Damage Control

by hilarilygrounded

Summary

The sequel to Building Family in which Remus and Sirius attempt to stave off empty nest syndrome and struggle to protect Harry from the dangers of the wizarding world during his first two years at Hogwarts.
A lanky boy with red hair and freckles poked his head into Harry's empty train compartment. “Can I sit here? Everywhere else is full.”

“Course.”

The boy dragged his trunk into the compartment. Harry helped him lift it into the luggage rack.

“I'm Ron, by the way. Ron Weasley.”

“Im Harry-”


“He's my godfather.”

“Who was that man who was with him? On the platform, I mean.”

“My, er, other godfather. His name's Remus.”

Sirius had told Harry it was okay to tell his friends he'd been raised by both of them, as long as he didn't go screaming it from the top of Gryffindor tower. Ron seemed nice, so Harry decided he could tell him the truth.

“You have two godfathers? How does that work?”

“How many parents do you have?” Harry asked.

“Two. My mum and dad.” Ron looked mystified.

“Same thing, c'cept both of my parents are dads. Well, only Sirius is legally my dad cause for some reason Remus wasn't allowed to adopt me too. Something about gross double standards. When I went to muggle school I had to pretend I only had one dad but Sirius says wizards are more tolerant or something.”

“Oh. Hang on, you were raised by wizards but you went to muggle school?”

“Yeah. They wanted me socialized before I came here and they thought the muggle world was safer or whatever. Where did you go to primary school?”

“Mum taught all my siblings at home before we started at Hogwarts. I'm second youngest, though, so after Fred and George started school it was only me and Ginny.”

They compared their childhoods and debated the merits of having siblings. Harry had always wanted one, while Ron was of the opinion that he had far too many and offered to lend him Percy or Ginny to cure him of the notion. The debate took them until lunchtime, at which point Ron forlornly took out corned beef sandwiches he looked like he didn't want.

Harry had a bit of a dilemma. Remus packed him a decent-looking lunch, but Sirius had been telling him about the trolley full of sweets since he could remember and he had quite a bit of pocket money on him at the moment. He had been taught never to waste food, but he knew that if he ate his lunch from Remus he wouldn't have room for as many sweets.
Ron solved it for him by half-jokingly asking to trade sandwiches. Harry bought all the candy he wanted and then the two of them split the candy and Harry's lunch. After all, he reasoned, it wasn't wasting food since Ron didn't consider the corned beef sandwiches edible. Sirius would be proud of his ingenuity and Remus would be proud that he was sharing.

A few minutes past two, two scared looking boys and a girl with bushy brown hair and a mission stepped into the compartment.

“Neville's lost his toad,” she announced.

“His name's Trevor,” the smaller of the boys added.

“We haven't, sorry. Spot would have noticed right away if he'd been in here,” Harry gestured at Spot's travel basket.

“What kind of animal is Spot?” the girl asked.

“She's a milk snake.” Harry removed the lid to show them his sleeping pet. Neville hung back while the other three leaned in for a closer look. “She's five years old and her favorite food is mice.”

“What about rats?” Ron seemed suddenly frightened.

“She could probably eat a small rat, but big ones would probably be too much for her. Why?”

Ron produced a squirming grey rat. “I don't want her to eat Scabbers.”

Before Harry could reply that Scabbers should be safe, the other boy bolted from the compartment. Everyone looked at each other as if to ask what they should do. Harry replaced the lid on Spot's basket and followed him.

“Hey,” Harry said when he found him cowering by a window. “You okay?”

“Scared of rats,” the boy squeaked. He glanced up at Harry, probably checking to see if Harry would laugh at him. Harry gave him a kind smile.

“Not too fond of them either. I'm Harry by the way.” He stuck out his hand.

“Harry Potter?” Harry nodded. The boy took the offered hand and used it to pull himself up.

“Dudley Anderson. I'm your cousin.”

“Sirius and Remus told me about you. I thought your last name was Dursley, though.”

“Used to be.”

On the walk back to the compartment Dudley told him how they'd been moved to a squib's house after he and his mother were released from St. Mungo's. His mother fell in love with their host, and eventually they got married. Then they changed Dudley's last name his stepdad's to erase his last tie to Vernon Dursley.

“Mum was afraid to send me here when we found out I'm magic, but dad convinced her I'd be safer at Hogwarts than as an untrained wizard living in the muggle world.”

Dudley waited outside the compartment while Harry fetched the girl, whose name turned out to be Hermione Granger, and Neville. Then the three of them continued their search for Trevor while
Harry returned to his seat.

“What was all that about?” Ron asked.

“He's afraid of rats.”

Harry let Spot out of his basket to bask in the sun. The snake hissed in Scabbers’ direction before going to sleep. Harry thought he heard something about 'not right’. He would have to ask Spot about it later. Scabbers looked like a typical rat to Harry.

The rest of the afternoon passed without further incident. Despite all the candy, Harry was famished by the time the train pulled into the station. He and Ron stuck close together as they made their way over to the abnormally tall man calling “First years, this way!” When they reached him, Harry realized he was the man Sirius and Remus had talked to the day before in Diagon Alley. If Harry remembered correctly, his name was Hagrid.

Hagrid helped the first years get into a small fleet of rowboats at the edge of a lake. Harry and Ron ended up in a boat with him and Neville, who had apparently found his toad.

“Hullo Harry,” Hagrid said as the boats made their way across the water. “Sorry if I caused any trouble yesterday, I was just excited to meet ya at last. Sirius and Remus aren't too mad at me, are they?”

“I don't think so,” Harry reassured him. They hadn't mentioned the incident again so it was probably true.

A collective gasp rose from the first years as they passed a rocky outcrop and Hogwarts came into view. Harry gazed up at the castle. Remus and Sirius hadn't done it justice in their stories; it was the most beautiful building Harry had ever seen.

The boats docked close to the castle and Hagrid led the first years inside. He told them to wait in the entrance hall and continued on through a set of ornate double doors. Harry took in his surroundings while he waited.

“Can't believe we're finally here! Can you Harry?” Ron practically vibrated with excitement.

A ripple of whispers passed through the students closest to them. Before Harry could answer, a blond boy swaggered up to Harry and stuck his hand out.

“Draco Malfoy. I hear we are family, since mother's cousin adopted you. We ought to stick together. I can teach you how to find the right kind of friends.” He gave Ron a nasty look.

Harry glanced at the boy’s hand, which was still outstretched. “I don't think you can teach me anything about making friends. But maybe you could stand to learn something about being nice to people.”

Draco Malfoy withdrew his hand. He might have had time to construct a snarky retort, but at that moment Professor McGonagall appeared.

“The sorting ceremony is about to begin. Please form an orderly line.” Harry waved at her, but she didn't acknowledge him. He supposed she didn't want to be accused of playing favourites.

Harry and the other first years filed into the great hall. Even though Remus and Sirius had described it to him many times, he was completely unprepared for the splendor of the enchanted ceiling. At the moment, it showed the peaceful black sky splattered with stars.
Potter fell more than halfway through the alphabet, so Harry had to wait a while for his turn. He watched his cousin, Dudley, get sorted into Hufflepuff, and Hermione and Neville into Gryffindor. He noticed that Draco Malfoy went into Slytherin. Finally, McGonagall read out “Potter, Harry!” and he made his way to the low stool to be sorted.

A thousand whispers flooded the hall as the other students processed his name. Harry tried not to pay them any attention as he sat and let McGonagall place the hat on his head.

“Am I allowed to ask for Gryffindor?” he asked the hat with his thoughts.

“There's no harm in asking. Though I must say, you would do well in Slytherin too.”

“No thanks. Anything but Slytherin.”

“Ah, your guardians have prejudiced you against Slytherin, haven't they?”

“Sirius tried to. Remus told me I shouldn't let house divisions stop me from making friends. But mostly I just want to be in the same house as the friends I've already made.”

“Such fierce loyalty to one's friends is a Slytherin trait, you know. But I suppose arguing with a thousand year old authority on the subject is undeniably Gryffindor.” The hat opened its mouth and yelled “GRYFFINDOR!” and the great hall exploded in applause.

Harry found an empty seat next to Neville at the Gryffindor table. He couldn't wait to write a letter to Sirius and Remus! And to eat; boy was he starving. He watched the remaining students get sorted more or less evenly into the four houses. Ron joined him in Gryffindor, which confirmed he’d been right to make the hat put him there.

The welcoming feast was better than Harry could ever dream of. Sirius was a decent cook, but the decadent meal that appeared on the gold plates completely outshone him. Harry decided not to include that part in his letter. Remus would probably think it was funny, but Sirius would get sulky. Full to bursting, Harry and the other first years stumbled after Ron’s older brother up to Gryffindor tower once Dumbledore sent everyone to bed.

Harry, Ron, and Neville were delighted to discover that they would be roommates, along with two of the other first year boys--Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan. That first night in the dormitory felt rather like a sleepover, or at least what Harry imagined a sleepover would be like. For his own safety, he’d never been to one before. He was so busy having fun that he forgot to write to Sirius and Remus, and he didn’t get the chance to ask Spot what she meant about Ron’s rat.

It was much later than it should have been by the time all five boys settled down to sleep, for which all of them paid dearly the next morning when they had to wake up for their first day of classes. Only Harry’s excitement about finally getting to learn how to do magic carried him through the long day. That night he barely had the energy to finally write to Sirius and Remus before collapsing into bed.

Professor Snape hated Harry. It was immediately obvious from the moment Harry entered the dark classroom on Friday morning that this was one adult he would not get along with. He targeted Harry with questions that seemed wholly unfair, considering it was the first class. He was only able to answer one of the questions--“What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?”--because Sirius had recently begun looking into brewing wolfsbane potion for Remus. Giving the right answer, however, seemed to further irritate Snape.

By the end of class, Harry and the other Gryffindor students had somehow managed to lose five
points while the Slytherins, who performed no better overall, had gained ten. Harry complained at
length about this injustice in his second letter home. Remus wrote back the following morning to
say that Snape had been at school with him and Sirius, that he had always been a bit of a bully, and
that Harry still had to behave in his classes. Harry could tell from the ink splotches accompanying
Sirius’s rather aggressive signature that it had taken some convincing for him to endorse Remus’s
stance on the matter. He guessed that their history with Snape was more fraught than Remus was
willing to let on.
Two

“He fought a what?” Remus yelped. He and Sirius had come home from their Halloween visit to Lily and James intending to have a quiet night in. Unfortunately, their plans were interrupted by a sudden floo visit from McGonagall who had some news about how Harry’s Halloween was going. Her previous unannounced visit had been to notify them that Harry had somehow made the quidditch team despite being a first year. This time the news was less cheerful.

“A troll, Remus,” she repeated. “A full-grown mountain troll that was discovered in the castle. Harry and several friends prevented it from killing another student, who claims responsibility for the boys’ proximity to the troll in the first place. A story which Severus-”

Sirius hissed.

"-strongly doubts. He is convinced that Harry is the ringleader of a gang of mischief-makers who will grow up to rival your own exploits at school."

"And what do you think?" Remus asked.

"I doubt that Miss Granger was being entirely truthful in her description of what transpired, but I am also not inclined to believe that Harry purposefully endangered his friends for a laugh."

"We tried to raise him to be better than we were," Sirius laughed. "Snivellius is just acting on old prejudices."

McGonagall's eyes flashed. "Rather. Now if you'll excuse me, I must be getting back to my students." She vanished into the fire.

Remus felt like someone had hit him in the gut with a beater's bat. "A troll Pads. He's only been at school for a few months and he fought a troll! He could've been killed!"

"I know, love." Sirius took his hand, steered him over to the couch, and made him sit down. "But he didn't. He's bloody brilliant, our boy. Gods, I need a drink."

Remus continued silently fretting over Harry. Sirius returned a minute later with a bottle of firewhisky and two glasses. Remus snuggled up to him when he sat down.

"To James and Lily," Sirius handed Remus a glass and raised his own to the empty room as though toasting ghosts.

"May they protect our son from the reckless bravery he inherited from them," Remus added before draining his glass. Sirius refilled it for him.

Remus woke up the next morning in a tangle of sheets and limbs and with a pounding headache. He and Sirius were barely in their thirties, but already they were getting too old to drink as much as they did last night.

A tapping at the window both startled him and increased the pain in his head. The family owl was perched on the empty flower box with a letter in her beak. Remus sighed, extracted himself from the bed without waking Sirius, threw on his dressing gown, and let the bird inside.

He read Harry's description of the troll incident while brewing some very strong coffee. It differed slightly from McGonagall's version in places, probably where Harry was too excited to remember
to lie, but it did at least confirm that he and his friends had acted to protect a fellow student rather than simply to cause mischief.

Sirius would want breakfast when he woke, so Remus set to frying eggs, bacon, sausage, mushrooms, and potatoes. He rarely cooked, but he was quite proud of the elaborate breakfasts he could produce on special occasions.

"Food?" Sirius emerged from the bedroom as Remus was just finishing up the sausages. He looked like death warmed up.

