you see how the progression occurred –”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

“– and then we came up with a map! From there it was only natural to try and figure out where people were at all times, especially considering the map was primarily for – well – “

“Sneaking around?” Lea offered.


“Mischiefs.”

“It’s about getting the most out of our education, really –”

“Forbidden mischiefs.”

“– being able to truly know the castle we live in for so many years –”

“Finding hiding places when about to get caught engaging in said forbidden mischiefs.”

“– anyway, we have a map now and it tracks everyone and shows secret passages,” he finished grandly. “More to be added as discovered.”

“But the actual magic –”

“A gentleman never tells his secrets,” James interrupted, a sage smile on his face even as Lea grumbled.

“What was the point of this anyway,” she muttered.

James remained unfazed. “Since we’re asking personal questions now, am I allowed to inquire about Nikki Lee?”

Lea raised her head to frown at him. She hadn’t expected that. “If you’re polite, maybe.”

“I guess it just occurred to me that I don’t even know how the two of you got together,” he mused.

“I think that might have something to do with you never asking,” she replied blandly. “And perhaps with how we had strongly disagreed with each other around the time it happened.”

“Oh, yeah.” He didn’t look the least bit repentant and – for once – Lea didn’t have the energy to get upset. “Well. I’m asking now and we’ve explicitly established we aren’t fighting.”

Lea wondered how to explain it. “It just…sort of happened,” she admitted. “We appeared on each other’s radars through Daisy and Tommy and she kind of – latched on? I couldn’t tell you what made her think I was worth her time but I’m not complaining. She’s one of the best friends I could ask for and one of the few people I know who have their shit together, honestly and truly.”
James exhaled noisily. “She just decided she liked you? How can you make someone do that?”

“You aren’t talking about Lily Evans, are you?” Lea thought she didn’t even sound mean that time.

James surprised her by not getting defensive, but instead adopting a pensive expression. “I think – I think I’m over it.”

“Uh.” She floundered for a second, pushing herself onto the palms of her hands to look at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Evans. I’m done with that. She’s a bit of a tight-arse, isn’t she? And it’s not like there aren’t other girls that want my attention. That would beg for it, even.”

“Okay, slow down, Casanova,” Lea interrupted dryly. “What brought this on?”

James shook his head at the ceiling. “It’s just that she doesn’t like me very much, does she? And she’s rather horrible and loud about it. Why am I wasting my time?”

Lea narrowed her eyes. “Horrible about it? Did she say something?”

He hesitated. Her suspicions grew.

“You don’t have to tell me.” She would find out one way or another. “But – gods, I hate to say it but if you really like her then you shouldn’t give up, Jamie. What you need to do is change up your game, like, completely, and stop being an obnoxious wanker every time you express interest. There are better ways to convey your emotions than lobbing enchanted pieces of paper at her that say ‘Do you like me? Check yes or no’ and proceed to grow teeth and try to bite off her fingers when she ticks no.”

“Evans needs a better sense of humour,” he said dismissively although Lea could see the beginnings of a blush on his cheeks.

She had been praying for the day James would stop embarrassing her by tarnishing their name while getting shot down by Lily Evans – but there was something so sad about the defeat lining his face. It wasn’t something she was used to seeing. Besides, to stop after two years would be a waste and a tragedy.

But if she’d said something hurtful enough to make James stop in his tracks – James – then Evans had another thing coming.

“Not everything needs to be extreme, you know,” Lea said after a moment. “You don’t have to take these things so seriously. It might be good for you to just…enjoy yourself. Forget Evans. She’s always seemed like more effort than she’s worth.”

James frowned for a second, as if he was going to disagree with her, before his forehead softened and his mouth turned down grimly. “Yeah.”

Oh, Lea was definitely going to find out what this was about.

Christmas day found James waking Lea by flopping onto her bed sharply, his bony elbows digging into her ribs.

She gasped in surprise. “JAMES GET OFF ME WHAT THE FUCK –”

“Happy Yule!” he yelled into her ear happily. “Mum and Papa are waiting to open gifts!”
Lea jerked suddenly, throwing James off her and onto the floor with a thud. “OW!”

“Serves you right, you fucking twat,” she muttered, rolling off the bed and standing up to massage her sore ribs. “Bony idiot.”

Christmas mornings were always a time of comfort in the Potter household. No matter what was going on with them, the few hours at the start of the day when they exchanged gifts and ate obscene amounts of chocolate were joyous and sweet. This year was no exception, especially when Lea descended the stairs and entered their sitting room only to be greeted by the sight of a familiar ball of grey-brown fur curled up in her mother’s arms.

She faltered in the doorway. “Is that –”

“Merry Christmas, darling,” Dorea said warmly just as the same kitten from days before leapt lithely from her lap and strutted straight up to Lea, purring loudly as she wove through her legs.

“Oh, it’s you,” Lea breathed, bending to pick up the kitten and rubbing her cheek against the furry face. “Mother, you –”

“What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t respect what is obviously a union between witch and familiar?” Dorea said dryly.

“Lea gets a cat?” James whined, knocking his shoulder against hers playfully as he pushed past her. “I want a familiar.”

“I think everyone knows you and those friends of yours are animal enough, Jamie,” Lea muttered, grinning when he pouted at her balefully.

They settled around the room, Charlus and Dorea on the loveseat and Lea and James on the floor on either side of the coffee table. They gleefully worked their way through their gifts – James got a collector’s edition box set of wizarding comic books he was secretly obsessed with and the two of them received boundless boxes of chocolates and sweets. Lea got James a book that dictated the potential negative side effects of transfiguration. It had one particularly detailed chapter on all the things that could go wrong with animagus transformations (she thought she was rather funny). James got Lea a self-help book on how to manage stress (he smirked at her as she glared). The two of them had pooled resources together to buy their parents a rather extravagant decanter and bottle of elf wine – Lea had seen one similar at Grimmauld Place – and both were pleased with how impressed their parents seemed.

Lea’s fingers were pleasantly sitting in the unimaginably soft fur of the animal in her lap and she was grinning uncontrollably for the rest of the day. Her smile only widened when her mother pulled her aside as lunch was being served.

“I wanted to apologise,” Dorea started, looking more uncomfortable than Lea had ever seen. A mixture of sorrow, frustration, and embarrassment stiffened her mother’s lips and tightened the skin around her eyes. “I shouldn’t have asked you to suck up your frustration and not told James to fix his behaviour. Forgive me?”

Lea’s newly coined familiar purred contentedly in her arms as she accepted, grateful that her mother had listened. “Forgiven, Mother. Thank you.”

After lunch, the family settled in the sitting room once more. They were all pleasantly stuffed with heavy food and experiencing that familiar sense of lethargy that followed Christmas meals. James and Lea were throwing names at her kitten to see what would stick and the kitten was humouring
them well enough, meowing loudly from her position on Lea’s lap every few names as if to say ‘not a chance’.

“Lorna,” James suggested, flipping idly through one of his comics. He was lying on the floor in front of the fire, resting on his stomach in an effort to soothe the pain of eating too much.

“I’m not naming her after a comic book character,” Lea replied, sighing. She gently lifted the animal from her lap and deposited her on the rug in front of her. She was also on the floor, sitting cross-legged by James’s head to similarly take advantage of the warmth of the flames. The kitten curled up by her knee, her tiny body brushing against James’s forearm where it rested on the floor. “Blossom?”

“Tyra.”

“No comic book characters, James! Azalea.”

“Pointy ears. Bat? Batty? Bathilda?”

“Oh, Bathilda is one of our neighbours in Godric’s Hollow,” Charlus interjected, a nostalgic look in his eyes as he presumably remembered the woman. “A bit nutty, but makes a mean biscuit.”

“And the author of *A History of Magic*,” Lea added dryly. “Most definitely not.”


“Star?” she repeated incredulously. “James, stop it. I should have known better than to ask someone who nick-named his friend *Moony* –”

“Moony?” Charlus echoed, amused. “Whatever did you call poor Peter Moony for?”

James guffawed. “Not Peter. *Remus*. Pulled down his trousers in front of the entire Common Room once, the cheeky git. Remus really can’t refuse a dare.”

“You really are a terrible influence on that sweet boy,” Dorea chastised, although she couldn’t hide the amused twitch of her lips.

“Should I just call her kitten?” Lea mused, earning a lazy swipe at her arm from the kitten herself.

“Oh, just name her Cuthbert and be done with it,” James replied.

“As in *Binns*? Not likely.” There was a pointed meow of agreement. “If I were naming her after a teacher I’d go for Minnie, wouldn’t I?”

James’s snickering paused suddenly as the kitten started purring loudly.

“No,” he said disbelievingly, looking at the kitten with awe. “It’s just too perfect.”

“I didn’t mean it literally,” Lea said, alarmed. She reached out a finger to poke the kitten behind her ear to get her attention. “You can’t – I have to go to school! If she finds out she’ll give me the most disapproving look and my body physically cannot take it.”

The kitten lifted her tiny head onto Lea’s knee and looked at her in a way that could only be described as *pleading*, icy blue eyes wide and innocent. James started *cackling*.

“Minnie!” James said delightedly, sitting up and laughing harder when the kitten – Minnie, for the love of Merlin – immediately turned and crept into his lap, allowing herself to be held. “Oh, what a clever little thing!”

Helplessly, Lea turned to look at her parents only to find them sporting similar looks of amusement, her mother resting her head on her father’s shoulder and watching Lea and James fondly.

“Traitors,” Lea accused them vehemently, crossing her arms over her chest but fighting a smile as Minnie allowed herself to be scratched under her chin as James cooed at her.

The five of them settled further into the comfort of tradition as the day wore on. Charlus brought out the turntable with a flick of his wand and Dorea dimmed the lights and lighting candles as the sky outside darkened. Twitchy served hot chocolate and other sweet snacks intermittently, eager to feed them into the ground. Minnie seemed to thrive in the festive atmosphere that lingered, curling up lethargically against the curve of Lea’s hip where she lay on the floor and sang along lazily to the Christmas tunes.

When, in the late afternoon, the four of them started to doze off, Charlus and Dorea retired to their room to nap comfortably, and James and Lea rose from their positions on the floor to the couches. Minnie lay in front of the fire, curled up so her little eyes were looking into the flames. Soft Christmas music still played in the background.

“How’s Remus been doing?” Lea asked quietly, not wanting to disturb the peace too much. “This month’s full moon was a few days into the holidays.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Begun keeping track, have you?”

“I’ve kept track since it was confirmed, Jamie.”

He was surprised. “You never said.”

Lea sighed, tilting her head back against the couch and closing her eyes. “What would I have said? I saw Remus in class after every full moon, looking admittedly exhausted but fine otherwise. If he or you didn’t show up within two days of the moon then I’d start asking questions, wouldn’t I?”

Lea couldn’t see him anymore but she assumed James accepted her answer as he said, “Remus is okay. We offered to stay at school to wait out the full moon but, well, Remus has been a little bit… sensitive about us and full moons after he found out we’d been trying to become you-know-whats so we let him overrule us.”

There was a brief pause and James’s voice was slightly bitter when he continued, “We know he hates transforming with his parents but there’s only so much one can fight the boy. Besides, there’s not a chance he’s spending another full moon alone when we all transform. There’s no way he’ll be rid of us then.”

She still wasn’t sure about how she felt about all of that but again, it was something to be dealt with when the time came. “I’m glad he’s doing all right.”

Silence fell for a few seconds and Lea opened her eyes just as Minnie roused from her lying position, rising rather abruptly and beginning to pace in front of the flames.

James brightened suddenly and twisted in his armchair so his legs were dangling over one of the arms and he was facing her completely. “Hey, you’re a prefect, aren’t you?”

Lea raised an eyebrow, suspicious. “No, Jamie, what gave you that idea?”
He ignored her cheek. “So, can you tell me about the inner working of prefect meetings? Moony absolutely refuses and he’s successfully diverted us when we’ve tried to sneak in under the Cloak. Apparently, some things are sacred to him. Don’t ask me, I won’t pretend to understand.”

Lea snorted. “What do you want to know?”

He smiled so widely that Lea struggled not to snicker. “There’s a pattern as to who gets paired with who for patrols – I know there is but I can’t figure it out. Do you know what it is? And can you get me a copy of the roster?”

He didn’t truly believe she would tell him anything, did he? “There is a pattern, Jamie, but I couldn’t tell you what it was. I’ve never really given it much thought, to be honest. And the roster will change when term starts so I don’t think that’s about to be of much help to you.”

James pouted. “You won’t lend it to me when we get back to school?”

Lea blinked at him in innocent confusion before momentarily frowning at Minnie who had started yowling softly as she paced. “We don’t get to keep the roster, Jamie, what gave you that idea? We’re given a certain amount of time to memorise our responsibilities and then told to leave. You either remember what your duties are or you lose the job. Sink or swim. Perform or get cut. Didn’t Remus tell you?”

James – to her everlasting amusement – stared at her dubiously. When she met his eyes with nothing more than honesty and earnestness, she thought he believed her for a good minute.

Then he frowned at her with disappointment. “You’re joking.”

She didn’t break. “Are you telling me – honestly and truly – that Remus hasn’t told you this before? I couldn’t imagine why he’d want to keep this a secret, especially given that he wouldn’t be able to give you any real information about important things like the rosters. The badges don’t allow for it, you see.”

Lea knew she was taking a risk in pushing it but James’s disbelief was slowly giving way to curiosity and she had missed this – he had always been taken by a good mystery and she’d always been gifted at creating one, even if it was something as tiny as a fib about prefect duties.