"Almost ready," Remus assured him. "There's coffee in the pot if you want some."

Sirius hugged him from behind, which was nice for about three seconds before Remus realized he was using it as an excuse to steal some bacon from the pan.

"Hey!" He slapped Sirius's wrist playfully. "Wait two minutes, can't you?" Sirius pouted, which made Remus laugh. He kissed him gently before turning back to the sausages.

Once breakfast and coffee made a dent in their hangovers, Remus showed Sirius the letter from Harry.

"What are we supposed to do here?" Sirius asked. "Punish him for putting himself and others in danger? Congratulate him for rescuing this Hermione girl?"

"Some of both, I think. Emphasize that he did the right thing but also tell him not to pull any stunts like that again."

Sirius pulled out some parchment and a quill and scribbled out a reply. After a few minutes he presented it to Remus for approval.

"Perfect." They both signed it and then Remus sent it off with the owl.

Once the dishes had been cleared away and they'd gotten dressed, Remus took out his books. Now that Harry was at Hogwarts, Remus had decided to leave his primary school job to pursue a master's degree in defense against the dark arts at Britain's only magical university. He found he missed being a student, and he missed being immersed in wizarding society.

While Remus soldiered through a complicated text on horcrux detection theory, Sirius lay with his head in Remus's lap and breezed through a trashy romance novel. Every once in a while he would read a passage out loud, which Remus found equal parts amusing and distracting.

"Can't believe Dumbledore let Snape teach Harry," Sirius mused. Remus sighed. This had been a constant refrain since the first week of term, and was only a slight modification of a gripe Sirius had had ever since McGonagall informed them that Snape had filled Slughorn's vacant position many years ago.

"He must have his reasons," Remus repeated his standard answer.

"Huh. He has his reasons for everything. Wish he'd share some of them with us mere mortals once in a while."

"Indeed."
At first, Harry was overjoyed to hear that Sirius and Remus would be coming to watch his first quidditch match. The closer it got to the big day, however, the more anxious he felt. What if Gryffindor lost and it was his fault?

Normally, when Harry was feeling anxious about something, he would talk to Sirius and/or Remus about it. These dilemmas generally didn’t involve them, however. He tried talking to Ron and Neville, who both thought he was being silly—“But you’re good enough to be the youngest player in a century!”—and Hermione, whose idea of a pep talk involved quoting *Quidditch Through the Ages* at him.

Finally, Harry turned to Dudley. As his cousin both didn’t really care about quidditch, being raised by a muggle and a squib, and was a Hufflepuff, he didn’t stand to benefit from Gryffindor beating Slytherin. And, Harry reasoned, with a therapist as a stepdad he might know a few tricks for coping with stress.

"Why're you so panicked over quidditch? S'only a game."

"Yeah but the whole school watches. A bit higher stakes than gobstones, don't you think?" Dudley was in the gobstones club. He was also enthusiastically terrible at gobstones.

"A bit," he admitted. "But you never seem to be bothered by having an audience off the pitch. What's really the matter?"

"Sirius always talks about how great my dad was at quidditch. It's his favourite game! I guess I'm afraid of not living up to his expectations."

"Has he ever made you feel bad for not meeting his expectations before?"

"Well, no. But-

"Then what makes you think he'll be disappointed if you're not the best quidditch player ever by your very first game? I bet even famous quidditch players have to practice a lot before they get good at it. Just like footballers."

Harry considered this. It was true that footballers took years to get good at football, and quidditch was kind of like magic football with a lot more things going on.

"Thanks, Dudley. I feel a bit better now."

"Anytime."

The day of the match came all too quickly. Harry didn't even get a chance to see Sirius and Remus before Wood rushed him and the rest of the team off to the locker rooms. Before he knew it, he was in the air.

Harry risked a peek at the stands. Sirius and Remus sat with McGonagall near the front of the Gryffindor section. Remus wore a restrained red and gold sweater, while Sirius had gone all out with face paint. Despite his earlier anxiety, seeing them gave him a small confidence boost. He turned away from the crowd and began his hunt for the snitch.

A few minutes later, however, his broom bucked underneath him. He held fast, but it continued its
efforts to unseat him. Harry slipped and only just managed to catch the handle so that he was hanging by one hand. What was going on? Through the haze of adrenaline and concentration required to keep him from falling, Harry heard shouting from the crowd and saw Fred and George fly over to him.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, it was over. The broom stilled and Harry was able to get back on. What was that? He redoubled his efforts to find the snitch so he could get back to the ground before it happened again.

And there it was, about a hundred feet below him. He dove. But the Slytherin seeker saw it too. They raced each other through the air. The dive was too steep, however. The other seeker pulled out of the dive, but Harry kept going. He fumbled for the snitch while trying to avoid ploughing into the ground.

As it was, he crashed into the dirt at a technically safe, but hardly ideal, speed. He could feel the snitch in his mouth, almost choking him. The whole stadium was dead silent. Harry coughed and spat out the little golden ball into his gloved hand. The crowd erupted as Lee Jordan cried "Potter has the snitch!" into his megaphone.

His team landed around him, cheering. They lifted him onto their shoulders and carried him off the pitch. Once he'd changed back into normal robes, Harry found Sirius and Remus waiting with his friends outside the locker rooms.

"You were fantastic!" Sirius tackled him in an enthusiastic hug.

"Let him breathe, Pads," Remus smiled. "And congratulations, love. Staying on your broom when it's being jinxed like that is no easy feat."

"That's what that was?"

"Oh yes. And when I find the person responsible-"

"Actually, um, Mr. Black-" Hermione piped up.

Sirius made a face. "Please, call me Sirius. Mr. Black makes me sound like someone's dad."

Remus rolled his eyes at him. "You are someone's dad. What were you saying Hermione?"

"Well, I--we think it was Professor Snape. He was staring up at Harry without blinking and it stopped when Professor Quirrell noticed I'd set Professor Snape's robes on fire."

Remus looked shocked. Sirius's face seemed to be trying to work out whether it should smirk at the idea of someone setting Snape on fire or concerned that a teacher might be behind Harry's near-death experience.

"Thank you for telling us. We'll take it up with Dumbledore. In the meantime, please try to put it out of your minds," Remus said in his teacher voice, which let Harry know there was probably something the adults knew and were not going to share.

Sirius and Remus walked him and the others up to the castle. Then they said a hasty goodbye, which, to Harry's embarrassment, involved a lot more hugging, because they needed to check in with the headmaster before leaving. Harry wished their visit had been longer and unmarred by his broom being jinxed. But he was glad to have seen them all the same.

On Monday morning, Harry and his friends were outraged to discover that Snape was still teaching
at the school. They'd been so sure Sirius and Remus would be able to get him kicked out after he tried to kill a student. Harry wrote home in frustration. The reply, when it came, simply read "It wasn't Snape. We're trying to figure out who it was. Try not to worry."

Although Harry trusted his parents, and the other adults who had helped keep him safe, he nevertheless couldn't help worrying. The only reason he made it through Snape's class on Friday was an invitation to Hagrid's hut for tea that evening. As it was, he managed to lose 10 points for mistaking a frog liver for a salamander's.

Harry and his friends made sure to have a quick dinner before heading down to Hagrid's. The first time he'd invited them for tea they'd made the mistake of trying to eat the cakes he served. Only Dudley was able to stomach Hagrid's cooking, and Harry was sure it was largely due to the disciplined politeness he'd learned from his mother.

Hagrid opened the door when they knocked and Fang came rushing out to greet them. Everyone else dove out of the boarhound's path but Dudley, whose mother hated dogs, received the slobbery kisses and muddy paws with open arms.

"I've just put the kettle on," Hagrid smiled. "C'mere Fang, let the poor boy in."

They all clustered around Hagrid's table, two to a chair. Dudley scratched Fang behind the ears as everyone tried to catch Hagrid up on their week at the same time. Harry eyed the pile of rock cakes in the centre of the table nervously. Then he noticed a newspaper sticking out from under the plate. Surreptitiously, he extracted the paper and unfolded it. The headline read "Still No Suspects in Gringotts Break-In."

"Someone broke into Gringotts?" he asked Neville, with whom he was sharing one of Hagrid's enormous chairs.

"Yeah, the day before we came to school."

"But I thought that was impossible?"

"It is! Apparently the vault had just been emptied so nothing was taken. I reckon they'd lessened security on it or something and that's how the robber got in and out alive."

"What's Gringotts like?"

Dudley and Hermione, both muggle borns, shrugged.

"Cave-like," said Ron.

Neville nodded. "And there's a bunch of little carts you have to ride to your vault."

"Talking about the Gringotts carts?" Hagrid asked. "Make me motion-sick." He shivered at the thought, nearly spilling the tea he was pouring into Hermione's mug.

"You were at Gringotts the day it was broken into, right Hagrid?"

"Yeah. On Hogwarts business, mind. Fetched something from vault seven hundred and thirteen for Dumbledore." He winced. "Don't repeat that. Wasn't supposed to tell anyone."

"Hang on, wasn't that the same vault that was broken into?" Ron took the paper from Harry and scanned the article. "It was! Someone must've wanted whatever Dumbledore had you take out very
badly. What was it?"

"Even if I knew I couldn't tell you. It's between him and Nicholas Flamel."

"Wait who's Nicholas Flamel?" Hermione asked.

"Never you mind." He attempted to distribute the rock cakes as a way of changing the subject. Dudley took one and dunked it in his tea. Ron tried to feed one to Scabbers, who didn't seem to like it anymore than the rest of them.
Remus watched Sirius read and reread Harry's latest letter with mounting impatience. He wanted to read it himself, and he especially wanted to know what Harry could write that would make Sirius look shocked and hurt on the first pass, proud on the second, and downright nostalgic on the third. After a geological age, Sirius looked up.

"Now, don't be mad, but he doesn't want to come home for the winter holidays."

"What do you mean he doesn't want to come home? Did we do something wrong?"

"No, I think we did something right for a change."

"In what world is our son not wanting to come home a sign that we did something right?"

Sirius thrust the letter at him. Remus forced himself to breathe and focus on the words.

"Dear Sirius. Is it ok if I stay at school over winter holiday? Ron's parents are visiting Charlie in Romania so he has to stay here and I don't want him to be alone. All our other friends have to go home. Maybe you and Remus could visit me here instead? Love, Harry."

"He sounds like James," Remus sighed. "I'll write Minerva to arrange something for us."

Remus had never been more ready for a holiday by the time winter break rolled around. At school, he was juggling his TA job, classes, and the research for his thesis. He also missed Harry terribly and was excited to see him again.

He and Sirius arrived at Hogwarts via floo the evening after most of the students had gone home. McGonagall showed them to the unused staff flat where they would be staying over break. It had a bedroom, bathroom, tiny combination living room and dining room, and a kitchenette.

"I always wondered what these looked like," Sirius said as he set down his bag next to the bed.

"Feel free to make it a bit more comfortable while you're here. I'll give you some time to get settled and then I'll inform Harry that you're here." McGonagall left them alone.

"Bit weird being here as an adult," Remus mused. He considered the sad grey wallpaper for a moment, then charmed it to a cheerful yellow.

"I know. Brings back old memories. Had my first kiss just around the corner, for example."


"Were they someone I should be jealous of?"

"Oh yes. He had gorgeous long black hair, stunning good looks, and a personality that could charm the stripes off a tiger. Not to mention he was disgustingly wealthy. I wonder what he's doing now?" Remus pretended to stare wistfully into the distance.

"Waiting for you to stop being an ass so he can kiss you again," Sirius laughed. He caught Remus in a dizzying kiss that caused him to have to sit down quickly on the bed. When Sirius tried to pull off his shirt, though, Remus stopped him.

"Later," he promised when Sirius pouted at him. "Harry will be here soon and we should be ready
At the mention of Harry, Sirius perked up. He set about charming the place to his liking while Remus unpacked their bags. The flat was still tiny when they'd finished, but it felt a little more like somewhere their little family could enjoy being for the next few weeks. It was nearly seven by that point, so Sirius started cooking a simple dinner of macaroni and cheese.

Harry knocked on the door to the flat just as Remus was laying the table. Sirius let him and Ron in, while Remus rushed to set another place. The four of them sat down to eat. Despite meeting him briefly only a month earlier, Ron looked a bit awed to be sharing a dinner table with the famous Sirius Black. He kept almost dropping his fork.

"So, Ron, I hear your parents are visiting one of your brothers in Romania. What does he do out there?" Remus asked.

"He studies dragons. Mum didn't want him to go, but he's happy at the dragon refuge and once he's done his degree he'll make good money so she's made peace with the idea."

"How long has he been out there?" Sirius asked.

"Just since September."

The conversation turned to Harry and Ron's first term at Hogwarts as they finished off the macaroni. For dessert, Remus had brought some of Harry's favourite muggle sweets. Ron was fascinated by them, so Sirius gave him the rest to share with his brothers.

"Who is Nicholas Flamel?" Harry asked Remus when there was a lull in the conversation.

"He invented the sorcerer's stone, which can turn lead into gold and produce an elixir that makes you immortal, why?"

"Hermione came across his name in a book but couldn't find anything about him in the library so we promised we'd ask you." The answer seemed slightly rehearsed, but Remus let it go because he couldn't see a reason for Harry to lie about it.

"She sounds a bit like Remus when we were at school," Sirius laughed. "He was always in the library too."

It was getting close to curfew, so they sent the boys back to Gryffindor tower with the promise of taking them to Hogsmeade the next day. Remus asked Ron to extend their invitation to Yule dinner to his brothers.

Spending Yule morning somewhere other than the cottage was weird. Opening presents without Harry, who had chosen to stay in his dormitory with his friends until dinner, was a bit anticlimactic. They saved the ones from Harry for after dinner. Sirius had gotten Remus some books he'd had his eye on, while Remus gave Sirius rainbow booty shorts as a gag gift and a new motorbike helmet as his real present.

Another package, addressed to both of them, had appeared during the night. Remus cast a few detection spells on it. Once he determined it safe, they opened it to find two handmade sweaters (a gold one with a burgundy S and a burgundy one with a gold R), a tin of fudge, and a wonderful note from Molly Weasley thanking them for watching her sons in her absence. Remus had to charm his sweater to fit properly, but it was soft and comfortable. He made a mental note to thank her later.
Sirius was a sight to behold as he began cooking a traditional Yule feast wearing only the rainbow shorts and new sweater under the pink frilly apron he swore he only wore ironically. He'd pulled his hair out of his face into a messy bun. Somehow, he managed to make this strange ensemble look not only completely natural but kind of attractive. Remus made him pose for a picture to capture the moment.

While Sirius took care of the dinner preparations, Remus satisfied his sweet tooth and grumbling stomach by whipping up a batch of Welsh cakes using his mother's recipe (which scandalously called for both currants and sultanas) for breakfast. The two of them could have easily eaten the entire batch, but they saved a few for Harry because they knew he would want some.

Remus eventually convinced Sirius to put on real pants for their dinner party. He returned from the bedroom looking unfairly handsome just as someone knocked on the door. Ron stood there with two identical redhead boys who could only be the infamous Fred and George. All three of them wore handmade sweaters bearing their initials.

"Where's Harry?" Remus asked as he let them in. Ron looked delighted to have been asked.

"Here I am!" Harry cried, pulling off what could only be James' old invisibility cloak. The four boys giggled as though this was the best joke anyone had ever made.

"Where did you get that?" Sirius inquired.

"It was in my present pile. The note wasn't signed." He shoved said note into Remus's hand.

"This is Dumbledore's handwriting!"

The boys looked shocked. Sirius raised his eyebrows.

"Wicked!" said Fred. Or at least Remus assumed he was Fred because his sweater bore a yellow F on the front.

The group sat down at the magically expanded table and Sirius went to fetch the food. Only then did Remus notice something.

"Shouldn't there be another one of you?"

"Percy didn't want to come. He said as a prefect he should be present at the school feast in case a student needs help," Ron explained.

Remus nodded. "C'mon Padfoot, we're wasting away here!" he called over his shoulder. When he turned around the twins were gazing at him, eyes wide.

"Padfoot?"

"The Padfoot? Like, one of the-"

"-four creators of the Marauders Map?" It was uncanny how well the two were able to finish each other's thoughts.

"What's this I hear about a map?" Sirius appeared bearing a glistening turkey on a tray.

"He just called you Padfoot! Does that mean you know Moony and Prongs and-"

"As a matter of fact, I'm Moony," Remus said.
"And James, Harry's biological dad, was Prongs."

"Wicked!" Fred said again. "What about Wormtail?"

Remus glanced at Sirius warily before replying. "We had a, uh, falling out." This was neither the place, nor the time, to get into the whole story. Harry looked a bit fidgety, no doubt because he knew the full story.

"Oh." George frowned. Then he brightened. "Still, it's an honour to meet two of the four Marauders. Your map has served us well in our mischief making." He tried to bow formally, but the maneuver failed because he was seated.

They dug into the meal Sirius had taken almost the whole day to prepare. As usual, it was delicious. Despite the appetites of four growing boys, as well as two relatively fit adult men, there were plenty of leftovers. Remus expected he and Sirius would still be eating them by the time the new term started.

After dinner they all fought their natural inclination to fall into a comatose state while the magical radio played traditional Yuletide carols quietly in the background. Remus, who had heard of Ron’s prowess at wizards’ chess from Harry, challenged him to a game. Ron bested him twice out of three games before Remus accepted defeat. Sirius and the twins built a giant card house out of several exploding snap decks and then sent it tumbling to the ground, resulting in a singed carpet.

Remus and Sirius had originally planned to keep Harry with them overnight and send the Weasley boys back to their dormitories before opening the last of the presents. Harry wanted to go with the Weasleys, however, so they compromised. Harry would come back to the flat the next morning so they could open presents together without the Weasleys looking on. Harry endured a kiss on the cheek each from Sirius and Remus before the troupe of boys were sent on their way.

“He’s growing up,” Sirius sighed as he closed the door behind the kids.

Remus put his arm around his waist. “At least he’s growing into an independent and emotionally mature young man.”

“I guess.” Sirius yawned and leaned his head on Remus’s shoulder. “It’s just that it’s all going by so fast.”

“I know, Pads. I know.” Remus kissed the top of his head and led him to the bedroom.
Despite still feeling exhausted from Yule dinner, Harry was too wired to sleep. He had an invisibility cloak! And it was a family heirloom! Very few of his parents’ things had survived to be passed down to Harry as he grew up, and Sirius and Remus had already given all of what did survive to him by the time he was able to form proper memories. That made the cloak even more special.

He was determined to use the cloak tonight. As soon as Ron fell asleep, he snuck out of their dormitory and swung the cloak over his shoulders. Now, where to go? In theory, the whole castle was at his disposal. Then, he remembered what Dumbledore had said about the third floor corridor at the welcoming feast in September. He had a feeling that it had something to do with the sorcerer's stone.

Being invisible was hard to get used to. Harry froze in fear when Filch passed him, an excuse about sleepwalking on the tip of his tongue, but when the caretaker didn’t acknowledge him in any way he gained a new sense of confidence. Nobody could touch him. This deflated a bit when he nearly collided with Professor Quirrell five minutes later. He stuck to the edges of the halls as he crept the rest of the way to the forbidden corridor.

Immediately, upon reaching his destination, Harry encountered a locked door. He racked his brains for a solution before remembering a spell he’d learned in charms.

“Alohomora,” he whispered. The lock clicked and the door swung outwards. Harry was about to enter the room when he noticed what lay inside. A huge, three headed dog sniffed the air where Harry stood. It growled menacingly and he took a step back. The growl deepened. Harry gathered all his strength, slammed the door, and ran in the opposite direction as fast as he could.

His feet carried him to an empty classroom far from anywhere else he'd been in the castle so far. A gilt framed mirror stood against the far wall. Unlike the mirror in his dormitory, it showed his reflection even with the cloak on. He stepped closer to investigate and jumped as more people appeared in the frame.

He looked behind him, but nobody was there. When he turned back to the mirror, he noticed he knew several of the people. Sirius and Remus stood behind him, next to his biological parents (who he recognized from photographs). Dudley stood to his right, in front of a man and a woman who Harry thought must be Dudley's parents. Behind all of these were adults who shared various traits with James, Lily, or Petunia. He guessed these were his ancestors.

Harry stood drinking in the images of his family for at least half an hour. Then he glanced at the frame and noticed it read "the mirror of erised" across the top. What was erised? Harry yawned. After one last glance at his assembled family, he left to make his way back to bed. It could be a mystery for another night.

Finding Gryffindor tower was difficult. After many wrong turns, he found his way to the library. Although it was nowhere near where he wanted to be, he at least knew how to get where he was going from there.

Halfway back to Gryffindor, he passed the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. He heard voices, which was unusual since it was nearly three in the morning. He stopped to listen. What he heard sent him running again.
Harry pounded on the door to the flat where Remus and Sirius were staying and pulled off his invisibility cloak. A bleary-eyed Sirius opened the door wearing only a pair of very short shorts.

“When we said come back early, we didn’t mean this early,” he yawned.

Harry was still too scared to form words. Sirius must've registered the terror on his face, because he pulled Harry into the flat and disappeared into the bedroom. He reappeared a minute later wearing a silk dressing gown and clutching his wand. Remus followed right behind him, Sirius’s Weasley sweater over his flannel pajama pants and his wand drawn.

"What's wrong, love?" Remus asked calmly.

"P-professor Quirrell! I heard him talking--talking to V-vold-"

"Voldemort?" Sirius exclaimed.

Harry nodded. His parents shared a look of mingled terror and fierce determination. After a quick nod from Remus, Sirius took Harry's hand.

"Show me," he said. The two of them set off towards the DADA classroom, while Remus hurried in the other direction.

"Where is Moony going?" In his worry, Harry reverted to the old pet name.

"To get Dumbledore."

The light was still on in the classroom and voices could still be heard. Sirius banged the door open to reveal Professor Quirrell standing, ostensibly alone, in the centre of the room. Harry noticed his turban was missing, and as he looked at Quirrell's bald head he realized where the second voice had come from. Another face protruded horribly from the back of his head. It laughed coldly.

Sirius launched himself in front of Harry. "Harry, run!" he cried. Before Harry could move, Quirrell flicked his wand at Sirius, who crumpled to the ground. Harry screamed.

"Ah, Harry Potter," the second face drawled. Harry drew his wand defiantly, though he had no idea how to defend himself with it.

"You think you can stop us?" Quirrell laughed. "An eleven year old boy with little training against a full grown wizard and the Dark Lord?"

“Silence!” Quirrell winced at the sharpness of the command. “We have much to do and little time before the boy has more foolish adults to protect him. Seize him!”

Quirrell closed the distance between himself and Harry and reached out to grab him. Harry struggled against the hard grip the professor had on his wrist, and to his surprise it slackened. Quirrell screamed as if burned, and indeed his hand appeared to be covered in large welts.

Instinctively, Harry reached up and pressed his hands to Quirrell’s face. The two of them struggled while Voldemort screamed from the back of Quirrell’s head. They tripped over Sirius’s body and Harry hit his head on the floor. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was Quirrell’s reddened face contorted in pain.
Six

Remus watched Harry sleeping in his hospital bed, begging any and all gods that his son would wake up soon. He mentally kicked himself for placing Harry in danger. They knew where the classroom was, they could have easily found Quirrell without him. They should have gone for Dumbledore first, without splitting up. A thousand scenarios for how he and Sirius could have better handled the situation pummeled his brain. Gods, his head hurt.

Madam Pomfrey came over to him and tried to order him to sleep. He wanted to obey, but he couldn’t. Not until Harry woke up. James and Lily had trusted him and Sirius to protect him, and they hadn’t done enough to fulfil that promise. Remus was determined never to slip up again.

“Sirius!” Harry shouted as he shot up to a sitting position. Remus almost wept with relief.

“He’s right there,” Remus pointed to the next bed over, where Sirius lay sleeping off a healing potion, and gently pushed Harry back into the pillows with his other hand.

“I thought--I thought they killed him!” Harry burst into tears.

Remus stroked his hair gently. “No, he’s ok. Just a nasty stunning spell. When he wakes up he’ll be right as rain.”

He quietly let Harry cry himself out. Just after the tears stopped, Madam Pomfrey returned with Dumbledore and McGonagall.

“It’s good to see you awake,” McGonagall said.

She presented a tin of ginger biscuits to Harry. He picked one up and nibbled on it without much enthusiasm. Remus frowned. Harry loved ginger biscuits, especially McGonagall’s, and it was impossible to keep them around without him devouring them.

“What happened between you and Quirrell, Harry?” As usual, Dumbledore dove right into the heart of the matter. He may have used a gentle tone, but Remus recognized the intensity behind it.

Harry avoided everyone’s eyes as he carefully put his biscuit back in the tin. “I-I heard voices in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom so I stopped to listen. Professor Quirrell was talking to someone. He kept calling him master. The other person had a mean voice, and he was threatening Quirrell because he wanted him to do something he didn’t want to do. Then he said ‘Lord Voldemort expects results, Quirrell,’ and I went to get Remus and S-Sirius.”

He paused for breath, looking like he was in danger of crying again. Remus conjured a glass of water and handed it to him. Dumbledore looked like he wanted to press on, but a look from McGonagall stopped him.

When Harry was ready, he continued. “Sirius had me take him to Quirrell while Remus went to get you. Quirrell was still there when we got there, but we couldn’t see V-anyone else. But then we realized he--he had Voldemort sticking out the back of his head. Sirius tried to protect me but Voldemort made Quirrell stun him, except I thought-I thought he-”

He took a shuddering breath. Remus held his hand. “It’s okay. Sirius is gonna be fine.”