“She just keeps it to himself so we won’t tarnish his good reputation –”

“Oh, I don’t doubt he does,” she agreed easily, pausing to make soft beckoning noises at her still-yowling kitten, “but people can do things for more than one reason, no? So, while that may be the truth, Remus could also simply be incapable of telling you anything.”

James was properly frowning now. “The badges, you said?”

“They prevent the owner – the person marked as such after wearing it and repeating an oath during the first meeting on the train – from spilling confidential secrets. Especially because things like round schedules can be a genuine threat to the school’s safety if it were to reach the wrong hands. You get all stuttery if you try to betray the trust put in you and the Head Boy and Girl are notified immediately.”

Still disbelieving, hazel eyes narrowed on her sharply. “How are you telling me all of this, then? Does it only work when you’re wearing it?”

Lea scoffed. “That would be incompetent. No, Jamie, it’s not a secret that we’re bound for safety. Besides, it hardly matters if you know that I can’t tell you anything because I still can’t tell you
anything.”

“This sounds ridiculous. To go to such lengths to protect mere schedules –” James shook his head and Lea smiled sharply, baring her teeth in a manner wouldn’t look amiss on the face of a predator.

“Who said that’s all we’re protecting?”

And then James was hooked despite himself. She could tell by the suspicious set of his brow that he still didn’t completely believe her but the part of him that couldn’t shake off the chance of there being truth to her words – the chance that she was being honest about knowing secrets about the inner workings of the castle – was much stronger.

He dropped his head back so his eyes – now sparkling with possibilities – were trained on the ceiling. His mouth fell open on a smile as he began guessing, “Is it the squid? Do you have to feed the giant squid?”

Lea laughed. “What?”

“I’ve always suspected prefects have to feed the giant squid,” he explained, “Moony leaves and returns to the dorm at like five in the morning some days and he’s always wet – well, not completely wet but definitely damp. He never explains where he goes and always escapes before anyone can find, follow or track him, the sneaky thing.”

She laughed harder, the sound mingling harshly with the sharp hiss that left Minnie as the soft flames of the fire turned a powerful green, and the trembling body of Sirius Black was thrown onto the rug.
She couldn’t really pinpoint what it was that pushed her to remain by Sirius’s bed the first time James was called away from him. Perhaps it was the guilt festering in her for having let this kind of abuse continue for so long when she’d had suspicions, or maybe it was the need to see the results of her first proper attempt at healing. Either way, as Sirius remained bed-ridden, drifting in and out of consciousness over the next few days, she sat vigilantly in the chair James had pulled next to the bed. Granted, it was a rare occasion James himself was not there, but their mother and father made a point to blackmail him out of the room for some fresh air every now and then.

Sirius had been in and out of consciousness for two days after he’d fallen through their floo, and strictly bedridden for the days after. The healer that had been sent for had immediately called for a mind healer to take her place and Sirius had been diagnosed as being the victim of non-consensual Legilimency and most-likely other invasive mind magic.

“Sirius!”

James and Lea were on their feet within seconds, both of them falling to their knees next to the pale boy. Sirius had landed on his forearms and knees but fallen onto his side, groaning under the weight of his own body.

“Sirius, what happened?” James asked softly, a noticeable quiver in his voice as he gently rolled his friend onto his back. Sirius’s eyes were half-closed, the whites of his eyes visible as they rolled back into his head. He was trembling, barely conscious.

“Twitchy!” Lea said sharply.

The house elf snapped into existence a few paces away from them, gasping when she saw the scene. “Young Miss!”

“Get Mum and Dad,” Lea interrupted, and the house elf apparated immediately.

A sharp shudder racked through Sirius’s frame and a soft whimper fell off his lips.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” James was saying softly, his unsteady hands hovering in the air above Sirius. “What’s wrong with him? Lea, can you see what’s wrong with him?”

She couldn’t. He was dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a black shirt, all of which seemed intact if a bit mussed. His skin was disturbingly pale but there was no visible injury, no signs of blood anywhere. That didn’t mean a lot, really, only that it would be more difficult to determine what had happened.

“Give him some space.” Charlus and Dorea had apparated downstairs, Twitchy half a second behind.
“Oh, darling,” Dorea said sadly, wand already raised and throwing up what Lea recognised as a stasis charm around Sirius’s body.

“I’ll send for a healer,” Charlus said gruffly, turning towards the floo.

“Has he said anything?” Dorea questioned. “Do you know what’s happened?”

“It was his parents,” James blurted. “It – it has to be. They hurt him –”

The line of their mother’s mouth stiffened, but she didn’t disagree.

It was about three days after James’s exile that she was sat low in the chair, feet kicked up onto the edge of the bed and eyes closed. The sky was still dark, the sun not having risen yet, and the rest of the family was still asleep as they had been when she quietly changed rooms roughly half an hour ago. Lea hadn’t been able to sleep – any fitful rest she managed was plagued by visions of what had been described in Regulus’s last letter – or rather, what she imagined hadn’t been said. Obviously, it wouldn’t have been possible for him to speak freely given that anyone could have intercepted the owl, but Lea deeply felt a little more detail could have been given.

The owl had come late in the night – early in the morning, really – after the night of Christmas.

In a disturbingly familiar script, all Lea was given was:

Merry Christmas?

It was written on a tiny square of parchment that fell out of the front cover of a book titled A Guide to Advanced Occlumency.

Infuriated, Lea scribbled her frustration on the other side of the parchment and sent it back with Talon immediately. Then she sat on her bed and wiped her tears aggressively, trying to ignore the horrific scenarios running through her mind. Now, after Mind Healer Jordan had come and gone, and her parents had retired to their room after helping transfigure a chair into a bed so James could be near Sirius as he slept, and she was left alone with her thoughts she didn’t – she couldn’t understand what had happened.

She had dressed for bed swiftly in an attempt to distract herself and had made a good dent in the book when the reply came.

You’re right. I’m sorry.

I’m okay – as I told you I would be – and it seems I’ve been right about many things lately.

I look forward to discussing the book with you so do make sure you educate yourself on the matter.

The sheer fact that Regulus hadn’t addressed either of his notes to her, or signed off himself, told her enough of his situation even without his words. All the fight left her.

Sweetheart, I am the most educated. It’s a good thing I’d do anything for you otherwise you’d be in a bit of trouble, huh?

I’ll see you in a week.
And then she settled back into her sheets, only falling into a fitful sleep well into the morning, the open Occlumency book falling to her chest as her grip loosened in slumber.

Lea’d experienced somewhat of a crash course in mind magic over the last few days. It began with the book (which led her to more books) and continued with Mind Healer Jordan’s answers to her questions. She’d asked about everything from the best way to form Occlumency shields (Lea struggled to clear her mind) to details about invasive mind magic other than Legilimency. That was something Mind Healer Jordan had been less willing to talk about – James and Lea hadn’t been allowed to be present when she went into details about what spells she had deduced to have been performed on Sirius – but with the relatively lighter areas, she’d been gracious with her knowledge. Lea felt like she’d gained a completely different perspective of just how intertwined one’s magic was with their body.

Mind Healer Jordan was willing to humour Lea and allowed her to cast the diagnosis charm when she came in on the third day. Guilt had been festering within her for days and she found her hands shaking whenever she strayed from Sirius’s room for too long. She’d accepted the fact that she had to stay by his side until she found out from the source himself that he was feeling better.

“See how the colour is more consistent around the brain?” Mind Healer Jordan was telling her. “It’s a huge improvement.”

Lea nodded, scanning the colours of the diagnosis charm critically. It showed up like what she imagined a person’s aura would appear as – a light cloud of colour over his body. The first time Mind Healer Jordan had cast the spell when she’d arrived, the colours had been loud and vivid, fluctuating uncontrollably around Sirius’s head and thick over the rest of him. Now, the charm was a pale, calm blue everywhere, to the point that it was almost transparent.

“He’s doing very well,” Mind Healer Jordan assured her once again, resting an elegant hand on Lea’s shoulder comfortingly. “And so are you. That was a strong charm.”

She wouldn’t lie and pretend that she didn’t have a little bit of a selfish reason in hovering while Mind Healer Jordan worked – after she’d finished the book on Occlumency, Lea had found that mind magic was rather fascinating albeit in a slightly morbid way. To see the damage that had been caused in someone’s mind even temporarily as a result of said mind being unprotected was horrifying, and once Sirius was well enough, she planned on getting him and James their own copies of the book.

“I’ve had a good teacher.”

The older woman made a soft noise of amusement, her brown eyes crinkling with humour. “Is that so? Explain to me again why poorly performed Legilimency can be severely harmful to one’s mind?”

“Ignoring the physiological response of pain and shock to the point of insanity,” Lea replied with a smirk, “the reaction of one’s magic to having your mind invaded by someone else’s magic can put you in a coma because of the sheer need to protect it. It can shut down your brain to protect itself. This, in turn, can lead to problems such as power depletion and psychosis in extreme cases which – obviously – leads to longer-term issues.”

“Good start,” Mind Healer Jordan complimented, “except for your labelling of magical core as
“something other than physiological – which, by the way, makes it what?”

Lea shrugged. “It’s something of its own. The way it performs – how it’s used and what it can be affected by – is very much like that of a person’s limb in a way, but a magical core isn’t tangible. There are ways to see it, but you can’t manipulate it with touch.”

“True enough,” she allowed. “But when you study any type of healing, they classify the magical core as physiological. Be careful of that, should you venture down that path.”

“Noted.”

Lea’d never spent much time thinking of how magic could be considered separate from one’s body – it had just always been something she’d had and felt in her bones – but it was true that a person’s magical core was not a physical thing inside of them and, while it was largely known how the core functioned and translated into focused spells, its actual existence was less explainable.

She didn’t like thinking about it too much if she was being honest. It got her feeling a little bit more existential than was comfortable.

She sank deeper into her chair, enjoying the silence and the rare peace in her mind. Exceptionally, she was nearing a light doze, comforted by the gentle light entering the room as the sun rose until she was jolted unpleasantly out of her thoughts.

“Did you plan that with Reg?” Sirius’s soft voice was rough from disuse and he cleared his throat as he sat up in bed.

Lea opened her eyes, watching his struggle carefully but offering no help. “Plan what?”

“You know what.” Once settled, he reached for the water next to his bed and took a hesitant sip. It was the most lucid he had been since his arrival.

When she said nothing, he mustered an irritated glare for her, but anyone could have seen it lacked genuine bite.

“The floo,” he explained impatiently, “How would there be a connection between our estates? Merlin knows your family would never have been invited to Grimmauld and I know for certain James hasn’t been there. You and Reg planned this.”

He certainly seemed to have woken up with a significant amount of strength.

She wanted to scowl at the conclusion he jumped to – it was irritating to think that the first thing he said to her was an accusation even if it was a mild one – but with the image of him freshly tortured still at the forefront of her mind, she collected her thoughts before speaking.

“I didn’t do anything…but I wouldn’t put it past Regulus.”

It had been Regulus’s idea to establish an escape plan when he’d pondered the implications of the ‘induction’ party his parents had held for him. She wasn’t lying. Lea wanted nothing more than to sit Sirius down and explain to him that Regulus still cared, can’t you see that even though you’ve left him and doubted him and deemed him lesser than you he still cares? and she could already feel herself working up some anger and indignation to counter whatever he threw at her but –

The anguished expression that appeared on his face gave her pause.
Hesitantly, she continued, “It was the whole reason he went to all that trouble to get me an invite to that party last year. To open a floo connection. He was sure he could manage to keep it open and hidden in the aftermath of so many guests going in and out. And, well, he did.”

“Merlin, Reg,” Sirius breathed, lifting a hand to scrub at his face.

Lea would blame the sleep she had missed for the slightly manic snicker that left her. She raised a hand, waving dismissively at Sirius’s affronted look as she continued to giggle. “No, no, I just – that’s such a mood. Merlin, Reg, indeed.”

The surprise on his face only spurred her on more and, much to her dismay, soon she was outright laughing, covering her face with her hands and praying the giggles would release her. When she finally regained some composure, she lowered her hands to find Sirius smiling back at her.

“A mood, huh? I’m not sure how I missed the fact that you two were such good friends. Especially considering how I spent a lot of my time obsessively tracking and monitoring all of his movements.”

“I’m not sure how you missed it, either,” said Lea, removing her feet from the bed and straightening in her seat. Did Regulus know Sirius had been supposedly stalking him? Sighing, she crossed her legs and folded her hands neatly in her lap. “But if I had to guess, it was probably because you weren’t looking for it.”

His smile had fallen slightly as his eyes tracked her movement, but he shrugged nonetheless. “Maybe not.”

They sat in silence for a while, Lea trying to enjoy the light gradually pouring in from the window while steadfastly ignoring the weight of the gaze she could feel on her. Uncomfortable, she was about to make her exit when the door creaked and Minnie entered, making her leisurely way to curl around Lea’s legs before jumping onto her lap.

“Who’s that?”

Her uneasiness lost in the face of her familiar’s arrival and pleased at the pure curiosity she heard in his voice – nothing more than that, either – she smiled, running a hand down Minnie’s back.

“This is Minnie. Mother and Father got her for me just last week. A Christmas gift and early birthday present. Minnie go say hi.”

“Minnie?” The delight that lit up Sirius’s face when he looked at her made her understand suddenly and all at once how people could consider Sirius Black attractive. He was handsome, there was no doubt, but the genuine excitement he directed at her in that moment was something closer to – dare she say it – beauty.