“And then it was just me and them. And Voldemort told Quirrell to grab me, cause they had to do something quick before more adults showed up, but when he did my skin burned him for some
reason. And I realized that was my chance to escape, so I touched his face to burn it. But then we fell and I hit my head and when I woke up I was here.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Dumbledore said while Harry drank some water.

“Why did my skin burn Quirrell? It’s never done that to anyone else.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed. “You have been told the story of the night your biological parents died, yes?”

Harry nodded.

“When your mother sacrificed herself to save you, she accidentally cast a spell that protected you from the killing curse. Voldemort couldn’t touch you, metaphorically or literally. That is why I originally arranged for you to go to live with her sister, because your mother’s blood runs in her veins as well and thus that connection would continue to protect you.”

“I was originally supposed to live with Aunt Petunia?”

Remus blushed. “Harry, we never told you this, but part of the reason Sirius and I raised you in the cottage, far away from wizards, is because we kidnapped you before Petunia could take you in.”

“Why?”

“Her first husband was an awful man who hated magic, and under his influence she wouldn’t have raised you with love.”

“And there is the crux of why your skin burned Quirrell. Love. I admit, eleven years ago I thought the protection of your mother’s love could only be preserved by a connection to her blood relatives. But I was wrong.

“As Sirius once pointed out to me, he and Remus were Lily’s family too. They didn’t share blood, but they shared a love stronger than blood. By raising you, they preserved your mother’s last spell. When Quirrell, possessed by Voldemort, attempted to touch you, that spell protected you from him.”

Harry gazed around the hospital wing as though he expected to see Quirrell a few beds over.

“You won’t find the former Professor Quirrell here,” McGonagall said.

“Why not?”

Dumbledore resumed control of the conversation. “Quirrell died when Voldemort left his body upon discovering he could not use him to hurt you.”

“Oh.”

“I think that’s enough for now.” Remus chimed in. Harry might be hungry for information, but Remus could tell he was emotionally and physically exhausted.

McGonagall nodded. “The boy needs his rest, Albus.”

They left. Remus and Harry split the previously abandoned ginger biscuit and left the rest in the tin for later.

“Did you and Sirius really kidnap me from Aunt Petunia?” Harry yawned.
“That’s a story for another time, love.”

“Okay.”

Not much later Harry drifted off. Madam Pomfrey tried to order Remus out of the hospital wing since he, too, needed sleep, but he refused to leave. She wouldn’t hear of him sleeping in his chair, however, so he ended up crashing in a hospital bed for the night.

Madam Pomfrey discharged Sirius in the morning. She kept Harry for two more days, during which Ron, Fred, and George were his constant companions. Remus read to him every night after visiting hours ended. Once he was allowed out of the hospital wing, Harry spent his nights snuggled between Remus and Sirius—the way he did when he had nightmares as a little boy—until the holidays ended. Remus worried, but Madam Pomfrey assured him that Harry was recovering well.

On the last day before the winter term began, all of Harry’s friends—most of them fresh off the Hogwarts Express—piled into the little flat for dinner. The party was Harry’s idea, which told Remus he was almost back to normal. Sirius cooked an extravagant buffet of all the foods Harry liked best.

It was a hit. Remus was very sorry to send everyone to bed at the end of the night, but he knew McGonagall would murder him if he allowed seven kids to show up to their first classes of the new term without any sleep. Besides, he and Sirius had to pack up the flat and go home to their cottage in the woods early the next morning.

“Do you think he’ll be okay?” Sirius asked as they lay in their own bed for the first time in a month. Remus had been thinking the same thing.

“He has his friends to keep him company. And Minerva will be watching him even closer now,” Remus reassured him.

“What about you? Will you be okay? Don’t think I haven’t noticed how hard you’ve been working to keep it together for Harry and me. You can let go now, love.”

Remus broke. He sobbed into Sirius’s chest as they held each other. “I thought I’d lost you. Both of you. When I saw you and Harry lying on the floor. Next to—next to Quirrell’s corpse.”

“Shhh. It’s okay. We’re okay.” Sirius kissed his forehead.

“I never want to feel that way again, Pads.”

“You won’t have to. Voldemort’s gone back into hiding, probably weaker than he was before, and as for Harry we’ll—what’s that muggle expression—wrap him in bubble wrap.”

Through his tears, Remus chuckled at the image of the two of them wrapping Harry up in sheet after sheet of bubble wrap. He tilted his head up and kissed Sirius as though his life depended on it.
It rained the day of the Quidditch final; Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Visibility was terrible; both the players and spectators were soaked through within minutes. Harry fought the wind and sheets of rain just to stay on his broom. He knew Remus and Sirius were watching somewhere below him, they came to all his games, but between the rain and the phalanx of umbrellas it was impossible to distinguish individuals in the stands.

Though the Gryffindor team clearly played as hard as they could, Slytherin took an early lead. Harry winced every time the quaffle made it past Wood. He searched for the snitch, hoping to end the game before the Slytherins made 15 goals, but it remained elusive.

A cheer erupted from the stands as Katie Bell scored Gryffindor's first goal of the game. Even the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were on their side. Harry smiled, but he still had his work cut out for him. Slytherin was nine goals ahead.

He briefly spotted the snitch hovering around Wood's ankle. Unfortunately, he chose to dive for it just as a Slytherin chaser took a shot at the goal. The snitch darted away, and Wood was furious at him for letting Slytherin get another 10 points ahead.

Then things went from bad to worse. Thunder boomed over them and Harry could've sworn he saw lightning. He wanted this game over, fast. As did everyone else. The game turned dirty, and suddenly Slytherin had 170 points.

Harry saw the snitch again. Now he had a decision to make. If he caught it now, they'd lose. But there was no guarantee Gryffindor could catch up, and losing by 10 points was better than losing by 310. He dove.

After a split second, the other seeker was on his tail. Harry willed his broom to go as fast as it could. His fingers closed around the small golden ball and he pulled up sharply. He held it out to Madam Hooch resignedly and she called an end to the game.

Nobody would look at Harry as they were forced to congratulate the Slytherin team. Once in the locker room, he changed quickly because he wanted to get the hell out of there. Just as he was about to make his escape, however, Wood cornered him.

"What was that about?"

"What?" Harry played dumb.

"We were losing! Why did you end the game?"

"There was no way we were coming back from being down 16 goals in this weather!"

"Lay off him Oliver," Fred yelled across the room. "It's not Harry's fault you let in 17 goals."

Wood went redder than the quaffle and stalked out. Harry mouthed "thanks" at Fred and left as well. He met up with Sirius and Remus just outside, where they sheltered from the rain under the door frame.

"We were just discussing how well you flew today," Remus smiled at him. "Right Pads?" He not-so-subtly nudged Sirius in the ribs with his elbow.
“Right. Spectacular.” Sirius made an effort to smile encouragingly, which Harry appreciated.

“But we lost! Everyone thinks I should’ve waited.”

“No, you saw how the match was going and decided to end it before it got worse. That takes guts. And I’m honestly amazed you were able to see the snitch in this.”

Remus conjured an umbrella and held it above the three of them as they stepped out into the rain. Harry gave him a quick hug. Somehow Remus always knew what to say to make Harry feel better.

Harry, his parents, and his friends all crowded into Hagrid’s hut for tea. Outside, the rain continued to pour, but the little party inside was quite cheerful. Sirius found a way to tactfully shove Hagrid out of the kitchen, and for the first time there was edible food available at one of his tea parties.

The afternoon full of laughter and stories put the morning out of Harry’s mind. Ron challenged practically everyone to a game of wizards’ chess, while Dudley simultaneously organized a mini gobstones tournament. Chaos ensued. Harry lost all track of time, and all track of how many snacks he consumed.

“Look at the time,” Sirius yelped as he glanced at his watch at the end of his fifth loss to Ron.

Harry looked up from his game of gobstones against Neville to look out the window. He did a double take. It was dark!

“We should get going,” Remus said.

“Do you have to?”

“Yes Harry. I’m defending my thesis tomorrow, remember?”

“And what’s more, McGonagall will skin us alive if we don’t get you kids back to the castle.”

“Can we finish our game? Please, Mr. Sirius?” Neville still hadn’t quite gotten over the fact that Harry’s parents wanted the kids to call them by their first names.

“Yes, but then we have to go.”

There was a chorus of “Thanks Hagrid” as they all filed out of the hut. Sirius and Remus shepherded them across the grounds and dropped them off in the entrance hall. Harry was sad to see his parents go. He loved Hogwarts, but he often wished attending didn’t mean several months away from home.
The morning of his thesis defense, Remus experienced an entirely new kind of fear. He'd been attacked by Fenrir Greyback as a kid, fought death eaters as a young adult, and parented the most danger prone child he'd ever met, but none of those experiences produced the paralysis he felt now.


"Not hungry."

“Too bad. I don’t want you fainting of hunger halfway through your defense.”

“From hunger,” Remus corrected him automatically. A sign he’d lost the argument.

Sirius smirked and held out the bowl of cereal he’d been trying to force on him for the last five minutes. Remus sighed and took it. He forced himself to eat, which did make him feel marginally better.

The next hurdle was getting dressed. He had, of course, picked out a suitable set of dress robes two months earlier. They were the wizarding equivalent of a conservative business suit—a traditional cut and nothing too flashy—and the one touch of individuality he’d allowed himself was the colour: a deep midnight blue as opposed to the more standard black. Objectively, they were perfect for the occasion. Now, however, with two hours to go before he needed to be there, he wasn’t so sure.

“Midnight blue, what was I thinking?”

“Relax, Moony. You’ll look stunning. Now, put them on.”

Remus blushed. “You think so?”

Sirius batted his eyelashes at him from his lounging position on the bed. “I know so.”

“Isn’t that a bad thing, though? I don’t want to seem like—”

“Just put the bloody robes on, love. They’re neither too loud nor too frumpy. I promise.”

Despite all of Remus’s fussing, somehow he and Sirius still managed to arrive at the university early. This gave him time for one last confidence-boosting chat with his thesis advisor, Elphias Doge, as well as a probably ill-advised cup of tea.

Finally, the moment came. The small group of faculty, curious undergrads, and well-wishers filed past Remus into a room that generally housed seminars. They watched as Remus self-consciously shuffled his notes. When he indicated that he was ready, Doge turned over an enormous hourglass.

“Begin.”

Remus felt his soul leave his body. He watched from above as his physical form lectured about his research into defending oneself against dark creatures. The following question period was a blur as well. He must have heard the questions, though, because he answered them.

He didn’t feel like his mind and body were reconnected until the panel sent everyone, including him, out of the room so they could confer.

“You were amazing, love,” Sirius hugged him.
“Was I?”

“Even better than when we practiced.”

Doge stuck his head out the door. “Remus, we’re ready for you.”

Dear Harry,

I passed! My graduation ceremony is about two weeks after you get back. Sirius will have to tell you about the actual presentation, since I don’t remember much, but I wanted to let you know the verdict.

Love,

Remus

Remus spent the last few weeks cleaning up the cottage to prepare for Harry’s imminent arrival home. Somehow, between the two of them, he and Sirius had let things go a bit in the last several months as far as cleaning was concerned. Deep cleaning provided an excellent outlet for the leftover stress he was experiencing, though. He had just started on vanishing the dust in Harry’s room, which he’d saved for last, when Sirius came barreling in, eyes wide.

“Minerva is bringing Harry by floo in a minute,” he panted.

“What happened?”

“Something about his friend Ron’s rat.”

“Rat?” Remus dropped the lamp he was holding and it shattered.

He pulled Harry into a tight hug the second he stepped through the fireplace.

“Explain,” Sirius growled at McGonagall. She pointed at a piece of old parchment clutched in Harry’s hand. It looked oddly familiar. Was that what he thought it was?

“Fred and George gave me the Marauder’s Map as an end of exams present. We were testing it out when we noticed it said Peter Pettigrew was in our dormitory, which didn’t make sense cause we were in our dormitory. Then Scabbers bolted. He was too fast, so we tracked the dot on the map. He went directly to the third floor corridor, so we got McGonagall,” Harry said, tripping over his words.

“What’s so special about the third floor corridor?”

“It’s where Albus hid the sorcerer’s stone,” McGonagall explained. Oh no.

“Tell me you caught him.”

The expression on her face confirmed Remus’s worst fears. Pettigrew had hidden under their noses all school year, and now he was loose in the world once again with the sorcerer’s stone. Would he take it to his master?

“Spot knew there was something off about Scabbers, but she couldn’t explain what,” Harry scowled.

“Wish she’d eaten him,” Sirius laughed without humor.
“I must discuss the matter with Albus,” McGonagall said. She strode over to the fireplace and vanished in the classic burst of green flame.

Remus floundered for something to say. There didn’t seem like any point talking about it any further until they had more information. So instead he asked Harry about how his exams had gone.

“Fine I think. Snape set us an unfair potion but I think I managed to not totally screw it up. Seamus exploded another cauldron, though.”
The only time Harry was allowed out in public all summer was for Remus’s graduation. He knew it was for his own protection, but he was nevertheless resentful. Before the Scabbers incident, his friends had been in the middle of planning a week-long sleepover at Ron’s house. Remus quickly nixed the idea. Instead, his main form of entertainment was reading in the top of his second favourite climbing tree. His first favourite tree was outside the bounds of the fidelius charm and therefore off-limits.

Harry finally got to see his friends on the last day of the holidays. After much begging and pleading, Sirius and Remus had allowed him to go with them to buy his school things in Diagon Alley. Only Dudley’s family was absent, as Harry’s aunt hadn’t wanted to take the risk and instead asked Remus to pick up his things for him. It was difficult for such a large group, Harry and three friends plus their families, to enter most of the stores at once, but the kids considered that the adults’ problem.

Hermione, Neville, and Ron took turns updating Harry about their summers as they shopped. Ginny, Ron’s little sister, stayed five paces behind them the entire time. Every time Harry turned to see if she was still there, she turned redder than her hair and looked away.

“She’s got a bit of a crush on you, mate,” Ron said when Harry pointed this out. “She wouldn’t shut up about you all summer.”

“But she’s never even met me!” Harry protested.

“Doesn’t matter, you’re famous,” Neville laughed.

Somehow, they all managed to get everything on their school lists. At last, only a visit to Flourish and Blotts was left. An author with whom Ron’s mum was absolutely smitten was doing a book signing, which meant the bookshop was even more crowded. Harry and the other kids sought refuge in the back of the shop, where they unfortunately ran into Draco Malfoy and his father.

"This is the riffraff I’ve been telling you about, father."

Lucius Malfoy seized Ginny's cauldron full of books and rifled through it. "Red hair, hand me down clothes, must be a Weasley. Tell me, girl, did your father have to take out a second mortgage on that stack of bricks you call a house to afford to send you to school?"

Draco laughed. Ginny and Ron turned bright red. Harry stepped in front of them and glared up at the man.

"Listen here, Mr. Malfoy-"

And suddenly their adults were there, forming a wall between them and the Malfoys. Mr. Weasley wrenched Ginny's cauldron away from Lucius and handed it back to his daughter.

"Leave my children alone," he growled.

"Are you going to make me?" Lucius raised an eyebrow.

"No, but we will," Sirius threatened. He and Remus stepped closer as a single unit.

"Remember us?"
"Your master isn't here to protect you this time, Malfoy."

Lucius turned white. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. Let's go, Draco." He turned on his heel and strode out of the shop. Draco hurried to follow his father.

The run in with the Malfoys put a damper on their shopping trip. After paying for their books, the group dispersed. For the first time in Harry's life, Sirius shot down his hopeful request for ice cream.

"We should be getting back, Harry. Some other time." Harry wanted to protest that there wouldn't be another time until at least Christmas, but something in his godfather's tone stopped him.

That night Harry and Remus packed their things. Dumbledore had asked Remus to fill the vacant position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, so he would be living at Hogwarts during the school year. Sirius was staying behind to make sure the cottage didn't fall into ruin, though Harry knew he planned to visit as often as he could get away with.

"What did you mean about Mr. Malfoy's master not being there to protect him?" Harry asked. Sirius looked up sharply from the laundry he was folding for him. "You heard that, did you?"

"You weren't exactly being quiet about it."

"Fair enough." He grinned sheepishly.

"So what did you mean?" Harry pressed.

Sirius sighed before answering. "Mr. Malfoy is not a nice man, love. During the war he was on the wrong side."

"Then why isn't he in Azkaban?"

"When the war ended, he pretended he was under a mind-control spell."

"And the ministry bought it?" Harry was horrified.

"The Malfoys have given heaps of money to the right people for generations. And some people were under those spells and forced to do unspeakable things. But I suspect the real numbers are a lot smaller than the official count."

"Anyway what am I doing discussing old ministry policy with my twelve year old when it's nearly bedtime? The takeaway, Harry, is that you would do well to avoid Mr. Malfoy but you also shouldn't worry too much about him. Now let's get this packing finished."

Sirius divided the laundry pile in two and directed Harry to get folding. Harry tried his best, but his folding technique was somewhat less developed. They'd nearly filled his trunk when he finally voiced another concern of his.

"Sirius, will you be lonely? When Remus and I are at school, I mean."

Sirius was silent for a moment. "A bit. But you're not to worry about me. I know how to be alone. Besides, I'll visit so often I won't have much time to get lonely." Harry thought his response seemed a little too chipper.

Remus knocked and entered the room carrying Spot's basket. "You two finished yet? Harry should've been in bed half an hour ago."
Harry stuck his tongue out at Remus and haphazardly dumped the rest of the clothes into his trunk.

"All done, see? You worry too much," Sirius laughed and kissed Remus.

"Eeeewwww!" Harry giggled and made a show of averting his eyes.

"Can you blame your parents for being in love?" Remus laughed. He gave Sirius another quick kiss, as if to prove his point, and Sirius pretended to swoon. Harry threw his pillow at them.

The next morning was a frantic struggle to get out the door on time. They were already running late when Sirius decided to say his sappy goodbyes before leaving the house because the busy train platform wasn’t a great place for them. Then Harry realized Spot wasn’t in her basket. A hurried snake hunt ensued.

By the time they finally caught up with the Weasleys, the Grangers, and the Longbottoms just outside King’s Cross, it was already ten til. They swarmed the empty space between platforms nine and ten and the adults began organizing groups of twos and threes to go through the barrier as unobtrusively, but efficiently, as possible, starting with Neville and his gran.

Harry, Remus, and Sirius brought up the rear. As he had done the previous year, Harry walked through the supposedly solid stretch of brick wall. Except this time, it was solid. He looked up at Sirius, who raised an eyebrow and pressed a hand to the wall and drew it back in surprise when he realized it wasn’t going to go through.

"The barrier won’t work."

“What do you mean it won’t work? I just watched Fred and George go through about a minute ago.” Remus strode at the barrier with such determination that he bounced off.

Harry pulled the sleeve of Sirius’s left arm up so he could read his godfather’s watch. “We’re gonna miss the train!” he cried. He watched the last few seconds until eleven tick past, then he kicked the wall in frustration. It remained solid.

Remus shared a look with Sirius. Then, after a quick glance around to make sure nobody was watching, he flicked his wand. A silvery wolf that looked as though it was made of light appeared. Harry gasped. Remus, unfazed, addressed the wolf. “Platform barrier sealed. Harry, Sirius, and I apparating to Hogsmeade. Expect us soon.”

With another flick of Remus’s wand, the wolf streaked away. Nobody seemed to notice it go except for the three wizards.

“What was that?” Harry asked.

“Not the time, Harry.” Remus took Harry’s hand and held it tightly. Sirius took Harry’s other hand. Harry realized they were about to apparate and closed his eyes. After a few uncomfortable seconds he opened them to see that they were now at Hogsmeade station. It looked very different in the daylight, a sight he’d missed this spring after the Pettigrew fiasco forced him to go home early. Sirius and Remus set off towards Hogwarts and Harry followed them.
"Now can I ask my question?"

Remus smiled. Harry's curiosity couldn't even be tamed by such an unusual, and potentially dangerous, situation. "Go ahead, love."

"What was that silver thing?"

"It's called a patronus. Their primary function is to protect the caster from Dementors, but you can also use them to send messages when an owl is too slow."

"What's a Dementor?"

"A creature that feeds on humans' positive emotions. They guard Azkaban."

"Oh. Are all patronuses wolfs?"

"Wolves. And no, everyone has a different one that relates to their personality."

"Sirius what's yours?"

Sirius grinned and cast a patronus. A large silver dog burst from his wand and frolicked around the little group as they walked.

Harry gasped in delight. "It looks like you! When you're a dog, I mean. What's mine?"

"We won't know unless you cast one someday," Remus said.

"Will you teach me? Please?"

"It's very advanced magic—"

Harry was old enough now that his puppy dog face shouldn’t have been as effective as it was. Remus blamed Sirius’s influence.

"-but I suppose we can try."

Snape met them at the gate. Sirius's patronus dissipated when he laid eyes on his former nemesis. Harry moved a little closer to Remus. It was as if he was seeking protection. Remus filed away this information for later.

"Why are you here?" Sirius growled.

"I have come to let you in, unless you'd rather be left on the wrong side of the gate indefinitely?" Snape responded icily.

Remus decided he'd better take charge. Sirius was awful at diplomacy. "Thank you for coming, Severus. It's just that we expected to see Minerva."

"She was busy, so Dumbledore sent me to fetch you. Now get inside before I change my mind."

Remus led Sirius and Harry through the open gate. Snape locked it behind them. The walk up to the castle was tense. Nobody spoke. Sirius placed himself between Harry and Snape. Remus sighed
internally and placed himself between Snape and Sirius to prevent as much unpleasantness as possible.

Snape left the three of them in the entrance hall and swept off to his office. After several minutes, McGonagall appeared.

"What's this I hear about a sealed barrier?"

"Everything was fine until Harry tried to get through. The wall became solid and we couldn't get onto the platform," Sirius explained.

"I would like to investigate this matter immediately. Sirius, get Harry situated. The password is wattlebird. Remus, you're with me."

Remus handed Harry's trunk to Sirius and watched the two set off up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. Then he turned on his heel and followed McGonagall back to Hogsmeade, where they apparated to King's Cross.

The barrier looked the same as it always did. But then it had looked no different barely an hour ago. McGonagall directed him to demonstrate his inability to get through. Remus stepped up to the wall and leaned casually against it. He fell through and found himself on platform nine and three quarters.

McGonagall appeared next to him a few seconds later. "It appears as though the effect was temporary. The barrier became solid when Harry, specifically, tried to pass through?"

Remus nodded. "We were with a large group--Harry's friends and their families--and the Weasley twins got through okay only a few seconds before Harry."

"Then we must assume Harry was being targeted."

They cast many dark magic detection spells on both sides of the barrier, but turned up no answers. Even a modified version of finite incantatem was unhelpful.

"All I seem to be able to ascertain is that magic of some kind was involved! I can't even tell if it was human magic!"

"We have at least ascertained that it does not appear to have been malevolent."

"That narrows it down," Remus snorted in derision. "Not malevolent, and not any recognizable human magic."

McGonagall turned suddenly and waved her wand at the barrier.

"What are you doing?"

"If it is not recognizable human magic, then perhaps it is recognizable as a particular kind of non-human magic," she explained, as though to a student.

She waved her wand a few more times. Silver sparks emanated from the tip and she smiled grimly. "Ah, a house elf has been here."

"A house elf?" Remus raised his eyebrows. "Why would a house elf want to stop Harry from taking the train to school?"

"That is an excellent question. Unfortunately, it does not appear to be one we can answer from
here. We should be getting back."

Remus's mind raced on the journey back to Hogwarts. As far as he knew, the only house elves Harry could have come in contact with were the ones working at Hogwarts. And they were unlikely to try and prevent a specific student from returning to school. Sirius's parents had owned a house elf, but as Sirius hadn't visited their house, which he now owned, since he was sixteen it seemed impossible that Kreacher could be to blame. If Kreacher was even still alive.

When they got back to the castle, all Remus wanted to do was check in on Harry and Sirius. Unfortunately, he and McGonagall were late for the staff meeting he'd been dreading ever since he accepted the position.

Even though he was no longer a student, Remus did not feel like he should be entering the Hogwarts staff room. A large conference table sat in the centre with people sitting around it. Dumbledore sat at the head. Remus and McGonagall took the two empty chairs. He noticed that she had at least spared him the unpleasantness of sitting next to Snape.

Once they were seated, Dumbledore stood up and addressed the assembled faculty and staff. “And so we begin another school year. This year we have one addition to our faculty, one Remus Lupin who will be taking on the role of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor since Auror Dawlish has decided that teaching is not for him.”

A few professors clapped politely. Remus braced himself for what was coming next. He, Dumbledore, and McGonagall had discussed the matter extensively over the summer, but it didn’t make the prospect of having his secrets divulged to a crowd any less unpleasant.

“As many of the wizarding community’s finest tabloids have speculated, Remus is indeed one of young Harry Potter’s guardians. If you suspect the boy is in danger, as he was last year when Lord Voldemort attempted to attack him while possessing Dawlish’s predecessor, or if you have any trouble with him in class, please do not hesitate to reach out to Remus.

“And before we can stop singling out our new hire and move on to other business, the Minister has made it a condition of his employment that I disclose to you that Remus is a werewolf.”

Remus flinched. Some of the other professors began whispering to each other.

Dumbledore forged ahead in a slightly raised voice. “Severus has agreed to brew wolfsbane potion for him every month, so I can assure you that nobody will come to harm. I must ask that all of you act with extreme discretion regarding this matter. Students and parents are not to be informed.

Now, is there any other business that needs attending to?”

Remus found Harry and Sirius playing chess in the Gryffindor common room. He described his and McGonagall’s investigation of the platform barrier to Sirius.

“House elfs can do magic?” Harry asked.