Minnie leapt neatly from her lap to the bed, approaching Sirius without fear and positioning herself for a pat, which she received. He looked from Minnie to Lea, smile almost bursting from his face. “Please tell me her name is short for what I think it is.”

She felt she was obligated to frown and thus she did, though she fought a smile the whole way through. “It is,” she had to smile at the delighted laughter that escaped him, “but she’s not named to embarrass McGonagall like you and James seem to assume – she’s honestly the most amazing witch I’ve ever had the pleasure of being in the presence of and deserves to be worshipped…also, I was throwing out suggestions and the cat wouldn’t answer to anything except Minnie even though I only said it as a joke.”
Watching as he carefully cradled Minnie’s face in his hands and bent so his own was level with hers, Lea covered her smile with a hand as Minnie’s tongue peeked out and licked him on the nose.

“She’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen,” Sirius said with awe. “Intelligent, too. Only a bright little kitten like her would know the only name worthy of her was Minnie.”

“Oh, fuck off, Sirius.” Lea rolled her eyes and stood, picking up Minnie and ignoring Sirius’s noise of despair. “I’ll wake James and my parents. I hope you’re ready for some aggressive seasonal festivities to hide genuine concern and fear.”

She had just reached the door when he spoke again.

“Thank you.”

It was a tiny, whispered thing, but she heard it.

Lea and James had been kicked out of their house.

“It’s fucking freezing and she insists on sending her children out in this? Some mother she is,” James was grumbling as the two of them walked the streets of the town. The new year had broken and shops had just opened back up, leading Dorea to exile the two of them under the guise of completing a few errands for her.

“It’s your fault,” Lea retorted pettily, “if you left Sirius alone for a second like she told you to she wouldn’t have felt the need to kick you all the way out, would she?”

“Don’t pretend like you haven’t been just as bad,” he countered immediately. “Which, by the way, still requires an explanation.”

She scowled. “How fucking dare you, Jamie. Can’t I show some concern about someone who’s been so severely injured?”

“Of course you can,” was his easy reply, “but you’ve been showing more than a little concern, Lea.”

Lea wasn’t in the mood to explain herself again so soon after having talked to Sirius. “It was scary, okay? That’s all.”

James was quiet for a few seconds, his internal debate over whether or not to push her blatant on his features, before a chilly gust of wind had him swearing under his breath and pulling his coat tighter over him. “She didn’t even give us a warming charm! Honestly.”

Even Lea, generally impartial to a bit of cold weather, was swiftly losing her patience with the dampness of the snow making her socks wet and the bite of the icy air on her face. They had picked up the books her mother had ordered in at the book store and managed to grab the few groceries they had been requested to buy (which was ridiculous because Twitchy was terribly specific about groceries and liked to buy them herself from Diagon Alley so they were likely to just sit in the pantry until they went bad anyway), but the next bus home was in half an hour and likely to be running late with the state of the weather.

“Not a chance I’m waiting outside in this,” James muttered, reaching out with a gloved hand to tug on Lea’s arm. “Come on.”

She allowed herself to be led into a café – almost empty and about ten minutes from the bus stop,
but blessedly heated. She removed her coat, beanie, gloves, and scarf and set down the bags she was holding as James ordered them drinks. The establishment was quaint but warmly lit, and the scent of coffee lingered soothingly in the air. There was the gentle sound of jazz playing under the soft rustle of the newspaper held by an elderly woman sitting towards the back and the murmuring of a few boys sitting a few tables down. Lea felt a shiver go through her as she settled into her chair, basking in the comfortable atmosphere.

She ran a hand through her damp waves, shaking them out as she smirked at the sight of the young barista leaning forward, forearms on the counter next to the till, and smiling provocatively as she took James’s order. She could just hear the low sound of James’s voice but wasn’t able to make out his words. If the soft blush that flitted over the girl’s face was anything to go by, it seemed James was holding himself to his resolution to move past Lily Evans.

He returned to the table with a smug smirk on his face and a neatly folded napkin tucked into his pocket. He took a moment to shed his own damp outer garments before looking at her expectantly. “Back to Sirius.”

She sighed. “There’s nothing to say, James. Unless he’s told you more about what happened because I’d be interested in hearing that.”

And then his expression darkened until it shuttered, telling her even before he spoke that he wouldn’t have any information for her.

James had taken the events even worse than perhaps Sirius. The rage that rolled off him after hearing the diagnosis Mind Healer Jordan had given had made Lea uneasy to say the least, and the way he had contained the rage and silently kept vigil by Sirius without saying a word scared her more. It wasn’t how James usually processed anger, and it scared her to think about where the feeling would go if he kept it tucked it away like he had.

Since he’d woken up, James had remained by Sirius’ side and if the way she’d seen him slamming doors and stomping his way around the house was indicative of anything, it was that Sirius had given him some detail, if not all.

“Oh,” she allowed, unwilling to cause much of a scene in public, quiet though it was. “Then there’s nothing left to say. Something terrible happened, Sirius got hurt, but he’s better now.”

“And he’s not going back,” James added firmly, his hazel eyes hard and his jaw tense.

“And he’s not going back,” Lea agreed. Her heart ached and pounded with the thought of what that would mean for Regulus but – well, it would do no good to worry until she knew more. It was only a few more days until they returned to Hogwarts.

The barista came to serve them their drinks. “One hot chocolate – extra chocolate, no marshmallows – and a strong cappuccino.”

Her smile was bright and her gaze landed solely on James who offered up a charming grin of his own.

“Thank you,” Lea said, amused. The girl sent a wink at James before moving away.

James sighed happily, beaming at the mug of hot chocolate in front of him.

“Getting a head start on moving on from Lily Evans, are we?” Lea asked coyly as she stirred her coffee.
His smile sharpened as he met her eyes. “It’s like I said – girls throw themselves at me.”

Lea couldn’t help the snicker that left her. “So, have you got anyone lined up at Hogwarts, then? If your pool of selection is so large it’s only practical to be prepared for the onslaught of attention once word gets out –”

“No way! Boarding school, is that you?”

Lea tilted her head up to look at the two boys now standing in front of their table. They were the two who had been sitting a few tables away but, as Lea’s gaze had skipped over them when she took her seat. She hadn’t recognised them as two of the three boys her and James had run into a few summers ago. If she remembered correctly, they had introduced themselves as Will and Danny, but she wasn’t sure if she’d put the right name to the right person.

They’d both filled out since she’d last seen them and the sharp sweaters and well-pressed trousers – both obviously tailored to their frames – screamed of wealth. Lea could respect a well-dressed boy but she was hardly impressed by the poor manners they’d displayed the last time.

She raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

The brown-haired boy (Danny?) visibly faltered but the other one took it in stride and said, “Sure you do! I’m Will and this is Danny. We met a few summers ago?”

Lea made a show of frowning and looking confused. “Are you sure? I think you have the wrong people.”

“Oh, definitely,” Will assured her brightly. His blond hair was neatly parted and slicked down despite the fact that he had to have been wearing a beanie in this weather. “I could never forget such a beautiful face.”

She turned to share an exasperated look with James but he only smirked at her lightly, raising an expectant eyebrow as if to say ‘Well? Go ahead’.

“Say, I know you were busy last time and we never got a chance to speak again,” he continued, “but what do you say to letting me show you around town? I know it’s cold but we can make it work.”

“I don’t know where you got the impression that I needed to be shown around town,” she countered dryly, “especially considering I live here.”

Danny let out a tiny snicker but swiftly hid it behind a hand when Will sent him a hard look. “How about just a date then?”

“That wouldn’t be appropriate. I have a girlfriend, you see.”

That had apparently been the wrong thing to say. Both Danny and Will gaped at her, their frames stiffening and disgust lining their faces.

Will took two sudden steps away from her and spat, “You’re a dyke?”

James and Lea both stood, enraged. “Watch your fucking mouth –” James began just as Lea snapped a dangerous, “Excuse me?”

“You need to leave,” Danny said, speaking for the first time. Lea had to repress the weariness that travelled down her spine at the sound of his voice. He wasn’t much to look at – he looked far too
well bred to be much of a threat to her – but his voice was deep and dangerous and angry. “Your kind aren’t welcome here.”

She took another step forward, partly to prove to herself that she couldn’t be intimidated, and delighted in the way both boys shifted away immediately, their faces reddening. “And what kind would that be, exactly?”

“Homosexuals,” Will hissed, repulsion dripping off the word.

“Technically, that isn’t how I identify,” Lea corrected lightly even as her hands fisted with rage, “I like cock just as much as I like pussy. In fact, I’d say it’s my biggest character flaw if boys like you are what I have on offer.”

Something flickered across Will’s face then – something that was almost a leer – and Lea blanched. She was about to refute any idea brewing in his sick mind when her attention was pulled to the other boy.

Danny wasn’t going down the same train of thought at all.

“As if any man would want a rug muncher like you – no cunt is better than a dyke cunt any day, you slut.”

Lea narrowed her eyes.

“I can’t believe you punched him,” James repeated for about the fifth time since they’d left.

They were back home and in the kitchen, leisurely emptying out the groceries. Both their parents were out (Lea suspected they were looking into the legalities of having Sirius stay with them permanently but neither would confirm anything) and Twitchy had gone to rouse Sirius on James’s orders after letting the two back in the house.

“I can’t believe you punched him after I did,” Lea replied, growing exasperated at having to repeat herself again. “I still think it was a stupid thing to do – they would never have hit me back but they would have hit you.”

It was honestly lucky they didn’t. They certainly looked as if they were going to but the old lady sitting in the back of the café had waddled over before Danny had so much as regained his balance and thwapped them with her newspaper. James and Lea had apologised profusely to both the lady and the horrified barista before swiftly taking their leave.

James scoffed, although the smile that had been on his face since they’d left was very much still present. “Please! What kind of brother would I be if I just stood by and let my little sister punch out a couple of boys without offering a hand?”

“A smart one,” she muttered under breath, grinning affectionately when he pouted.

“Who punched out who?” Sirius asked, walking into the room and settling in a chair with Twitchy a few steps behind, watching in case he needed a hand. He was walking and talking fine by now, though he was still quick to tire and required multiple naps during the day.

“Mate, you wouldn’t believe it!” James was practically vibrating with excitement as he turned to his friend. “These wankers in town got punched in the face by Lea.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow, eyeing her appraisingly. “Is that so? I didn’t think you had it in you, baby
“How did you punch like that?” James asked suddenly, pointedly ignoring the two of them. “It looked like you’d done it before and you certainly knocked that bitch back a few steps too which – I mean no disrespect – is impressive because he was closer to my build than yours.”

Lea adopted an innocent expression. “Oh, that? Bri’s father used to be a boxer, didn’t you know? When all of us stayed with her a few summers ago he taught us a few things. There’d been an assault a few neighbourhoods away from them, you see, and he hated the thought of us girls not knowing what to do if we were ever in a situation like that.”

“Are you saying Hale knows how to knock a person out with her bare hands?” Sirius looked a little bit sick. “That’s…scary.”

She smiled fondly. “Yeah, Bri can be a little bit angry, can’t she?”

“A little bit angry, she says,” he muttered, “like that harpy didn’t once set her homework on fire in the middle of Potions because she got an A.”

Lea tried not to laugh. “She’s passionate.”

“Barmy is more like it.”

“Oh, good, everyone’s here,” Charlus said, strolling into the kitchen with Dorea behind him.

“I expected you two to be out a little longer,” Dorea said disapprovingly, even as she dropped a kiss on their foreheads. When she reached Sirius, she pressed a hand to his forehead as if checking for a non-existent fever. It amused Lea to no end but the way Sirius blushed and looked up at her mother adoringly stirred feelings of fondness in even her jaded heart.

“It was freezing,” Lea replied dryly, moving to hug her father properly, “forgive us for not wanting to linger.”

“It works in our favour, jaan e mann,” her father reminded her mother before addressing the children, “Sirius. You’ve always been welcome in our home but we want to make sure you understand that we do, truly, mean always. You don’t have to return to your parents at all and they won’t bother you anymore.”

Sirius’s eyes were shiny even as he looked at Charlus with curiosity. “What did you do?”

Her father grinned, the cheeky smile shockingly similar to James’s, but it was Dorea who answered, “Never you mind, darling. I want you to make a list of things you’d like to pick up from your home so I can get them for you. If there’s nothing immediate, then I’d like for you to come shopping with me before you head back to Hogwarts.”

James, who had been bouncing on the balls of his feet and trying to contain his excitement, had barely opened his mouth before Dorea smiled at him too. “Yes, darling, you can come as well. God knows you’ve grown out of your clothes again. Sirius?”

Sirius looked as if he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself, and he blinked confusedly at Dorea for a second before answering. “My trunk is still packed – everything I need will be in that. I –” he faltered before murmuring a gentle, “thank you.”
“Oh, hush,” Dorea said, affectionately tucking Sirius’s hair behind his ear. “I want you to rest today. You’ll need your strength if we’re to be out tomorrow.”

Lea was beyond curious about what her parents could have done to be able to promise Sirius his parents would leave him be. It wasn’t as if they’d let him go freely in the past – the state he had arrived in their home in was telling enough of that, and Lea still remembered Regulus telling her once that Walburga was still focused on making Sirius conform to her ideals.

When she asked her father about it later that night as they sat at the piano, the other members of their house having retired elsewhere, she received little to no information.

“I don’t want you to worry about any of that, beta,” he told her gently, the Hindi rolling off his lips smoothly. “What matters is that it’s done.”