“Of course. They can do all sorts of things. Even make themselves invisible.”


There were still several hours until the rest of the students would arrive, so he asked Harry and Sirius to help him move into his teacher’s flat. It was not the same one that Sirius and Remus had shared over last winter break, but one connected to his office. Remus didn’t feel like he’d brought much from home, mainly clothes and books on defensive magic, but it still took a surprisingly long
time to unpack it all.

By the time they finished, the flat felt almost like an extension of the cottage. It was nearly time for the welcoming feast, so Harry said goodbye to Sirius and popped off to change into his school robes. Remus would have rather stayed in the flat and put off saying his own goodbyes, but after a last lingering kiss from Sirius he left for the great hall.

The feast was as good as Remus remembered from his own school days. He sat between McGonagall and Hagrid at the staff table, mired in nostalgia. During the sorting, he was glad to see Ginny Weasley join her brothers in Gryffindor. Dumbledore made a short speech welcoming the first years to the school. When Remus was introduced as the new professor, Harry and his friends cheered loudly. He chanced a glance at Snape, who looked murderous, and grinned. He’d missed Hogwarts.

Upon returning to his flat after the feast, Remus discovered that Sirius hadn’t left yet.

“Why are you still here?” he asked, wrapping his arms around Sirius’s waist.

“Didn’t want to go home yet. Don’t worry, I made myself some dinner.” Remus could taste the curry on Sirius’s breath as they kissed. He’d been experimenting with cooking traditional Indian dishes all summer, so Harry could get in touch with James’s heritage, and had developed a love of curry in the process. Remus smiled.

“Stay?” he breathed. “I can’t stand the thought of sending you back to the empty cottage tonight.”

“You have class in the morning,” Sirius protested weakly.

“Then we’ll go to bed early, like old people,” Remus yawned.

“It is my greatest wish, to grow old with you.”

“Have you been reading poetry?”

Sirius pretended to be offended. “How else am I supposed to maintain my image as a pretentious bastard?”
Eleven

About halfway through the first day of classes, Harry realized his friends were watching him in shifts. They wouldn’t even let him go to the toilet by himself. On some level, he appreciated their concern as it would have scared him if one of them had failed to turn up on the Hogwarts Express after being right behind him, but after a while he mostly found it annoying.

“I’m not going to disappear again, you know,” he told Neville outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Neville just shrugged.

Remus opened the door to the classroom and everyone filed in. Harry gave him an encouraging smile as he passed. He and Neville chose a table near the front of the class and saved seats for Hermione and Ron. At lunch, Dudley told them to expect an interesting first class with Remus and Harry was nearly bursting with excitement. A large cage covered by a sheet sat on Remus’s desk.

The bell that signaled the beginning of class rang. Remus closed the door behind the last stragglers and walked to the front of the room. The class was silent, except for the rattling noise emanating from the cage. Everyone who didn’t already know him was sizing Remus up. Harry, alone, had some idea of what to expect from Remus’s teaching style.

“Hello everyone,” Remus smiled. “Several of you,” he glanced at Harry’s table, “already know me. As for the rest of you, I’m not big on ceremony so if you want to call me Professor Lupin you can, but I’ll answer to Remus just as happily. I just finished a graduate degree focusing on dark creatures, so that is what we will be studying for a good portion of the year. Now, books and wands out!” Remus pulled the sheet off the cage to reveal a cluster of small, blue, vaguely humanoid creatures.

“Cornish pixies are dark creatures?” Seamus was incredulous.

Remus grinned in a way that told Harry he’d been hoping someone would ask that exact question. “Well spotted, Mr. Finnegan. Indeed, cornish pixies are more of a nuisance than deliberately malevolent. I want to see how well you all handle these tricky pests before we move on to anything more sinister.”

He waved his wand, and the large cage split into about a dozen smaller cages containing one pixie each. Then he distributed them among the tables so that there was one shared between three or four students.

“Between your textbook and the pixies in front of you, there should be enough information available for each group to turn in a labeled drawing and a brief description of how best to deal with cornish pixies. You have half an hour. Go.”

The class got down to work. Hermione dove right into the book, while Harry, Ron, and Neville studied their pixie. It rattled the bars of its cage at them. Harry felt kind of sorry for the poor thing. Neville was the best artist out of the four of them, so he got down to sketching. Ron helped him label the sketch, while Harry wrote down how to banish them, as dictated by Hermione.

After half an hour, Remus collected their work. Several people had apparently tried sticking their fingers in the cages, and Remus spent another five minutes distributing band-aids. Then, beginning with Harry’s group, he released each group’s pixie and directed them to get it back into the cage using what they’d just learned.
Most of the groups did well, but Seamus, Dean, Pavarti, and Lavender’s pixie managed to release one of its comrades before they could stop it. The pixies went right for Neville and tried to hang him from the chandelier by his ears. Remus stepped in before anyone got injured, however, and the four of them were eventually able to get their pixie back under their control.

All in all, Harry reflected, as they left for Transfiguration, it was a decent first class. He told Remus so when he came up to Harry and his friends to ask after dinner.

"I promise I won't make a habit of this, but since it's my first class of the year I wanted to get some students' perspectives on how it went."

"It was wonderful!" Hermione assured him.

"I could've done without being picked up by my ears," Neville admitted. "But aside from that it was interesting."

"Will you bring in more creatures?" Ron asked hopefully.

"Not every class, but sometimes," Remus laughed.

He sent them on their way. Harry forwent starting on his homework, and instead wrote a letter to Sirius describing Remus's class in vivid detail. He knew Sirius would appreciate being kept in the loop and resolved to write him as often as possible.

As he worked on the letter, Spot lay across his shoulders telling him about her day. The castle was much larger than the cottage and had more of both dark crevices for hiding and sunny places for warming her scales. She was also excited to investigate all the new smells in this enlarged environment.

Neville kept looking up from his homework to glance at Spot. Harry pretended not to notice. While Ron and Hermione had long ago gotten used to Harry's unusual pet and his ability to talk to her, Spot still made Neville nervous. Harry suspected he didn't believe her promise not to eat Trevor.
Twelve

Remus was thrilled by the reception he received from most of the student population. While teaching at the muggle school had been a rewarding experience, and taught him a lot about students' learning styles, he knew after the second week that this was where he was supposed to be.

And his enthusiasm for the subject seemed to rub off on the students. Very few students failed to rise to each new challenge he threw their way. He offered extra help to those that did, of course. Some of them even took it.

It was this, then, that allowed him to accelerate his curriculum and introduce boggarts to his second years in early October rather than late November. The Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw classes performed beautifully, and the only issue among the Gryffindors was Harry's annoyance that Remus stopped him from facing it--Remus hadn't wanted Voldemort to appear in his classroom. He wondered how the Slytherin class would compare as he called them to attention.

"Does anyone know what a boggart is?" he asked. After a brief silence a few students raised their hands. "Go ahead, Ms. Parkinson."

"It shows people their biggest fear."

"Very good. Now, can anyone tell me how to defend yourself against a boggart?" He paused. Three timid hands went into the air. "Yes Mr. Zabini?"

"Laughter."

"Correct."

Remus described the incantation set the students the task of visualizing their fears and how to transform them. Once everyone seemed ready he had them form a line.

"Now, nobody is required to face the boggart. As in our previous classes, anyone can submit a 500 word essay on the topic by next class to receive credit for the lesson." He was unsurprised to see that nobody wanted to write the essay.

The first student stepped forward as Remus unlocked the wardrobe in which he'd stored the boggart. A huge tarantula crawled out. A snort of derision came from the end of the line.

"One point from Slytherin for mocking a classmate, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco scowled but watched silently as his classmate turned the spider into an eight-legged puppy. Remus turned to the next student, and when there were no further interruptions he considered the matter settled.

As this was a lesson he'd now taught several times, Remus was unsurprised by the general pattern that presented itself. The main difference between what the Slytherin second years were afraid of versus the fears of their counterparts in other houses was that there were significantly fewer characters from muggle horror movies.

Then the boggart reached the end of the line. Draco Malfoy stepped up with some trepidation. Whatever Remus had expected the boggart to become, it was not Draco's father. And yet there stood an exact replica of Lucius Malfoy in all his aloof glory.
Draco’s face turned pink. He waved his wand at the boggart and said "Riddikulus!" in a small voice. Nothing happened. Remus prepared to take over, but let the boy try again. "Riddikulus!" Draco said again, this time with more confidence. The image of his father transformed into an albino peacock.

The entire class burst out into raucous laughter at the absurd image. The boggart exploded, which saved Remus from having to force it back into the wardrobe.

“Wonderful job, class. Two points to Slytherin for everyone who faced the boggart. Your homework is to read the next ten pages of the textbook and write down at least five questions you have about the topic.”

Remus handed out squares of Honeydukes chocolate as the students filed out the door. They were leftovers from his NEWT classes’ recent field trip to a secure location where they could practice their patronuses on a real dementor under heavy ministry supervision. While boggarts were nowhere near dementor level, he figured facing one’s biggest fears in front of a classroom full of peers still merited some chocolate.

He stopped Draco, again the last in line, before he walked out the door.

“Please come by my office before dinner.”

“You’re not going to give me detention for laughing at Bulstrode, are you?” the boy challenged.

“No, I’ve already taken points for that. I want to discuss another matter, but there’s not enough time between now and your next class.” He gave Draco his chocolate and closed the classroom door behind him.

When classes ended for the day, Remus headed to his office to wait for Draco. The form his boggart had taken confirmed what he already suspected. Although the young Malfoy affected a supercilious air around his peers, Remus knew a scared and lonely boy when he saw one. It probably had to do with his having been one. The way he saw it, it was his duty as a teacher to discover the cause and do something about it—if it was within his power.

Draco knocked on the office door. Remus invited him in and directed him to sit.

“What is this about, sir?” he asked formally. Remus sighed internally. This was going to be worse than pulling teeth.

“Today in class the boggart chose to take the shape of your father when you faced it.”

“So?” He could see the defenses clanging shut behind Draco’s eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me why your father is your greatest fear. And I won’t pry. But did you happen to notice that none of your classmates had their parents as their greatest fears?”

“I guess.” Draco stared at the floor.

“Children shouldn’t be afraid of their parents.” Draco looked ever so slightly hurt. “Wait, that came out wrong. Please don’t think I’m admonishing you. In fact, between you and me, I think you gave the strongest performance in class today.”

“But almost everyone else got it on the first try,” Draco scoffed.

“That may be true, but almost everyone else faced fears that they can generally avoid in everyday
life. Take Ms. Bulstrode, for example. How many giant tarantulas do you see in an average day?”

“None.”

“Exactly. But you see your father on a much more frequent basis, do you not? And to know that, and fear him, and still manage to turn his image into something comical, that is bravery. That is powerful defensive magic.”

Draco looked proud for a second. Then the defenses were back.

“But to get back to my original point. When I said children shouldn’t be afraid of their parents, I didn’t mean that you had some kind of character flaw for being afraid of your father. I meant that parents have a duty to love and protect their children, and that if a child’s greatest fear is their parent, then the parent has failed in fulfilling that duty.”

“How would you know?”

Remus reminded himself that the sneer meant Draco recognized the truth behind what he’d just said and was having difficulty reconciling it with the image he’d built of his father in his mind to protect himself. The loss of formality also meant Draco was becoming comfortable with Remus, which was in itself a surprisingly quick breakthrough.

“I myself am a parent. And over the last eleven years my son’s wellbeing has been my highest priority. He-”

“Wait, is your son at Hogwarts? He’d be old enough if he’s eleven.”

“He’s twelve, actually. We adopted him after his parents died. And yes, he is at Hogwarts.” Remus had hoped the conversation wouldn’t go here quite so quickly. He knew it would be harder for Draco to feel comfortable confiding in him if he knew Remus was one of Harry’s parents.

A light of recognition danced across Draco’s face, quickly followed by annoyance. “Potter. Your son is Potter, isn’t he? You and that Sirius Black. I remember you from the bookshop! And you don’t want to help me, do you; you just want to help Potter make fun of me!” He stood up, knocking his chair over.

“Yes and no. Sirius Black and I are indeed Harry’s parents. But I am not in the business of fueling feuds between students. Anything you, or other students, tell me in confidence does not leave this room unless I deem it serious enough that I have to take it to your head of house or the headmaster.

“I will not make you stay and discuss the matter further unless you wish to, but I must ask you to pick up the chair. I also ask that you don’t spread the story about my raising Harry. It may be an open secret, but none of us want the matter to get too much attention.”

Draco righted the chair he’d knocked over. He surprised Remus by resuming his seat rather than leaving. “I’m sorry professor.”

Now they were making progress.
Instead of going to the Halloween feast, Harry had a quiet dinner with his parents in Remus’s flat. They talked about how Harry’s school year was going and Sirius brought the other two up to speed on his daily activities.

After a few glasses of wine, the adults started getting sentimental and told some stories about James and Lily that Harry hadn’t yet heard. He remembered the enchanted mirror he’d found last year, the memory eclipsed by the awful events of the rest of that night, and wistfully thought about what it might be like to have known his biological parents.

“You’re making an effort to be nice to Draco, right?” Remus asked while Sirius was in the bathroom.

“Yes, Remus,” Harry sighed. Remus wouldn’t tell him why he had to be nice to Malfoy, but he was quite insistent. It did seem to be doing something, however, cause Malfoy had backed off from tormenting him all the time. “I’m not going easy on him in the match against Slytherin, though.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

Harry stared into the crackling fire and shoveled some chocolate cake into his mouth so he wouldn't have to talk. He was getting tired, but he also didn't want to have to leave Sirius. Then he heard something that made him feel wide awake.

"Rip, tear, kill," hissed a voice. It sounded like it was coming from the walls.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Remus looked worried.

"That voice! It said something about killing!"

"I definitely didn't hear any voices. Are you sure you didn't doze off? It's pretty late."

"I swear I heard it." Harry didn't feel as sure now, though.

When Sirius came back, Remus told him he was escorting Harry back to Gryffindor tower. Harry hugged Sirius tightly and made him promise to come back soon. Then he let Remus lead him back to his dormitory.

Halfway there, however, he heard the voice again.

"Did you hear it this time?" he begged Remus, who shook his head. Harry grabbed Remus's hand and dragged him towards the voice.

As they rounded the corner, they stumbled upon a bizarre scene. Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat, hung by her tail over a puddle of water. Next to her was some writing in what looked like blood.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened, enemies of the heir beware," Remus read aloud. He walked over to the cat and inspected her. "Petrified," he muttered to himself. His grip on Harry's hand tightened to the point of being painful.

"What is it?" Harry asked.
"Let's get you to bed and then I need to talk to Dumbledore." Remus's reply was not an answer, which bothered Harry.

Remus left him at the entrance to Gryffindor. Harry ran up to his dormitory to see if his friends were back yet, but it was empty. He was surprised, however, to see Spot coiled on his pillow, staring directly at him. It had been a cold October and she'd already entered brumation for the winter, so to see her wide awake was alarming.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Big snake. Wants to kill. Not yummy mice or frogs. Big prey."

"How big?"

"Eat humans like Harry." Spot wound herself around Harry's arm. He wasn't sure if she was seeking protection or trying to provide it.

"Where is the big snake?"

"Spot heard it in walls. Woke up to drink water."

Harry shivered. The voice he'd heard must've been the big snake that clearly terrified Spot. He wished he had a way of contacting Remus and Sirius quickly. He pulled out the Marauder's map and located his parents on it. Sirius was in Remus's flat. Remus paced in Dumbledore's office. There was nothing for it, he'd have to go to them.

He dug out his invisibility cloak and crept downstairs. When the deluge of students arriving from the feast poured through the portrait hole, he slipped out the other direction. Now, should he go to Sirius or Remus?

Using the map we a guide, Harry navigated to Dumbledore's office. Then he took off the cloak. The stone gargoyle guarding the door looked unamused.

"Password?"

"I don't know it."

"Then go away."

"I need to see the headmaster. Its urgent."

"No password, no entry."

"Please?"

"Harry, what are you doing here?" Remus and Dumbledore appeared from behind the gargoyle. Harry recounted his discussion with Spot. Dumbledore looked grave. Remus turned white.

"A snake? But I thought the monster-"

"As I long suspected, headmaster Dippet was mistaken. But we should get this young man to bed before we discuss what is to be done."

For the second time that night, Harry was escorted to Gryffindor tower. Remus made him promise not to leave again until breakfast.
In the morning, the school was already buzzing with the news that the Chamber of Secrets had been opened. Nobody seemed to know what it was. It certainly didn't appear on the Marauder's map. Only Ron’s little sister seemed upset by the petrification of Mrs. Norris; everyone else was far too concerned with increasingly speculative versions of the legend of the Chamber and who the heir of Slytherin might be.

The first sign that any of the professors gave that they were worried was in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Remus announced that they were straying from the curriculum. He spent the lesson lecturing frantically about different kinds of dark creatures that looked like large snakes. Harry got the impression that Remus was throwing things at the wall to see what stuck.

During break, Hermione was nowhere to be found. When she reappeared in charms, she explained to the boys that she'd been to ask Moaning Myrtle whether she knew anything about the incident since it occurred outside her bathroom. The ghost girl was unhelpful, however, because she was perpetually preoccupied with her own misery.

There were no further attacks in the next few weeks, and life at Hogwarts resumed its normal pace with a few exceptions. For one thing, Filch remained even more hypervigilant than usual regarding student antics, and anyone caught performing a particularly nasty prank was likely to be accused by him of being Mrs. Norris’s attacker.

Harry’s first quidditch match of the year was coming up, however, and the team’s furious preparation took over all of his spare time. Malfoy had bought his way onto the Slytherin team at the beginning of the year, a donation of seven Nimbus two thousand and ones secured him the vacant seeker position, and it would take all of the Gryffindor team’s skill to beat the faster brooms.

Unfortunately, not that long into the match, it looked as though the new brooms might cost Gryffindor the game. The Slytherin chasers scored goal after goal while Gryffindor’s score remained at zero. Harry, however, had a bigger problem. One of the bludgers seemed to have it out for him.

Usually, bludgers targeted whichever player was closest at any given time, regardless of team. This particular bludger, however, followed Harry across the pitch in both vertical and horizontal directions. Between the bludger and Fred and George’s attempts to stop it, Harry couldn’t focus on finding the snitch. During a timeout called by Wood, Harry asked the twins to concentrate on protecting the other players. They objected, but Wood agreed with Harry. With any luck, he would be able to end the game before Slytherin got too far ahead and before the bludger managed to knock him off his broom.

Unfortunately for Harry, he only managed one of the two. He finally sighted the snitch, and was diving for it when the bludger hit him in the right elbow. Harry fumbled for the snitch while trying to keep his seat and crashed headlong into the muddy pitch with the snitch secure in his left hand. The pain in his arm was unbearable and he blacked out for a second.
Remus had already vaulted over the wall of the stands by the time Madam Hooch signaled the end of the game. He ran to Harry, who came to just as Remus bent over him.

“Did I catch it? Did we win?” Harry sounded dazed. His arm was bent at a weird angle.

“Correct on both accounts,” Remus assured him. “But your arm’s broken and I suspect you have a concussion. I want to get you to the hospital wing as quickly as possible. Can you walk?” Harry nodded. Remus helped him to his feet. Sirius joined them and cut a path for them through the crowd so they could get to the castle.

Madam Pomfrey was able to fix Harry’s arm in about thirty seconds, but she wanted to keep him overnight since he did in fact have a mild concussion. Remus and Sirius sat with him all afternoon, except for the hour or so when he wanted to be alone with his friends. Draco, to whom Remus had become a kind of mentor in the weeks since their first conversation, surprised him by visiting just before dinner to say good game to Harry.

Remus caught Draco as he was leaving.

“I’m proud of you for doing that. Thank you.”

Draco made a face. “Most of my teammates were too cowardly to say it to the rest of the team. Such behaviour is unbecoming of Slytherin House and they should hold themselves to a higher standard. That’s all.”

“Well, it certainly was decent of you,” Remus grinned. Draco had made huge strides in a short time, whether or not he would admit it.

He left and Remus returned to Harry. Sirius raised an eyebrow at him. Remus mouthed “later” and Sirius appeared satisfied. Harry, meanwhile, looked confused. Before he could ask any questions, however, Madam Pomfrey told Remus that he and Sirius would have to leave. Parents only got to ignore visiting hours in life or death situations, apparently.

Sirius elected to stay the night, as he had done most nights since the attack on Filch’s cat. Remus was close to meeting with Dumbledore to reevaluate the living arrangements since Sirius had practically moved into the flat anyway. There had to be some job, token or otherwise, Dumbledore could give Sirius to justify his living in the castle.

They were awoken just before three by McGonagall knocking at the door.

“Come quickly,” she said. Remus and Sirius raced after her up two flights of stairs, where Dumbledore stood guard over the frozen form of Colin Creevy.

Despite the boy’s small stature, it took both Remus and Sirius to carry Colin to the hospital wing. They placed him in an empty bed several beds down from where Harry slept and drew a curtain around him.

“Petrified,” Remus confirmed when Dumbledore brought Madam Pomfrey over. She gasped.

“Hang on,” Sirius pried the boy’s prized camera from between his stiff fingers. “What if-”

“Do you think he managed to get a picture of who, or what, attacked him?” McGonagall asked.
Sirius nodded and opened the back of the camera. Instead of a roll of film, however, they were greeted by a small plume of smoke and a lump of melted plastic.

"I am afraid that this means the Chamber of Secrets has indeed been opened again," Dumbledore said. His face was inscrutable.

Madam Pomfrey shooed them out of the hospital wing. Remus glanced at Harry as he passed. Although he appeared to be asleep, he looked slightly too still and his breathing was slightly too deep. He elected not to make an issue of it, though, and continued on to bed.

In the morning, Harry was released to Remus's flat. He devoured the breakfast Sirius prepared.

"Have either of you ever met a house elf?" Harry's tone was casual, but Remus recognized a note of intense curiosity behind it.

"My parents had one. Probably still lives in that moldy old house," Sirius answered. "Why?"

"One came to visit me last night, when everyone was asleep."

"What?" Remus asked sharply. He thought back to the mystery of the barrier sealed by house elf magic.

"His name was Dobby. He wants me to leave Hogwarts. Says it's for my own protection. Apparently he was behind the sealed barrier and the rogue bludger."

"Back up. What's he trying to protect you from exactly?"

"Well he started hitting himself when he mentioned the Chamber of Secrets. Is it really open again?"

Ah, so Harry had been awake when they brought Colin in.

"Did he say why he was protecting you in particular?"

"No. Bet he knows who opened the chamber though."

Remus caught Sirius's eye. “Please leave this up to the adults, okay Harry? And if Dobby visits you again come tell us right away.”

There were a handful more attacks over the next several weeks. Dumbledore made the precaution of hiring Sirius as extra security. Almost the entire student body decided to go home for winter break. In fact, other than a handful of older Slytherins, the only students who stayed were Draco Malfoy, Harry, Hermione, and the entire Weasley family, as Molly and Arthur were spending the holiday with Bill in Egypt this year.

Remus nearly caused an uproar when he invited Draco to their little Yule feast. Although Harry admitted he and Draco were in the middle of a truce, he maintained that having him over for dinner was a bit like poking a sleeping dragon. Remus, however, insisted. He was vindicated when Draco proved to be a polite, if quiet, dinner guest. None of the nastiness Harry expected was present. In fact, he seemed to almost get along with Ginny, the only other member of the party who could be described as quiet, and he was at least civil to Hermione.

“I’ve been doing some reading,” Draco said to Remus at one point, while almost everyone else was involved in a raucous game of charades.
“What about?”

“That lesson you did about the snakes was interesting, so I decided to look into it more. Especially since the Gryffindor ghost was attacked. I mean, what kind of creature could affect a ghost?”

“I never said the snake lesson was connected—”

“It was kind of obvious. Anyway, it would have to be something really powerful to do that to a ghost.”

Hermione plopped down on the couch next to Remus, clearly more interested in what they were saying than in participating in the game. “What would have to be powerful?”

“The creature behind the attacks.” Draco was in full researcher mode now. “And I think I know what it is.”

“What is it?”

“A basilisk.”

Hermione gasped. Remus felt like he’d been hit in the gut. A basilisk. It all made perfect sense, except…

“Who’s controlling it?” Hermione echoed his own thoughts. “And why hasn’t it managed to kill anyone yet?”

“Hey, where’s Ginny?” Sirius interrupted. The game of charades had ended, and it looked like everyone was ready to go back to their dormitories for bed.

“I think I saw her leave a few minutes ago,” Draco said. “She must’ve gone back to Gryffindor.”

“I can check in on her when we get back,” Hermione offered.

Unlike last year, Harry chose to stay behind when the party broke up. Although he didn’t give a specific reason, Remus attributed the decision to it being a year since his encounter with Voldemort. Harry spent the night on the couch, since he claimed he was too old to sleep in his parents’ bed anymore.
They found Hermione the next morning. According to Ron—who came to deliver the news to Harry, Remus, and Sirius—Ginny was on her way to breakfast when she tripped over Hermione’s petrified body in front of the common room fire.

“Thank goodness Moony sent everyone back with mirrors,” Sirius sighed dejectedly.

“She’s still petrified, Pads.” Remus put his head in his hands.

“But without your mirror she’d be dead,” Harry said.

Harry had already been angry at whoever opened the Chamber of Secrets, but now it was personal. All he wanted was to find and punish them for hurting Hermione. But Remus and Sirius were adamant that he should stay out of it and let the adults handle the situation. Deep down Harry knew they were right, but every time he visited Hermione’s petrified form in the hospital wing his anger flared again.