“It’s just impressive that you managed to get them to bend to your will,” she persisted, her own Hindi relatively fluent as well despite only ever speaking it with her father, and that too on fewer occasions as she grew older. When she and James were younger, her father only ever spoke to them in Hindi. It was supposedly under the orders of his late mother who – being Indian herself – had only ever spoken that language at home.

His smile was full of false innocence. “I know you think I’m old and out of the loop but I’ve been dealing with those snobs on the Wizengamot for an embarrassing number of years. I know exactly how to get what I want.”

“Mum is the one on the Potter seat,” Lea countered.

“I don’t need to be on the seat to know what happens on that blasted council,” was all he said. “But even though we’ve taken care of that side of things it doesn’t mean the work is done.”

“Oh?” Lea raised an eyebrow.

“You’re friendly with the younger boy, aren’t you? Regulus.”

She tried not to stiffen too noticeably. “Mm.”

“But you aren’t that friendly with Sirius, are you?” Charlus continued, his voice much gentler this time, as if not to offend her.

Lea shrugged. Maybe she hadn’t made much of an effort to get to know Sirius but it wasn’t like he’d ever been open to her friendship. Quite the contrary, actually.

“He doesn’t have the healthiest family experience,” he said softly, “I think it will be beneficial if you were to extend a hand in friendship. Especially as he will be staying with us.”

Her mouth twisted with displeasure. “Must I? We’re not *unfriendly*, exactly, but I don’t think he has a lot of interest in making friends with the likes of me.”

“Try,” her father pleaded. “Not everyone is as lucky as we have been to have grown up in loving environments and no child – *no child* – deserves to have been shunned.”

Lea felt properly chastised. He was right, of course.

_____

“Sirius Black,” Lea announced, bursting into his room. “We need to sort this out.”

She’d never grow bored of seeing Sirius flounder violently in the wake of her surprise entrances.
This was what – the second or third time it had happened? Bless Merlin for small victories.

“What the fuck are you on about?” he asked angrily, brushing off his surprise and settling back into the bed with a pout.

They were due to head back to Hogwarts the next day, and Lea had thought long and hard about how to go about following through on her father’s request.

“So, the only reason James and I can speak to each other semi-politely is because we’ve agreed to disagree on a few crucial things.” Lea forced herself to sit on the end of his bed, crossing her legs on the sheets and feigning nonchalance as best she could. Especially when his face grew instantly suspicious.

“Yeah? And what might those be?”

“His treatment and view of my housemates for one,” she said, taking an odd sort of delight at the way he momentarily blinked in surprise. “Well, to be honest, that’s the biggest disagreement we have between us. But there’s a bigger problem with you and me – especially because half of James’s prejudice comes from you anyway.”

“Can you still call it prejudice when it’s the truth?”

And that was the thing, wasn’t it? Sirius Black was someone who hated the kind of people she associated with – and, although the hatred was sorely misplaced, it wasn’t exactly unjustified, was it? How could she ever try to deny him his anger when he’d fallen through her fireplace, beaten and mind-raped at the hands of those same people? The problem was, to him the people who did that were the same as Lea and her classmates. And they weren’t the same – they would never be if she had her way.

On top of that, Sirius wasn’t angry, wasn’t upset, he was just speaking as if he were stating facts. An almost pensive expression sat on his handsome features, as if he were about to engage in a strikingly intellectual discussion with her and was more than ready for the academic debate.

But was she?

“But it’s not the truth,” she countered, meeting his eyes. “Not completely, at least. Not at school.”

“Oh?” Sirius bent his knees and rested his elbows on them, leaning forward. Strands of his long hair framed his face where they had escaped his bun and Lea’s fingers twitched the sudden urge to make it neat. “How would you account for the slurs, then? The discrimination? The bullying?”

“Can you not also be called a bully, in your own way?” Lea said sharply before catching herself and holding her tongue. That was not what she was trying to say. More softly, she continued, “None of what they do is justified. But when you instigate – Sirius, you take out your anger on them for things they didn’t do. It becomes about more than their actions. You blame them for crimes they haven’t committed.”

That was when he grew defensive. His eyes hardened, became meaner as he bit out, “I bet you never tell them –”

“You think I don’t?” she snapped. Gods, had she ever held any semblance of composure? What was wrong with her? She softened again. “You think I don’t try and stop them? I’ll never tell you to stop defending yourself, Sirius, I’m just asking you not to instigate.”

Lea was suddenly aware that Sirius’s ability to intimidate stemmed from his knack for saying
things plainly, bluntly, *meantly* and with the intention to hurt. She wasn’t used to dealing with that—underhanded, semi-polite, backhanded comments were more her area of expertise.

“Why would I care what you say?” he said. “Because you helped tidy up a few cuts? Decided you wanted to play healer? I never asked for your help and we’re not friends.”

Oh, and there it was.

“No, I guess not,” she said easily, using every ounce of her battered self-control to ignore her hurt. “But I thought we might be, so it was best to throw this out there.” Then she sighed, moving to stand. “I guess if we can’t get past this there’s no use in trying, huh? Things only get worse from here—I mean, imagine if I tried to bring up *Regulus*? That would be crazy.”

She’d only gotten her legs off the side of the bed before he said, “So—what? You want me to stop baiting Slytherins as a condition of your friendship? Is that what you’re asking?”

Lea faltered. She didn’t like it when it was said like that—*conditions of her friendship*. “No—I no. I think it’s more about communication—right? So, *both* of us will voice our…hesitations? And then it’s up to us to decide if we want to accommodate each other. In friendship. At the very least we’ll understand each other’s intentions better.”

There. That was fine.

When Sirius didn’t respond immediately, she turned and found him watching her speculatively. She wasn’t sure she liked the way he looked at her—it was far too contemplative and it made her feel a little bit exposed. Not to mention, this was *her* extending a hand of friendship to him and that was terrifying in itself. Especially because it didn’t really look like he would come around to her.

“What was that you were saying about Regulus?” he asked finally, sitting back against the headboard, opening up his posture a little more.

Lea took a second to mentally re-adjust. “Oh—well, I thought that would be more to do with you. Do you have questions you wanted to ask? I know you’re suspicious.”

“Suspicious,” Sirius echoed, scoffing.

She raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you?”

It was like she could see him harden right in front of her eyes—his mouth tightened, his eyes narrowed, and his frame became ever so slightly more rigid. There was none of that sadness, none of that willingness to listen from the day he had woken up present anymore.

“What’s there to know?” he said dismissively. “The two of you are friends—*society* friends. I saw that picture in the Prophet just like everyone else. I know everything I need to know.”

Oops, she’d forgotten about that. “Well my entire involvement in that night was for you so maybe lose the tone and count your fucking blessings,” she advised, patience snapping like a thinly stretched rubber band.

Sirius looked like he was blossoming in the wake of her lost temper—his lips stretched into an antagonistic smile and his fingers tightened around the sheets even as his eyes brightened, honestly and truly, for the first time since he’d gotten to their house.

“Do you know what Regulus said to me?” he began softly—*dangerously*. “He told me I deserved what I got for not sucking up my feelings and doing as I was told. That if I just did as they said—
meaning shun any and all beings other than purebloods and join that fucking cult of theirs – nothing would have happened.”

“Well, he wasn’t wrong,” she muttered, irritated.

Sirius didn’t lose his composure or yell like she thought he would. He just looked smug, as if his suspicions had been confirmed. “I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

Furious and defensive all at once, Lea was halfway out of his room before she even registered moving. Well, she fucking tried and instead of gaining any sort of friendship, all she’d gotten was a disgustingly overpowering sense of weariness in her stomach as she ran over his words in her head.

What did he mean she wouldn’t understand?

What was she meant to make of Sirius Black and what had happened to him and what it meant for Regulus or for her or for James or any of them let alone his piss-poor attitude?

Lea was losing a little bit of herself every day since Sirius had shown up. Things were becoming a little bit too real for her liking. It was all well and good to keep on saying her housemates weren’t like that, that they wouldn’t do that, and that she wouldn’t let them but what the fuck was she really on about? She hadn’t been able to stop any of this – hadn’t even tried because she was so sure it wasn’t a real problem. She hadn’t realised how real it was.

But that realisation had fallen onto the rug in her sitting room right next to the quivering boy.

And there was no avoiding it now.
“I’m ready,” Lea said, bringing her knees up onto the seat so she was neatly curled into one side of the window seat. Across from her, Regulus was looking out of the window in the Slytherin Common Room, gaze unfocused as he stared unseeingly into the depths of the Black Lake. Between their legs and the window, Minnie was curled up snugly.

“Privacy charms are up?”

“Who do you think I am?”

His attention flickered back to her, steely eyes looking wearier than she had ever seen before.

“How did you find the book I sent you?”

Lea tapped her fingers against her leg impatiently but humoured him. “Meditation is much more difficult than I thought it would be.”

Regulus nodded. “As long as you keep practicing –”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed improvement already and it’s only been, like, ten days,” she agreed.

“Good.” Regulus tipped his head back against the wall, letting out a deep sigh. “We should meet regularly and practice. I’ve got a hold of it, I think, but if I’m to be able to keep my sanity around someone like the Dark Lord then I’m going to need more than a basic shield.”

“It’s a good idea, Reg,” Lea noted. “What made you think of Occlumency?”

“Narcissa suggested it. She said it was a skill that could only be of help. She was right.”

“As always,” she added fondly. Narcissa and her still corresponded semi-regularly, though less so than when the older girl had first graduated. It was heart-warming to think that Cissa was still keeping an eye on her young cousin, just as she had asked Lea to do all those years ago.

“It was as I said.”

Lea’s stomach twisted unpleasantly, not surprised in the slightest at the sudden change of topic.

“They tried to give Sirius the mark?”

“Mm.”

When he said nothing more, she continued hesitantly, “He wouldn’t take it.”

“They tried to use the Imperius but he prefers his followers willing.”

Lea blanched. “He was there?”

“Not at first.” Regulus lowered his head to meet her eye. “They called for him – I mean, this was planned; he was expected – and when Sirius found out what was happening, he started making noise about leaving. They went with the Imperius before realising it wasn’t a lasting solution. Then they started with the Legilimency. It can be awfully persuasive if done correctly, you know.”

Lea could practically hear him grinding his teeth together with repressed anger. You couldn’t tell just by looking at his face and Lea only noticed because they were seated so close together. Anyone else might have thought Regulus was completely unbothered.
“When the Dark Lord arrived,” he continued softly, voice almost a whisper, “they left him for a moment. To greet him. When they discovered Sirius was gone Mother was furious – predictably – but they had to make do with what they had.”

Lea raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “Make do with what they had,” she repeated flatly.

Silently, Regulus offered her his left arm.

She didn’t hesitate in pushing up the sleeve of his oxford shirt, keeping the pressure light as her fingers ran up the inside of his forearm.

For a long while, Lea was at a loss for words as she stared at the shifting image of snake and skull. She swallowed heavily. “Does it hurt?”

Regulus had his eyes closed, but his expression was calm. “Sometimes.”

Her hands started shaking and she curled her fingers around his wrist more firmly, pressing her thumb against the base of the mark. He shivered under her touch. “What will happen now?”

Reg shrugged lightly and Lea wanted to punch him. “Nothing. I don’t have to do anything.”

“Nothing?” she echoed doubtfully.

He opened one eye to peer at her carefully, a smirk lifting his lips. “I told you it wouldn’t mean anything.”

Lea stared at him incredulously. “Are you honestly naïve enough to think it’s going to remain that way?”

He rolled his eyes. “This is what we call a later-problem,” he informed her. “What’s the point of worrying about something we don’t even know will happen?”

“There’ve been quite a few later-problems being added to the list lately,” she muttered, scowling.

“Oh, stop it.” He twisted the arm in her grip so his own hand curled around her forearm and tugged on it playfully as he grinned. “Worry doesn’t suit you.”

Her frowned deepened. “Everything suits me.”

He tugged on her arm again, this time hard enough to yank her forward a little. “It most certainly does not. You’re much prettier when you smile.”

It was Lea’s turn to roll her eyes. “Adorable. And how are you going to see my pretty smile when you’re dead?”

“You think death will be enough to separate us?” he scoffed. “I’ll become the new patron ghost of Slytherin – Salazar knows the Bloody Baron is overdue for retirement. Did you see him wailing in the Entrance Hall before dinner today? It wasn’t nearly as chilling as usual.”

“He’s losing his manners, too. Usually he sticks to having his cry in the dead of night in the Astronomy Tower, not while we’re eating.”

“I’ll be sure to keep my own groaning and clanking closer to the Gryffindors – he really is missing an opportunity to terrorise.”

Minnie took that moment to lift her little head and rest it on their joined arms.
“She is so fucking cute,” Lea said passionately. Regulus made a soft noise of assent, using his free hand to stroke a finger down the kitten’s neck.

She sighed heavily. “Sirius doesn’t like me at all.”

Regulus blinked in surprise. “Do you want him to?”

“My father told me to try and be friends with him because he’ll be living with us,” she explained, noting the way Reg’s jaw stiffened ever so slightly. “I don’t even know what I did to him.”

“I don’t think I’m the leading authority on how to befriend Sirius,” he replied wryly.

Lea sighed again. “I’m not used to people not liking me, you know. No one else has ever treated me like this without me doing something to upset them.”

“Maybe you should ask him what you did?”

“No, I don’t want to talk to him.”

Reg let out a soft laugh. “I’m not sure how else to solve the problem.”

“Forget it.” Lea untangled their arms so she could use both her hands to rub her eyes. She’d only been back at Hogwarts for a few hours and she was already exhausted. “We’ll see what happens.”

“Did you tell James we take Unbreakable Vow-like oaths when we become prefects?” Remus asked, sliding into the seat next to her in Charms. Bri, who had just walked into the classroom, sent him a dirty look and went around to the other end of the row to sit next to Laury.

Lea looked up from the notes she’d been reading over with an innocent smile. “Yes? Because we do?”

She wasn’t sure if she was imagining it because she knew the next full moon was within the week, but she thought Remus looked a little keyed up – jittery, even. His green eyes were shockingly bright, almost shining in the sun-lit classroom, and he was lightly flushed, as if he was running a fever.

“He’s not left me alone about it ever since we got back,” Remus told her quietly, lowering his head closer to hers as the room filled out more. “Do you know how many times he’s tried to follow me around under the cloak?”

Lea snickered. “It’s your fault for making him so suspicious in the first place – what exactly is it that you do at five in the morning that has you coming back to the dorms slightly damp and extremely suspicious?”

Remus grinned cheekily. “I take baths in the prefect bathroom. James like to find a mystery in everything he hasn’t explicitly been told about.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me about that,” she murmured. “How else do you think he bought that nonsense about oaths?”

“Is this prefect stuff? Are you taking about prefect stuff?” James demanded as he neared them, Peter and Sirius half a step behind.

James moved to take the single remaining seat on Remus’s other side but was bodily pushed away by Peter. James let out a shock-filled gasp, taking a second to glare at Peter and make sure the
other boy knew he wasn’t pleased, but when he received only a beatific smile in response, he took the seat in the row in front. Sirius sat next to him, looking only vaguely interested in the happenings and mostly focused on Lily Evans and Rosie Burns who were having some sort of animated discussion across the room.

“You know we can’t tell you,” Remus said, reaching for his book bag to take out what he needed for the class. “And apparently now you really know we can’t tell you. I was just asking Lea what she was thinking blurtling out all of our innermost secrets to you.”

“Hey!” she protested, inwardly pleased she was that he was playing along. “I didn’t tell him anything important – obviously, because I physically can’t.”

But James wasn’t having any of it. “No one’s going to hide from me for much longer,” he announced decisively, voice loud enough to draw the annoyed attention of students around them. “I will find out everything and everyone will rue the day they kept secrets. Besides, Lea doesn’t keep secrets from me, we’re family.”

Lea rolled her eyes, trying not to laugh.

“On the topic of secrets,” Peter interjected, leaning forward to look at Lea around Remus. “What did you say to make Bertha Jorkins so tetchy? She was crying all over the porridge this morning.”

She made a soft noise of interest. “Was she really? I didn’t see her. What makes you think it has anything to do with us?”

“Us?” Peter repeated, a smug grin forming on his lips. “It was all of you, then? I had guessed but it was difficult to discern who exactly she was pointing at while she was wailing.”

“Wailing?” Lea turned to the three girls on her other side. “Did any of you see this?”

“Everyone saw it, Lea,” Daisy said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “It was awfully unbecoming.”

She frowned. “I didn’t see it.”

“You were distracted,” Laury reminded her with a pointed look.

Lea suddenly recollected that she was, in fact, occupied during breakfast – Nikki had come back to Hogwarts that term significantly more tense about exams and was determined to convince Lea to help distract her. Lea, who was worried about her own damn OWLs, was finding the entire experience a learning curve regarding her self-control.

“But why is she wailing about it now?” Lea asked. “It’s been over a month.”

“Wailing?” Bri said, turning away from Evan and blinking rapidly at Lea. “Are you talking about Bertha Whore-kins?”

As one, the other girls narrowed their eyes at Bri.

“Brianna, love,” Laury said. “you wouldn’t happen to know something about Bertha Jorkins’ state of distress this morning, would you?”

Bri grinned, completely unashamed. “I absolutely do. I told Leona Edgecombe about how Bertha was chatting shit about us and she thought it was simply disgusting. I’m pretty sure a bunch of girls in Ravenclaw gave her a dressing down and I wouldn’t be surprised if the chit’s getting frozen out of her own house.”
“Bri,” Daisy said exasperatedly. “We were done with that!”

“It’s not like I asked Leona to do anything,” she protested, though her grin was far too smug to be properly repentant. “But she has always been a very clever girl.”

Lea and Daisy shared a helpless look, both of them unwittingly amused.

“No more, Bri,” Laury said firmly, her eyes stern on Bri’s. “Promise.”

Bri rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine, whatever.”

“I guess that’s my answer,” Peter said, drawing four sets of eyes to swivel in his direction.

“You don’t know the half of it, Pettigrew,” Bri replied coyly.

“I always liked Leona Edgecombe,” Daisy murmured thoughtfully, making Lea snicker under her breath. “I’m going to send her some chocolates.”

When the unmistakable sound of whispering started from her left, Lea turned suspiciously to Sirius and James who were, indeed, muttering furiously under their breath in the seats in front of them.

“Sirius is grilling James about his recently cured case of Evans-fever,” Remus told her, slouching comfortably in his seat, looking as if he wanted nothing more than to take a nap under the warmth of the sunlight gently streaming through the classroom windows. “He’s finding it difficult to believe.”

Lea turned her suspicion on him. “Oh?”

“I think it’s awfully mature of James,” Peter added, his own voice dropping so the boy himself wouldn’t hear. “But even I can admit it’s come out of nowhere.”

“Wait,” Lea interrupted suddenly, a thought occurring to her. “Didn’t she – Merlin, I forgot I was going to find out about this – has Evans said something to him? Something…harsher than usual?”

Peter frowned thoughtfully as Remus seemingly gave up on everything, letting his eyes fall shut even as he said, “The last encounter I can remember involved her calling him an arrogant, spoilt waste of space who had no understanding of the world outside his snitch and broomstick.”

Flitwick had just walked into the classroom and Remus wouldn’t get more than a minute before his attention would be demanded by the teacher. When Lea winced, it was in sympathy for both Remus and James.

Peter let out a low whistle. “I didn’t hear about that.”

“He’d cornered her early morning in the Common Room just before term ended, barely anyone was there. It was a miracle I’d been up to hear them, but – well.” It had been days before the full moon, Lea filled in mentally.

“Interesting,” was all she said, mind reeling for a second before she re-focused on the boys in front of her. A tiny smile lifted her lips as she glanced at Remus, her voice barely a whisper as the class began to quieten, “Was that your special hearing at work again?”

His eyelids fluttered open to pin her with a bright, moss-green gaze as he raised a single, bemused eyebrow. “I could hear that dirty thing your girlfriend was whispering in your ear this morning, and that was over the wailing. So, yes. It was my special hearing.”
Lea blushed, growing uncomfortably warm at the thought of *anyone* hearing what Nikki had murmured into her skin (she really had a terrible habit of doing that in the Great Hall), frowning at the smirk that flitted across Remus’s face before he turned his attention to Professor Flitwick just as he started to speak.

What a cheeky boy.

Lea shoved aside her discomfort (and the ridiculous thought that Remus could hear her heart beating or, Merlin forbid, *smell* her embarrassment) as Flitwick began his lecture. Instead, she focused on the fact that Lily Evans *had*, in fact, finally hurt James enough to get him to back off.

She was well aware that James’s pursuit of Lily was unwanted and, therefore, Lily was well within her right to refuse him how she wished. But she also wasn’t a fan of James being made to feel as discouraged as he had appeared, no matter the reason.

Something would have to be done.

“Say, how would you go about scaring someone?” Lea asked her friends later that night, this time in the safety of their dorm. “Just enough to remind them of their manners.”

“You can’t just say something like that and not explain,” Daisy complained, rolling over under her covers to face Lea. They were all tucked in, lights off and ready to sleep. Minnie was already dozing at Lea’s feet.

Lea thought about it for a second and then shrugged mentally – it wouldn’t hurt to give them details. “Lily Evans was a little bit rude to my brother. I think it wouldn’t be amiss to remind her that it’s not very nice to make people feel like rubbish.”

“Your brother has been getting on Evans’s nerves for years,” Bri mumbled, her voice muffled against her pillow. “He deserves getting shot down a few pegs.”

“Yes,” Lea agreed, thinking this was true enough, “but I still don’t like it. He’s sworn off her now, did you hear? Because what she said was so harsh.”

“Then neither of them should be bothering the other any longer, thank Salazar,” Bri pointed out, “so what’s the need to get even? Mind you, I’m not protesting, I just want to make sure this is something you want to start.”

“She’s right,” Daisy piped up, “This is different from, like, the Bertha Jorkins thing. *You’ll* be the one starting it.”

Lea felt a sudden rush of fondness for her friends, but she had thought this through.

“I’m prepared to finish it, too,” she said firmly.

“All right, then,” Daisy said easily. “Lily Evans. What makes her tick?”

“Potions?” Bri offered.

“Severus Snape,” said Lea darkly.

“She *hates* getting in trouble.

“We could poke her friends a little?”

“Maybe swap her textbooks out with something else?”
“I want something less of a prank and more of –” Lea cut herself off, frowning, “Well, a threat, I guess. Should I just confront her?”

“Maybe just curse her in the hall like everyone else does,” Bri suggested.

“You have to take things from her,” Laury interjected quietly, sounding half-asleep. “Little things, like gain yourself favour amongst the prefects, answer questions in class before she does, beat her test scores.”

“I do all of that already,” Lea muttered, disgruntled. “Evans is damn hard to beat and my main competition for Head Girl, you know that. She’s a fucking Potions prodigy, for Merlin’s sake.”

“You don’t do it loudly,” was the gentle argument. “You don’t like offering answers in class and you don’t show off things like test scores. It would infuriate her to know for sure you’re better. Do something to remind her that you have power and then confront her.”

Lea considered this. As a plan of action, it was strong, but it would take more than test scores and answers in class to rattle Lily Evans. For all her character flaws (short tempered, disgustingly eager to please, terribly prideful), she was a conscientious student, and Lea both admired that and resented it.

It was true that Lily Evans was her main competition when it came to becoming Head Girl, especially because grades-wise they were fairly even-footed (besides Evans lording her knack for Potions over Lea’s simple ability to just get them right instead of revolutionise them like Evans).

It came down to having connections.

Lily wasn’t overtly known to branch out of her house, although she was generally friendly and approachable, but Lea was intimately acquainted with all of her house, most of Hufflepuff house, and a good amount of Ravenclaw (it was important to have people on the inside when you needed to keep an eye on the enemy). In Gryffindor, most of the conversations she’d had had been with younger children rather than the older ones, but they were still important wins for her. Her becoming a prefect had been especially helpful in that it allowed her to interact more freely with the younger students where she simply may not have crossed their paths before.

So, there was still the matter of what she could do to get Evans on the defensive, but blatantly confronting Evans about her treatment of James could be fun once the kinks were sorted out.

“That’s a good idea,” Lea murmured. “Thoughts?”

“S’good,” Bri agreed through a yawn.

“Yeah, I’m in,” was Daisy affirmative.

Laury made a soft, irritated noise as she rolled over so her back was to the other beds in the room. “Oh, good, it’s decided. Can I sleep now?”

“You should just leave her alone,” Nikki told her, looking uncharacteristically jittery as she walked the streets of Hogsmeade. Her black hair was tightly braided and hidden under her Hufflepuff-coloured beanie, and she was covered snugly by layers and layers of warm clothing to fight off the chill that lingered in the February air. “It’s really not your problem and the two of them look like they’re finally figuring things out. Don’t mess with a good thing.”

Lea tried not to feel hurt at having her plan shot down so quickly. “You’ve never had a problem
with meddling before,” she pointed out, wincing when her voice came out more accusing than she’d intended.

Nikki frowned, bristling at her tone. “Then you should listen to me because I obviously know what I’m talking about, what with my meddling experience.”

“I can’t just let it go – it’s James. For someone to make him doubt himself they’d have to have said something really fucking terrible.”

“You’re just going to make Evans angry again,” Nikki said firmly, crossing her arms tightly over her chest as an icy breeze blew through the air. “And then she’ll get upset at James again. You have to stay out of this.”

Lea shook her head, annoyed. “You don’t understand.”

The other girl looked at her incredulously. “You’re being unreasonable, Lea. This is a terrible idea!”

Lea swallowed her irritation, trying to remember that Nikki had been feeling rather tense herself, lately. In fact, she’d been borderline snappy ever since they’d left the castle. Instead, she repeated, “You don’t understand. Don’t worry about it. Come on, let’s get some food.”

Nikki looked as if she was about to protest, lips thinning as she held back her words, but allowed Lea to hesitantly weave an arm through hers and lead her into the Three Broomsticks.

The inn was blessedly warm and packed to the brim, the sharp noise of the room effectively cutting through the lingering tension surrounding the two of them. They were momentarily distracted as they weaved through the tables to get to the bar, greeting their classmates as they went.

Lea sent a cheeky wave to Daisy, who was sat with Frank Longbottom in a tiny booth off to the side, receiving a wink in response. Laury and Bri were huddled at a bigger table closer to the middle with Evan, Severus, Alix Mulciber, and Erika Fawley, both of them exchanging smiles with Nikki and Lea as they passed them.

They were stopped momentarily by a table of seventh-year Gryffindors, all of whom eagerly questioned Nikki about what the fuck Frank was doing with Daisy when Alice Mowry was seated just a little way down at the bar with some other sixth-years. By the time Nikki finished coyly evading their questions, a few seats made themselves available at one end of the bar, and the two of them settled. As they ordered themselves Butterbeer, looking at each other through the awkwardness that lingered.

Lea didn’t like the way she felt simultaneously hesitant and sickeningly discomfited, neither of which she was used to experiencing around her generally good-spirited girlfriend – or in general, really. For all of how Lea worried, awkward was something she rarely felt.

Nikki rolled her eyes. “This is stupid. How’s OWL preparation going? Are you sticking to the timetable?”

Lea – in a fit of severe nerves when she repeatedly messed up her Invigoration Draught in class the week before – had tried to regain some semblance of control by drawing up a study schedule to distribute an even amount of time to all her commitments. It had done its job, for the most part.

“I’ve been good with the studying part of it,” she said, grateful for the change in subject, “but you know Josephine Clearwater has been fucking up the Prefect schedules – it’s driving me up the wall! She paired Evan Rosier with Remus Lupin for rounds and Evan had a cry and made me
change around my entire schedule to swap with him! Why am I paying for her inability to keep it together?"

“To be fair, Josie’s grades have taken a bit of a hit because she’s been going above and beyond with her extracurriculars,” was Nikki’s pointed response. “Have you seen her lately? She looks exhausted, the poor girl.”

A flutter of irritation ran through her. “I get it. NEWTs are fifty times more difficult than OWLs and I’m already panicking so, of course, I get it. But there are solutions – like, anyone can organise the Prefect schedule, it doesn’t have to be her! She can delegate, it’s so easy.”

“She’s a perfectionist,” Nikki said slowly, as if speaking to a child. “Surely you understand her hesitation.”

“I just said I did, didn’t I?” Lea snapped before she could bite back her words. Nikki’s face twisted into a scowl but she held her tongue, lifting her mug to her lips in an obvious attempt to prevent herself from responding.

Lea tried to process her irritation as her mind spun rapidly, looking for a way out. It felt like things had somehow escalated and warped into something she had no understanding of without her knowing it was happening.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. It’s not really a problem, anyway. Or if it is, it’s a minor one. What about you? How’re you going with classes?”

She knew immediately that this was the wrong thing to say.

Nikki’s expression darkened before it closed off completely, a false look of apathy replacing the anger. “It’s fine. The same as always.”

“That’s good.” Lea floundered some more, unwilling to continue down this road (she knew Nikki was having a tough time with classes why the fuck did she think –) and rapidly shoved a few chips in her mouth to make time.

Silence fell again, this time even tenser than before.

“I saw Sprout and Sinistra taking a walk along the grounds the other day,” she blurted, “I know I’ve always said it wasn’t right to put them in a box and just assume what they had was romantic but they really did look…loving this time.”

“They would,” Nikki agreed shortly, “because they are.”

“Right.” Lea’s wide eyes fell to the surface of the bar as she searched for something more to say. The more she thought about it, the more she couldn’t understand how things had become as they were. Surely the James and Lily thing wasn’t bad enough to warrant this much annoyance?

Nikki cleared her throat. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Is that it, then?” The words had stumbled from Lea’s mouth before she knew what she was doing, confusion, regret, and indignation melding into one, big, ugly emotion. “Are we fighting now?”

Nikki, who had just hopped off her stool and taken one step away, spun to fix Lea with a glare she’d never seen before. It was an impatient, agitated expression that she could never have imagined taking over Nikki’s gentle features. It made her eyes hard and her mouth tighten and the already sharp angles of her face sharpen even further into something that could cut.
Lea hated it.

“You’re being a hypocrite,” Nikki said flatly, crossing her arms over her chest. “James was out of line harassing Lily like he did and yes maybe it was just because he didn’t know better and not because he’s a terrible person but he’s finally stopped and you’re not allowed to go after Evans now just because you’re feeling some random sense of familial loyalty! James was wrong and you can’t just pick and choose who you think is wrong and right whenever it fucking suits you.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Lea took a second to correct herself mentally – the James and Lily thing could be bad enough to warrant such a reaction.

Nikki barrelled on, “It’s disgusting to preach feminism and equality and consent when you forget everything to exercise some twisted form of nepotism and –” she paused furiously to toss her braid over her shoulder, “– and the worst part is: you know better!”

Shame coiled in her stomach as the words settled. She had always been mad about James’s behaviour, hadn’t she? Thought it was unbecoming and embarrassing to refuse to listen to someone that very obviously didn’t want anything to do with him? But she – no.

“I’m sorry,” Lea said quietly, suddenly unable to meet Nikki’s eyes. “I’ll stay out of it.”

“Good,” Nikki snapped vehemently.

Lea, who could admit she was wrong, still prickled at the way Nikki’s glare lingered. “Was there something else you wanted to say?”

“No,” she said too quickly, turning again and heading towards the bathroom.

Lea stood, following her into the empty loo. “Are you sure?” she said, a taunting cadence slipping into her voice without her permission. “It sounds like you’ve got something else on your mind. Go ahead, there’s no point in keeping it in.”

“Do you want me to be upset about something else?” Nikki demanded, spinning back around so suddenly that Lea almost ran into her.

Lea scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest in an attempt to appear unaffected. “Of course not. But if you are, then –”

“I said I wasn’t!” Nikki exclaimed, her voice rising into something closer to a scream.

Lea raised an eyebrow.

Nikki let out a noise in between a groan and a cry of frustration. Lea took a moment to hope the sound didn’t carry into the pub – the last thing they needed was the school speculating about their business when she didn’t even have a handle on it.

“Whatever, Lea. I can’t deal with this right now! I think I’m just going to head back to the castle –”

“Can’t deal with what?” she pushed.

“You!” Nikki exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air and sending a sharp, icy gust of wind at Lea as a window behind them snapped open with the force of her words. Her hair blew away from her face sharply and her cheeks reddened with the bite of the chill that suddenly surrounded them.

Nikki staggered back a step, eyeing Lea with a heart-wrenching mix of horror and surprise.
Lea pressed her lips together.

“Are you laughing?” Nikki demanded, glaring at Lea as the breeze continued to blow through the cracked window.

“No,” she said immediately, cursing silently when her mouth lifted into a smile of its own accord.

“You are,” she said accusingly.

Lea snickered helplessly, unable to help herself, as she tried to hold her windblown girlfriend’s eyes. “You just broke a window.”

Nikki’s lips twitched even as she stepped forward and slapped Lea on the arm. “Stop it!”

“You performed accidental magic,” she continued, giggles falling faster.

“I’m angry,” Nikki insisted, pouting through the smile that was now undeniable.

Lea laughed harder, curling her own hands through Nikki’s and pulling her closer.

“You just lost control of your magic,” she said, pressing her now-cold lips against the curve of Nikki’s jaw and making her shiver. “Like a five-year-old.”

“I lost my temper,” she corrected, trying vainly to twist out of Lea’s hold, “because you’re annoying.”

Lea smiled into Nikki’s skin, slowly drawing one hand away from Nikki’s and onto the arch of her waist, sliding it down until her fingers rested against her thigh. “Annoying, am I?”

She sighed, settling against Lea, and nodded her agreement into her neck. “So annoying,” she mumbled.

Nikki’s arms curled around Lea’s waist as she pressed against her more firmly, melding the lines of their bodies together. Even under their layers of clothes, Lea felt something inside her unwind at the familiar feel of Nikki’s hips slotted against hers and the soft press of her breasts. This, she understood.

“I’m sorry,” Lea murmured, bending to press a line of kisses along her jaw. “Forgive me?”

“Only if you forgive me.” Nikki shivered, sighing again. “I’m worried and it isn’t your fault.”

“I know,” she whispered, letting the words hover in the space between their lips, letting Nikki make the next move.

And she did, starting with a soft, cold press of lips. The stood like that for a moment, finding warmth in each other in the iciness of the room, before Nikki sighed, softening even further and opening her mouth to Lea.

She let out a tiny noise – something between a moan and whimper – when Lea took advantage of the moment and slipped her tongue in, tightening her grip on Nikki’s leg, pressing her fingers into the softness where her arse met her thigh. She managed to do nothing more than squeeze before they were interrupted.

“Oh, fuck, it’s freezing in here,” Bri muttered, rubbing her arms and shivering lightly. She smirked at them as she stepped around them and into a cubicle. “Hooking up in the loo, are you? I didn’t realise you’d let Lea drag you to such improper levels, Nikki. And here I was, worried you were
having a spat.”

Lea rolled her eyes and Nikki huffed a laugh, uncurling herself from Lea and throwing a *Reparo* at the window, immediately cutting off the breeze.

“No,” she said, peppering kisses on Lea’s cheek and smiling softly, “no spat.”

“No hooking up either,” Lea muttered petulantly, mock scowling when Bri and Nikki both giggled. Sighing, she straightened out her clothes and did the same to Nikki, running her hands teasingly down the front of her jumper and blinking innocently as she lingered over the cup of her bra, making Nikki narrow her eyes.

She curled her fingers around Lea’s wrists, pausing her ministrations and pulling her closer once more. Lea felt a jolt of excitement run down her spine, overwhelmed and *happy* at the sight of the playfulness on Nikki’s features once more.

“Come back to the castle with me?”

Lea smiled, tilting her head to kiss her again. “Yeah.”
Chapter Twenty

“Uh, Lea,” Bri nudged her shoulder, jolting her out of her mental run through of the benefits of a Beautification Potion. It was difficult to focus on the homework – she and Regulus had both been spiralling into the depths of obscure branches of magic in an effort to get a better-than-average hold on Occlumency. The number of ways in which magic could be channelled that they hadn’t even heard about had both their imaginations running wild.

Lea herself had been enamoured with earth magic and pagan rituals, while Regulus leaned towards more experimental/theoretical (both named as such because they were generally obscenely dangerous to practice) methods. One of her latest causes of worry these days was whether or not Regulus would inadvertently partake in some sort of ritual (generally power-level related) and accidentally suck all the magic out of his dormmates just by reading a spell out loud. Theoretical ‘dark’ magic loved fucking things up for the underprepared.

“Lea!” Bri repeated loudly, “I think someone wants to speak to you.”

Lea looked up, coming face to face with a rather striking Hufflepuff girl, who Lea knew was in her year level but whose name slipped her mind. She looked at the smiling girl, blinking in confusion. “Yes?”

At Lea’s acknowledgement, she slipped into the empty seat beside Laury, facing the other three girls head on. It was the breakfast hour on a Tuesday, and this was already bordering on too much excitement for Lea.

“Hi! I just thought – well, because of, you know, it’s probably best for us to get to know each other better.”

Lea frowned, bewildered. She looked at her friends for help, but received only muted snickers for her effort. “I’m sorry – do I know you?”

The girl faltered slightly. “We have, like, three classes together? I’m Victoria Lumley.”

Silence.

Victoria Lumley was affronted. “I’m dating your brother.”

“My –?” Lea looked over Victoria Lumley’s shoulder over at the Gryffindor table where, sure enough James and his goons were already watching. She raised an eyebrow at him before turning a smile onto Victoria. “How long have you been dating, exactly?”

Victoria relaxed a little now that she was getting more reception. “Oh, only a couple of days. But I really feel it’s important to get to know his family, right? Especially because there’s a chance we’ll all be much closer one day.”

Lea stared at her, smile growing wider despite the bewilderment growing inside her.

“I was thinking we should spend some more time together!” Victoria Lumley was on a roll now, smiling eagerly and almost vibrating with excitement. “You can tell me all about James when he was a child and what kind of food he likes and –”

Lea found herself feeling rather sorry for Victoria Lumley, because she couldn’t possibly know how she was coming across or she wouldn’t have been acting as she was.
“I’m going to stop you right there,” she interrupted, “because I’m not interested in helping you wheedle your way into my family or into my brother’s pants or whatever it is you’re trying to do over here. Best you just run along.”

Victoria Lumley didn’t seem stupid, for all her eagerness, and stood without another word. Pleased, Lea turned her attention back to her notebook.

“Bitch.”

Lea looked up, bemused, at Victoria Lumley’s retreating figure. Two of her friends bristled in anger, Bri already having pulled her wand. Laury, however, simply hid her smile in her porridge.

“No, no,” Lea said, putting her hand over Bri’s and lowering her wand. “Leave it.”

“She just called you a bitch,” Daisy protested, “Some boils would do her good.”

“I was being a bitch,” Lea replied. “Besides, I have a feeling that whole situation’s going to be a bit of a shitshow. It’s good to let some things fester, you know. Wait for the right moment.”

“Collate evidence,” Laury agreed sagely.

Lea looked over Laury’s shoulder and made sure she had her brother’s full attention before pointedly giving him the middle finger. He really needed to keep his shit contained, and she told him as much when they were exiting the Great Hall together.

“I didn’t know she was going to do it,” he threw out before she’d said anything.

“Victoria Lumley, huh?” Lea said, looking up at her brother, humour dancing in her eyes. “Hopefully you don’t need me to warn you about her intentions.”

James scowled, but Sirius and Peter behind them were snickering. “She’s actually really nice.”

“Oh, I’m sure she is,” Lea agreed, “but what does _nice_ mean in the grand scheme of things, really?”

James sighed. “I don’t suppose you’d tell me what you said to her? Because you know I’m the one who’s going to have to do damage control and she looked a _bit_ put off back there.”

“It’s possible I wasn’t very nice,” Lea mused, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

“You were just telling the truth,” Bri said, pinching Lea in the arm.

“I guess. But delivery _is_ rather important, you know? Whatever, we’re even now.”

“She talked back to you, didn’t she?” Remus asked, amused. “That’s why Hale pulled her wand.”

James made a surprised noise. “Did she? Huh. Who would’ve thought?”

Bri snorted. “What, did you think I was just whipping out my wand for a laugh?”

“You never know with snakes,” Sirius drawled without pause. Lea reached for Bri blindly, pulling her forward until she could lace her arm through one of hers, trying to contain whatever Bri’s reaction would have been and blatantly ignoring Sirius. They had been doing such a good job of ignoring each other, after all.

“So, what’s the story with this, by the way?” Lea said loudly, eyeing James curiously. “A
Hufflepuff? I wouldn’t have thought she’d be your type. And is this, like, a steady kind of thing or is she actually completely delusional?"

“Why, what did she say?”

“Ask her yourself and then I’ll tell you. Comparing our answers will be extremely telling. The story?”

James was looking mildly alarmed now, and it was Remus who answered, “Attempted steady kind of thing. The product of a Puff party.”

All the girls burst into laughter.

“Our favourite kind of product,” Daisy managed in between giggles, tugging on a strand of Lea’s hair teasingly.

Lea herself was looking back at Laury, reaching out to gently poke her friend in the cheek. “And the cause of one hundred percent of Laury’s relationships.”

“It’s just something about the air in the Hufflepuff Common Room,” Laury said lightly, “makes sluts out of the best of us.”

“That’d be the weed,” Bri pointed out. “It’s reached a point where the stench of it sticks in the damn furniture. It gives contact high a whole new meaning.”

“Oh, it’s been too long since we’ve been,” Lea sighed, “Especially if we’re missing James finally stepping away from Lily Evans.”

“A pivotal drama moment,” Daisy agreed. “Maybe we can make it this Friday.”

“Unlikely.” Lea looked over her shoulder to share a look with Laury.

“Wait, what’s this Friday?” Bri questioned.

Laury shot her friend a significant look. Bri and Daisy groaned in unison.

Bri gaped. “Wait, that’s this Friday? I thought we had a few more weeks.”

“Nope,” Lea said, popping the p. “It’s this Friday.”

“I’m extremely uncomfortable with the ambiguity of this conversation,” James admitted.

“I’m pretty sure they’re talking about scheming of some sort,” Peter said, “but I feel like it could also be a sex thing?”

Remus groaned. “Can you please stop talking about the orgy thing, it’s the dumbest thought you’ve ever had –”

“Oh, it’s definitely an orgy thing,” Bri said, wagging a finger at Peter who looked mildly horrified at being spoken to directly, “I always knew there was something about you, Pettigrew, how did you hear of our plans?”

James, Sirius, and Peter immediately traded shifty looks while Remus looked skyward as if begging for strength. Lea clued into their silent conversation a moment later and felt the beginnings of an incredulous glare forming. Remus met her gaze and shook his head imperceptibly. Yeah, he better not be fucking spying on them with his rat powers. What the fuck.
And there lay the other source of her worry – Sirius and Peter had made their animagus transformations.

It hadn’t even been difficult to find out, really. Not when three, loud, havoc-wreaking boys walked into Charms two days ago calling each other Padfoot and Wormtail and Prongs while a disgruntled, nervous-looking Moony trailed a few steps behind.

The idiots.

James had been quick to confirm her suspicions when he was faced with a furious, wand-wielding Lea, additionally armed with threats to write their parents about his illicit activities. Lea had firmly added this situation to her list of later-problems, especially since they still had two weeks until the next full moon.

The more immediate source of her attention was what was to occur that Friday.

“I don’t like this.” Bri was looking out the tall windows of the music room and into the clear night sky with suspicion. The area had been cleared, all the desks and stands shrunk and moved to one side of the room so the girls were left with a large, empty, moonlit space. “This feels like an unnecessary risk.”

Lea’s newfound interest in earth magic and pagan rituals had led the girls to this moment – preparing to partake in a ritual to honour the pagan goddess Brighid on the eve of Imbolc. According to her reading, it was a time for new beginnings and purification, both things she would adore having in her life, and she had eagerly roped her friends into joining her. Laury, unsurprisingly, was already aware of the ritual and had agreed to help Lea lead the ceremony.

“I’m a prefect,” Lea said, eyes on the flowers she was artfully laying on a window seat. The moon wasn’t full, but the night was clear enough that the room was still glowing with its light. “If we get caught, you guys hide, and I’ll say I was doing rounds.”

“That would be reassuring if it wasn’t two a.m. and not even Lily-fucking-Evans, prefect and tight-arse extraordinaire, would be doing rounds at this ungodly hour.”

“One thing to add,” Bri said, pulling out a sheet of parchment and tapping it against her desk. “Don’t bring ungodly things into this room,” Daisy told Bri, a mildly scolding expression on her face even as her lips twitched in humour, “We encourage only positive and purifying energies, thanks ever so. I’m harnessing tonight’s energy to manifest another date with Frank – I thought the last one went awfully well but I need him to make the next move.”

The other girls simultaneously rolled their eyes. Daisy had been surprisingly eager to join in and, for all her teasing, was valiantly lighting the candles Laury was laying around the room.

“Oh, Merlin,” Bri muttered, turning back to the window.

“It’s okay,” Laury said sagely, “the whole point of this is that there will be no toxicity once we’re done.”

“Wow, I wonder if there’ll be anything left of Bri, the poor thing,” Daisy snickered.

“I’m done!” Lea exclaimed. She straightened and admired her work – the window seat had been cleared of all cushions so candles could be lain along the length of the window. In the centre of the seat, daffodils, crocuses, and fresh twigs formed an artful circle around a neat, wooden cross. To the right of the circle, there was an empty bowl, a small glass of milk, and a plate of oat cookies.
“Now we take an unlit candle each, and keep an unlit one on the shrine,” Laury said, joining the other three girls at the window seat. She handed out a candle to each girl.

“I know we’re witches,” Bri said, accepting the candle gingerly and looking nervously at Lea, “but this is weird. What if we mess up? It’s not the same as when muggles do it because they don’t have actual magic they can channel, do they? We don’t know what’ll happen when we do it!”

“Yes, we do,” Lea said, slipping her wand from her sleeve into her palm and moving to light the candles on the window. “I read about this ritual in a magical book, Bri. As in, written by a witch. It’s perfectly safe as long as we remain respectful and keep our intentions pure.”

“Which they are,” Laury said, looking pointedly at Daisy.

Daisy raised her hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m all for this! Where do you think muggles got these rituals from? Magical families used to perform cleansing and honouring rituals all the time but the practice fell out of fashion as schools opened and education became more standardised. Mother was so pleased when I wrote to her of our plans.”

“And Imbolc is only a time for cleansing and purifying,” Lea added, turning a reassuring smile onto Bri. “We’re not calling on anything or anyone, it’s simply a show of respect and a chance to release any unhelpful energy we may be holding onto.”

“Fine,” Bri muttered, sighing heavily, “Let’s get it done.”

Lea made eye contact with each of her friends and then Minnie, who was lounging on one of the desks, making sure they were all ready.

“Form a circle around the altar,” Laury said, her gentle tone echoing in the empty room. She moved to open the tall windows carefully, letting the chilly, unmoving air of darkness seep into the room.

Lea could understand Bri’s hesitation – there was something undoubtedly eerie about the castle in the night. It was silent and still, an energy that made you feel all the more aware of your own physicality; how loud you were being and how much you disturbed the air. Even as the girls formed an open circle facing the altar, Lea and Laury in the centre and Bri and Daisy on either side, Lea was all too conscious of the sound of their quiet breaths, the scuffle of their bare feet on the stone floor.

There was a moment of silence as they stood there, unlit candles held between fingers. Their eyes flitted from each other to the shrine to the moon just visible above the line of the tall trees that made the Forbidden Forest.

One day, Lea thought, she’d create a bonfire on Imbolc and celebrate under the open sky as Brighid intended.

Another breath passed. The lit candles flickered. Lea and Laury met eyes.

It was Lea’s idea to perform the ritual, but it was Laury who spoke the rites. She nodded to Lea, and Lea extended the hand without the candle to bring the tip of her wand to the candle on the altar, lighting it wordlessly.

Laury continued.

Lea lifted the glass of milk from the windowsill and held it up to the sky, offering it to the goddess silently before pouring a little into the empty bowl. She then turned to Daisy, who accepted the cup
silently and took a sip, saying, “May Brighid give her blessings to you this season,” as she passed it to Laury.

Laury repeated the gesture and the words before passing it to Bri – now shifted closer to Laury – who did the same and passed it back to Lea. Lea took her own sip before placing the milk back on the altar and then offering an oat cookie to Brighid by placing one in the bowl.

“May Brighid's love and light nurture your path.”

As Lea placed the plate back on the altar after it made its way around the circle, the slightest breeze flitted through the open window, sending a shiver down Lea’s spine.

“Fuck, it’s cold,” Bri muttered, her breath visible in the moonlight.

“Shh,” Daisy admonished, her eyes on the altar and her expression serious. “Go on, Lea.”

Lea bit back her amusement before taking a deep breath. She tucked her wand away and knelt in front of the altar, eye level with the flames of the lit candles. She lowered the tip of her unlit candle to the lit one on the sill.

The soft flame grew taller as it caught, the heat from it flaring hot enough that she felt a flash of warmth against her face.

She spoke the final rites.

One by one, the girls approached the altar to light their candles.

They retook their places in the circle.

“Well,” Bri said, “Was that it?”

Just as the last word left her lips, a sharp gust of wind blew in through the open windows and every flame in the room rose a good three inches from the wick. Bri screamed and held her candle away from her, thankfully having the sense to hold onto it.

Whispers flooded the room, the sound deafening. Lea brought her free hand to her ear, trying to keep the words at bay as fear caught in her throat. Across the room, Minnie raised her head but remained relaxed, releasing a soft, inquiring meow.

“We did it just as the book said,” she protested weakly, the words barely legible through the noise filling her brain. She was so sure –

“Wait.” Laury’s voice was strong and even. “Don’t fight it.”

As the girls looked to her, all in varying levels of distress, as she made a show of taking a deep breath, candle held calmly in two hands, and exhaling slowly. When she repeated the motion a second time, Lea mimicked her, closing her eyes and trying to calm herself.

On her second exhale, her heart steadied into something peaceful. On the third, the intrusive heat from the tall flames softened into something kinder; more nurturing. On the fifth, the whispers gentled into murmurs, warm words caressing her cheeks with promises of happiness.

She wasn’t sure how long it had been when she next opened her eyes, but the room was no longer painfully hot, and there was no intrusive murmuring any longer. When Lea turned to look at her friends, she was met with similar looks of awe.
“Wow,” was all Daisy managed.

“That was creepy as shit,” Bri said flatly, blowing out her candle. As the flame extinguished, so did every other in the room. Bri startled. “So was that. What the fuck? I thought you said this would be normal.”

“I never said that,” Lea told her mildly, her body tingling as her magic, content and calm, buzzed under her veins. “But I’ll admit I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Are those…ashes?” Laury interrupted, voice awed. She was peering into the bowl on the altar that was, Lea saw as she neared, indeed filled with ashes.

“No flame was close enough for it to catch,” Daisy said.

Bri shook her head. “Even if it did catch, there’s no way milk and oats would turn into ash. Lea, I want it noted that I’m uncomfortable and this is not normal, muggle magic we just engaged in.”

“When did I say it was muggle magic?” Lea demanded. “Laury, tell her I never said that.”

“She never said that,” Laury echoed, a serene smile on her face. “No matter either way – we did it.”

“And I feel like I’m buzzing,” Daisy said, reaching for Bri earnestly. “Don’t you feel it? Your magic.”

Bri was hesitant, but she nodded. “I feel something, for sure.”

“And?” Daisy encouraged.

She sagged, smiling slightly. “It’s not bad.”

The four girls exchanged wide smiles, ignorant of the rapidly cooling room and the shock they had just experienced.

“Well, ladies,” Lea announced, “We’re officially witches of the old ways.”

“Wonderful,” said Bri. “Can I go to bed now?”

Lea had been nervous leading up to her prefect rounds the next week – not that she’d admit it – and not even the lingering optimism from the Imbolc ritual carried her through her uneasiness.

It had seemed right in the moment, when Evan begged her to switch rounds with her, because whatever he and Remus would go through would probably be considerably worse than anything she and Remus would go through. Especially as she might even consider him a friend, these days. However, whatever interactions they’d had were extremely different to an extended stroll around the castle with only each other’s company to pass the time.

She had no idea what to say to him.

She was tense.

They had agreed to meet in the Entrance Hall – a neutral location, as prefects rarely did rounds with anyone other than their own house counterpart. Josephine Clearwater had some hideous idea about inter-house unity she was trying to implement in the last half-year of her schooling career, the crazy bint, and Lea was furious about having to be the one dealing with the consequences.
She arrived a few minutes late, and Remus was waiting for her, frowning as he leant against the stone wall.

“Hey,” Lea greeted him, internally disappointed at his apparently already-upset mood until she heard a barely audible shuffling sound. It sounded like feet sliding slightly against the stone floor. She noted the way Remus firmly turned to look at her – almost like he was pointedly turning his back to something – and made sure to focus her gaze on him.

“Hey, Lea,” he replied, offering her a soft smile. “Ready to go?”

She nodded easily. “Right after someone explains why we need to be spied on? I know it’s not in any of your natures to trust a Slytherin but it’s a prefect’s round, honestly, James.”

James’s head popped out from under the cloak, appearing to float in the air, as Remus looked at her in surprise. “I’d hoped you’d gotten rusty.”

“You’re so fucking loud.” She shook her head in mock disappointment. “It’s like you’ve learnt nothing.”

“That wasn’t me,” James scowled, tugging the cloak away from him to reveal himself completely, as well as a suspicious Sirius Black. “I told you she’d know, you tosser.”

“I still think if you hadn’t popped out we could have gotten away with it,” Sirius replied, unrepentant.

“If we’re done,” Remus interrupted, irritated with his friends. “I’d like to get on with my day. Goodbye and fuck you both.”

Lea looked at him bemusedly as he grabbed a hold of her forearm gently and pulled her down the hall.

“Don’t get into too much trouble, children!” came the parting shout from James. “You can’t keep your secrets from me forever!”

“I take it that wasn’t your idea?” Lea asked once they were out of sight of the two of them.

Remus shook his head, sandy blonde hair falling into his eyes. “James and Sirius were bored – I’m sure you understand the impossibility of reasoning with them when they’re bored. And James is still convinced we’re hiding something.”

Lea couldn’t help the snicker that escaped her. “Good. And yes, unfortunately, I do. There was a shocking amount of whining coming from supposedly fifteen- and sixteen-years old boys over Christmas, after everything settled. I was embarrassed for them, really.”

Remus huffed out a laugh. “That sounds about right. They’re arrogant enough to think anything they do is justified when they’re bored because the universe dared to leave them unoccupied for a second. Really, it’s the universe’s fault.”

Lea giggled. Remus looked at her strangely. She giggled even more, her hand coming up to cover her mouth, trying to physically hold back the sound. As they neared the first broom closet that required checking, Remus knocked on the door before pushing it open, causing Lea to almost double over with the force of her laugh.

The cupboard was empty and he turned to narrow his eyes at her, head tilting suspiciously. “Are you high?”
Her snickers subsided slightly. “I cannot believe you just knocked on the door.”

“It’s polite!” he defended, although his lips were quirkling into a smile. “It’s nice to have some warning if you’re about to be seen in a compromising position.”

Lea shook her head, amused at the boy walking beside her. “It’s their own fault if they’re getting naked in broom closets at the time prefects are known to be patrolling. Rookie mistake.”

“Oh?” Remus lifted one eyebrow. “Is this something you have a lot of experience with?”

“Please. It’s common sense! I’ll do the next one.”

As they neared the next closet, Lea could hear noises that indicated this one was nowhere near as empty as the previous one. Taking out her wand, she glanced back at Remus. He was watching her expectantly, smirk in place and arms crossed across his chest.

“Watch and learn.” She pushed the door open with a flick of her wand, smiling widely at the sight of a boy and girl mostly hidden in the dark of the closet but, predictably, semi-naked. They looked to be older too. Honestly, people never learn.

“Hello,” Lea greeted the pair jovially as they scrambled to pull themselves together. She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “What’s your name, again? Gordon? Gerry?” she asked, addressing the boy.

“George,” he said, unhappily buckling his belt.

Blonde hair filled Lea’s vision as none other than Mary MacDonald stepped out into the light. “Remus?” she asked.

“Hi, Mary,” Remus offered, biting back a smile.

“Now, you two naughty children are out past curfew,” Lea chided, trying not to giggle as Mary shot her an incredulous look. “I’m thinking detention with Filch? Maybe some house points? Depends on how far you were planning to go, really. Get it? Points? Scoring?”

Mary’s incredulous gaze turned into a glare and she shot a pleading look over Lea’s shoulder at Remus.

“Sorry, Mary,” he said in response. “She’s right, you are out past curfew.”

“But –,” Mary began to protest.

“Don’t worry, MacDonald,” George drawled. Lea could see him tying a Slytherin tie, the colours only just visible in the darkness that still enveloped him from the closet. “This can be easily remedied.”

Lea’s eyebrow rose as she watched him step outside properly and give her a once over. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I have it on good authority McGonagall is planning a pop quiz for her fifth years in two weeks.”

Lea scoffed. “She told us that in class, idiot, it’s not a pop quiz.”

She could see his confidence falter like it was a physical thing. “I can get you into the Slug Club.”

“I’m already in it. Are you? I swear I’ve never seen you before in my life.”
He faltered even more. “I’m only in the year above – never mind. How about Quidditch World Cup tickets?”

“I’m rich and also don’t care about Quidditch.”

George was grasping at straws now. “What about –”

“How about you just be a good human being and keep your mouth shut about this?” Mary interrupted. “We’ll serve the detentions.”

“Unfortunately, the morality card doesn’t really work on me, so I won’t keep my mouth shut and you can serve the detentions.”

Mary scowled but George physically paled. Lea narrowed her eyes at him. This wasn’t something he wanted as public knowledge and it didn’t take a genius to guess why. Remus must have noticed too because he intervened. “The two of you should head back to your dorms. Don’t take detours.”

Mary shot a final betrayed look in Remus’s direction before following his instructions. George, however, turned to Lea the moment Mary had turned the corner. “Please don’t tell anyone,” he begged. “It would ruin me! My father –”

Gods, Lea hated it when they started talking about their fathers. “How about we leave it at you owe me one, yeah?”

Immediately George straightened, nodding. “If that’s all,” he said with a final dismissive nod at both of them, turning to walk away.

“So, you bargain? Stack up the favours?” Remus said, bemused.

“Eh, it’s nice knowing who’s with who, you know? Good to know where people’s soft spots are. I probably wouldn’t have told anyone about them anyway. Neither really matter that much politically, if you get what I mean?”

Remus frowned. “So, if you were to, say, find me in a broom closet with someone, what would it take to keep you quiet?”

Lea didn’t hide her amusement.

There was something to be said about the enigma that was Remus Lupin. Although often considered the kind, gentle, rule-follower of his friends, he certainly had no qualms about skiving off his prefect rounds and passing some time at the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Night had fallen long ago, and the moon’s light was half hidden by clouds. The tiny embers lingering on the end of the joint were bright against the backdrop.

Lea was occupied watching the smoke curl into the air, eyes tracing the line of Remus’s fingers to the length of the joint to the shapes in the air, re-focusing only when she was nudged gently with an elbow.

“All right?” Remus questioned, voice low and relaxed. His forearms were resting on the railing, looking out onto the grounds, but his eyes were on her.

Lea’s grin was a little too wide and more than a little dopey, and she nodded. “I really like the moon.”
She’d said it without thinking and wanted to take it back the moment it had left her, but Remus only raised a wry eyebrow. With courage that could only have been a result of the buzz in her veins, Lea shrugged. “Not only the moon. Night in general. I always concentrate better at night, though the gods know why.”

“I can’t say I can relate,” he said mildly, holding the joint out to her. “If I had my way, I’d always be asleep before the sun sets.”

“That’s sad.”

“It’s better than turning into a mindless monster.”

Lea blew her lungful of smoke at him before sticking her tongue out. “You know, James said once – in passing – that no one hated who you were more than yourself. It’s rather awful of you to be proving him right.”

He rolled his eyes. “Awful for who?”

“Me. I’m really uncomfortable with you making me feel worse about everything than I already do.”

It was only then that Remus stiffened. Green eyes that were a little closer to gold hardened under the waning gibbous that hung above them. “I don’t need your pity.”

Lea scoffed, noting that even the kind Remus was a servant to the darker side of his pride. “Not everything’s about you, Remus. I simply live by the philosophy that James is never right and despise thinking I might be wrong.”

He softened at her words, relaxing even though he didn’t look like he believed her. “Forgive me. I would never dare attempt change your world view.”

“And nor should you,” she agreed, stubbing out the joint under her shoe when Remus waved off her offer, “especially not about James. Besides,” she turned to face him fully, hip digging into the railing as she smiled, “you’re not going to get out of talking about the werewolf thing just by trying to make me feel guilty.”

He sighed heavily, shifting to mimic her stance. It might have been intimidating, how much taller than her he was, or the edge of wildness that lingered on him even after the drug, if she wasn’t so determined in her goal.

“I understand if you’re angry at me – I’m going to do everything I can to keep James and the others away on the full moon –”

Startled, she laughed. “Angry? About that? Why on earth would I be upset with you about something you had absolutely no hand in?”

His mouth twisted with displeasure. “If it wasn’t for me –”

“Oh, hush,” Lea said dismissively. “I won’t say I’m not worried about how it’ll go but it’s definitely going to go, no matter how you or I feel. Best to just embrace it and do what we can to keep it smooth.”

Remus crossed his arms over his chest. “I thought you’d be upset.”

“You thought I might help you stop them,” she corrected. “I might have, but I rather agree with where they’re coming from.”
There was a pause, one in which Remus’s unhappiness was palpable.

“Also, I researched it and they should be fine,” she added.

“*Should* be,” he echoed.

Lea rolled her eyes. “I have the feeling we’re going to go in circles if we keep up like this. Agree to disagree, yeah? Besides, I’m more concerned about why you apparently hate yourself so damn much when none of anything has been your fault. I also wanted to ask how you’ve been since last term. We’ve barely had a chance to speak.”

He didn’t pretend not to know what she was talking about, at least, and he reached up to run one tired hand through his sandy curls. “You know what happened to Sirius.”

It wasn’t a question. “I know it’s not my business,” she said, watching him carefully, “but I feel it prudent to say that his trauma doesn’t negate yours, and just because he went through something horrible, it doesn’t mean you’re obligated to forgive his actions if you don’t want to.”

She was met with silence, Remus’s gaze holding hers for a long time before looking away.

“Thank you,” he said finally. Lea smiled and let him compose himself.

There was some internal turmoil, for her, when she had first seen her brother and his three friends back together on their return to the school. She was torn between admiration at the united front they presented (even though practically no-one was aware of Sirius’s change in accommodation) and the uncomfortable feeling that they had all forgotten about the drama that had been occurring weeks before.

It had also been painfully apparent to her that she’d gotten a vague understanding of where James and Sirius stood on the matter but had been told little about how Remus felt. Ever since that thought had crossed her mind (the week before during Charms, catching the way Remus’s gaze flickered with irritation when Sirius threw a thinly veiled insult at Severus from across the room when Flitwick’s back was turned) she had been itching to know more.

Then, just as Remus seemed to have relaxed once more and Lea was going to finally find her answer, there was a sudden flutter of wings from behind her.

She startled violently, almost losing her balance and making Remus reach out to steady her. There was a moment of stunned silence, hazel eyes looking into green, before Remus started snickering.

Lea pouted, but gave way to her own laughter within seconds.

“Stop it!” she protested through her laughter. “I thought James had followed again! This would have been a terrible look, you know.”

“He won’t come back,” he told her easily, “Sirius would have distracted him – he has no interest in what we get up to.”

“You can’t know for sure!” A thought occurred to her, making her stiffen. “What if he’s looking on that blasted map? Gods, I should have thought of that before!”

Remus raised an eyebrow, a shrewd look on his face. “*Map*?”

Oops.

A slightly manic giggle left her. “What?”
He wasn’t impressed. “Lea.”

She was suddenly aware of the grip he had on her forearm, left from when he had kept her upright. “Remus.”

“Would you, perhaps, be talking about this map?” Then he pulled out that very parchment from his pocket, folded neatly and very much blank, but also undeniably the same thing she had seen that day in the music room.

She gaped at him. “Remus. Remus, have you ever been told you’re a genius?” She pulled herself from his grip and instead clutched at his arm with both her hands. “A genius.”

Startled, he laughed. “What on earth are you on about?”

“Do you know,” she began passionately, “the things we could do with this map?”

“I do have some idea, yes.”

“But as prefects,” she continued undeterred, “as prefects we could stay here the whole fucking time and just look at the map to check if any stragglers are out past curfew! Let me see.”

He allowed her to open the map and she slipped her wand from her sleeve to press the tip against the paper as she said the words.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

“Prefect Lea? Up to no good? I can’t believe it,” Remus murmured, teasing.


“It is a bit dramatic,” he allowed, smiling fondly. “Sirius finished the front just a few days ago.”

“Mmm. Oh good, James is in his dorm. Oh, look! Sprout’s in Sinistra’s room! Nikki’s going to have kittens.”

She pored over the map, filtering through the names that mattered and the ones that didn’t in seconds despite her still fuzzy mind. She was smiling at the sight of Daisy, Bri, Laury, and Evan in the Slytherin dorm, huddled in a group near the fire, when Remus said, “James told me what you did for Sirius when he got to your house.”

Inexplicably, sadness settled in her chest. “Is it so surprising that I would worry? I know Sirius and I are far from friends, but I wasn’t happy about what happened.”

There was a moment in which she refused to look at him and he seemed to be waiting for her to do just that.

“No,” he said, “Not so surprising.”

Lea was startled by his gentle tone and tricked into looking back into glassy eyes. Remus was rather pretty, with sharp lines and soft features framing intent green eyes. It was always his kindness, his careful behaviour, that made him seem approachable rather than his features, and now, with the full moon nearing, the manic, feverish edge to the boy was more prevalent than ever.

It made him seem sharper, wilder, and…powerful.
She blinked, looking back down at the map and hiding a smile. “That’s sweet.”

Her eyes trailed over the names as silence fell, sliding over the mostly empty corridors for a while until they caught on a name not too far from theirs.

“Filch is coming up.” Lea folded up the parchment, muttering the words to hide its contents and handing it back to Remus. “Best head down.”

They headed down the stairs, exuding innocence like the best of them, running only briefly into the ever-rageful caretaker.

“Just finishing up our rounds,” Remus said calmly, tapping idly on his prefect badge while Lea stifled a giggle.

Filch grunted, oozing suspicion, but let them pass.

They paused when they reached the bottom of the tower, realising they were heading in different directions.

“Thanks for the smoke,” he said, grinning.

“Thanks for the company,” she countered.

And then they turned around and went their separate ways.

End Notes

hit me up on tumblr to cry over harry potter

kudos and comments always appreciated!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!