The faculty members, especially Remus, kept a close watch on everyone for the duration of winter break. The only times they weren’t in the immediate presence of at least one adult were when they were in their dormitories. Normally, Harry would’ve been happy to have so much time with his parents. Under these circumstances, however, he couldn’t wait for the new term when it would be easier to fly under the radar.

When the rest of the student body returned from break, they were met by strict new rules. Dumbledore had apparently decided that the best way to prevent further attacks was to keep students from ever lingering in corridors. Harry’s guardians might be taking a hard line with his safety, but his parents were still two of the Marauders and he’d learned from their childhood stories that rules were meant to be broken.

It was this, then, that led to Neville and Dudley covering for him and Ron while they snuck into Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom. Hermione may not have been able to get anything out of her, but she was still the only possible lead they had.

“Hello, um. Myrtle, are you—are you home?” Harry asked nervously.

A bout of wailing sobs echoed through the bathroom.

Ron caught Harry’s eye. “Should we take that as a yes?”

The ghostly image of a girl around their own age swooped down from above. “Have you come to harass me too?”

"No! Has someone been harassing you?"

Myrtle wailed. “Has someone been harassing me? Ha! Nearly every day for fifty years someone comes in here to make fun of poor, dead, miserable Myrtle! The last one threw a book through my head!”

She pointed to a corner of the bathroom, where a small black book sat in a puddle of water. Harry walked over and gingerly picked it up. It was a diary. On the back, "property of Tom Riddle Jr." was printed in gold lettering.
"Myrtle, do you know a Tom Riddle Jr?"

"He was a nice boy," she sighed. "Slytherin prefect the year I died. Handsome as the devil."

"Why would a current student throw his diary at you? How could they even have it?"

"How should I know?" She swept away to resume her previous sobbing.

"Let's get out of here," Ron whispered. Harry nodded.

That evening, Harry, Ron, and Neville sequestered themselves in their dormitory to inspect the diary. As Myrtle had said, it was fifty years old. It was also blank, apart from the dates printed on each page.

"Why would someone keep a blank diary for fifty years only to try flushing it down Myrtle's toilet?"

"Maybe it's enchanted or something? Try writing in it," Neville suggested.

Harry pulled out a pen—which he still deemed much more practical than quills—and drew a small squiggle on the first page. After a few seconds, it disappeared. He looked up, confused. Ron and Neville wore identical looks of astonishment.

He tried again, this time writing "my name is Harry Potter." The ink disappeared as it had before. But this time it was replaced by new writing in a different handwriting.

"Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle," Harry read aloud. Then the message vanished.

"That's kinda creepy." Neville shivered.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "Ask him about the Chamber of Secrets."

"How would he know?"

"The diary is fifty years old right?"

"Yeah."

"So the last time it was opened was fifty years ago. Seamus told me."

Harry turned back to the diary. "Can you tell me anything about the Chamber of Secrets?"

"No," came the reply. "But I can show you."

"What-" Harry heard Neville say before he felt like he was tumbling head first down a long tunnel. When he landed, he was standing in a corridor in Hogwarts. A handsome boy in Slytherin robes with a prefect's badge stood next to him.

"Hello," Harry said nervously. The boy ignored him. "Hello," he said louder. When no response came, he waved his hand in front of the boy's face. It appeared the boy could neither see nor hear him. He realized this must be Tom Riddle's memory.

He followed Riddle to the headmaster's office, where a man who was certainly not Dumbledore sat at the desk. The man, who Riddle referred to as Professor Dippet, denied Riddle's request to stay at Hogwarts over the summer. Besides that being a thing that just wasn't done, Dippet's reasoning
appeared to surround a tragic accident that had just occurred. Harry inferred that it had to do with the Chamber of Secrets.

Riddle left Dippet's office, visibly upset, and made for a stretch of corridor with a blank wall. He paced up and down a few times, and a door appeared. Harry gasped.

The room behind the door held towers of miscellaneous stuff, from broken brooms to jewelry to books with titles that belonged in the restricted section. A few rows back sat a boy twice Riddle's height, who despite his size appeared to be about a year older than Harry. He realized with a start that he was looking at a young Hagrid.

Hagrid was sitting on a large wooden box, as if trying to hide it. "Hullo Tom." His cheerful tone was clearly forced and did nothing to disguise his obvious fear.

"Step aside, Hagrid. That monster must be stopped."

"Aragog never hurt nobody!" Hagrid protested.

"A student is dead, Hagrid. They're talking about closing the school unless the perpetrator is caught and the monster dealt with. Now stand aside."

Hagrid jumped up to shield the box, which was a mistake. Riddle waved his wand and the lid flew off. A spider the size of a spaniel scuttled out. Riddle aimed spell after spell at it, but missed every time as the spider scurried away. The image faded as Hagrid howled with misery.

Someone was shaking Harry by the shoulders. "Harry! Snap out of it!" Ron called.

"Should I get someone?" Neville's voice was half an octave higher with worry.

Harry opened his eyes. "M'okay."

Ron let him go. "You had us worried, mate. What happened?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Riddle, the guy who owned the diary, he showed me a memory from when the Chamber was opened fifty years ago."

Neville's eyes were huge. "What happened?"

"The monster killed a student. But Riddle had it wrong. Hagrid had a giant spider he was hiding in a secret room and Riddle seemed to think it was the monster. But we know the monster is a basilisk."

"And I can't see Hagrid opening the Chamber to hurt anyone. Maybe to try and befriend the monster, maybe," Ron agreed.

Neville laughed a bit hysterically. "What are we going to do with the book?"

"I'm going to give it to Remus. He'll know what to do."

The next morning, Harry presented Riddle’s diary to Remus. He was quite proud of himself for finding such a fascinating magical puzzle, even though the potential clue turned out to be a bit of a dud. Remus’s reaction was underwhelming. Instead of being grateful for the help with his investigation, he reprimanded Harry for potentially endangering himself.

A week passed. No new attacks occurred, but as far as Harry knew there were no breakthroughs either. Then, on Friday evening he was allowed to break curfew to join Remus and Sirius for
dinner. Just as Sirius was serving up large pieces of treacle tart, a loud noise came from Remus’s office next door.

Remus jumped up and ran to investigate. He called over his shoulder to Sirius to tell him to protect Harry. A silent, tense five minutes followed. Then Remus came back looking stricken.

“The diary. It’s gone.”

“Gone?” Sirius asked.

“Stolen. The thief must’ve wanted it pretty badly; my office is trashed.”

“Did you see who it was?”

Remus shook his head. He and Sirius walked Harry back to Gryffindor tower without even giving him time to finish his treacle tart, which Harry thought was rather unfair. Secretly, however, he was also somewhat pleased--the diary was obviously important if someone was willing to steal it back under Remus’s nose.
Sixteen

The next day, just after lunch, Sirius came to find Harry. Remus had been attacked by Slytherin’s monster. Harry refused to believe it until he was looking at Remus’s petrified body in the hospital wing. Even then, the idea that it was really Remus lying there was hard to swallow. Not only was he a teacher and an expert on dark magic—this heir of Slytherin was getting bold—but he and Sirius had been Harry’s steadfast protectors for as long as he could remember.

Draco Malfoy arrived a few minutes after they got to the hospital wing. He must’ve gotten special permission to visit his mentor. Harry tried not to feel resentful that Malfoy was encroaching on a family tragedy.

He looked up to see McGonagall striding towards them. She looked more grim than Harry had ever seen.

“There’s been another attack.”

“Who?”

“Ginny Weasley. She—she’s been taken into the Chamber itself. Dumbledore is in conference with the board of governors right now. They—they’re going to close the school.”

“What?” Harry, Malfoy, and Sirius gasped in unison. Close Hogwarts? It was unthinkable.

“It is unsafe for students to remain here with that monster on the loose. All students are to return to their dormitories immediately, where they will remain until evacuation tomorrow morning.”

McGonagall and Sirius escorted Harry and Malfoy out of the hospital wing. Malfoy caught Harry’s eye before they were sent in different directions. The look clearly said “this is bullshit. What are you going to do about it?”

What was he going to do about it? By the time Sirius left him in the Gryffindor common room, Harry had an answer.

The Weasley boys sat in a puddle of grief in a far corner. The other students gave them a wide berth. Neville tried to head him off as Harry approached.

"They want to be left alone. Fred hexed the last person who tried to give them his condolences."

Harry stopped in his tracks. "But I need to talk to Ron."

"Can't it wait?" Neville whispered. "Their sister is probably dead!"

"That's why I have to talk to him! I think there's a chance to save her but we have to go now."

Ron glanced up at Harry at that moment. Harry made a pleading face at him and flicked his head towards the stairs up to the boys’ dormitories. Ron gave the tiniest of nods.

"I'm going to bed," Harry heard him tell his brothers.

"It's two in the afternoon!" Percy protested.

"If I'm asleep I don't have to think."
"He's got a point," George said.

Harry and Neville waited for a minute after Ron went upstairs to follow him. They didn't want to attract attention.

"What do you want," Ron asked when they opened the door to their dormitory. His eyes were red and he looked on the verge of collapse.

"I'm going to try and rescue Ginny."

"How? Nobody knows where the entrance to the Chamber is."

"We'll start by asking Myrtle how she died."

"What's Myrtle got to do with it?"

"Myrtle died fifty years ago. The last time the Chamber was opened, a student died. It must've been her."

"I guess it's a start."

After another minute of planning, they were off. Neville's job was to cover for Harry and Ron while they snuck out under the invisibility cloak. Somehow, they made it out of the Gryffindor common room and into Myrtle's bathroom without being detected.

Draco Malfoy stood there, chatting away to Moaning Myrtle. He turned and gave them a grim smile when they took off the cloak.

"The entrance is right there." He pointed to one of the sinks.

"How-?"

"I'll explain as we go. Every second we waste is another second his sister loses. I can't speak parseltongue, so you'd better open it, Potter."

Harry glanced at Ron, who shrugged. He moved closer to the required sink. The faucet was in the shape of a snake. Harry pretended it was Spot and told it to open. Nothing happened.

"English," Malfoy said.

"Open," Harry tried again. The sink slid back into the wall, revealing a hole in the floor that turned out, upon closer inspection, to be the entrance to a tunnel.

"What are you just standing there for? Let's go!"

"Now just a minute, Malfoy. Why are you so anxious to get down there?" Ron snapped.

"Whoever is down there, probably killing your sister as we speak, attacked the only adult who has ever really listened to me. For that, I want to make them pay. You Gryffindors might mock us for having strong self-preservation instincts, but you can't deny we're loyal to our friends. Now let's get going!"

"Alright, you first." Harry said.

"Why me?"
"A second ago you were impatient to get started. If you want us to trust you, you go first."

Malfoy gulped and turned towards the tunnel entrance. He sat down on the edge and, after a moment's hesitation, slid into the tunnel. He disappeared from view. After a few seconds, a thud told Harry he'd reached the other end.

"Are you two coming or not?" he called.

Ron put on a brave face and plunged in after Malfoy. Harry waited until he'd hit bottom to follow. Just before the bathroom whizzed out of sight, he thought he saw a huge black dog in the doorway. Uh oh.

"Alright let's get a move on," Malfoy said before Harry had even righted himself. The three of them forged deeper into the tunnel. A crunch under Harry's foot made him pause.

"Are these rat skulls?"

"Looks like it," Ron groaned.

Malfoy made a face. Then a thud came from behind them. They whipped around to face the tunnel entrance. Sirius stood there, angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

"Harry James Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

He strode towards them. Malfoy tried to hide himself behind Ron, who stepped away from him with mild disgust.

"Saving Ginny and avenging Remus and Hermione!" Harry called back.

"And how exactly do you plan to do that without getting yourself killed?"

"I'll figure it out!"

"Please, go back. Let McGonagall and I handle it. We're supposed to protect you!"

"So was Remus! And he got petrified just like everyone else!"

From the look on his face, Harry knew his words cut Sirius deeply. But they inflicted the same pain on himself. Sirius lunged forward and grabbed his wrist.

"I'm not going to let you do this, Harry," he barked.

"Let me go!"

Harry's anger reached its peak and exploded. As wrenched his wrist out of Sirius's grip, the tunnel ceiling crumbled right over them. Harry felt Sirius push him back, away from the falling rocks.

When the dust cleared, the tunnel was completely blocked. Harry and Malfoy stood together on one side, while—he hoped—Sirius and Ron were on the other.

"Harry, are you all right?" Sirius called.

"We're fine, Mr. Black," Malfoy responded for him. "What about you?"

"Ron and I are okay. Stay still okay? I'm going to try to shift some of this rock."
"I'm going ahead," Harry said defiantly. "Whoever's down there probably knows we're here now, so Ginny's in even more danger. C'mon Malfoy."

"Harry come back!"

Sirius's anguished voice followed them up the tunnel, but Harry didn't turn back. He desperately wanted to, he wanted to hide behind Sirius and have his godfather tell him it was all going to turn out okay, but he knew if he did that he'd be condemning Ginny to death. So he trudged along, leading Malfoy towards the Chamber of Secrets to face whatever awaited them.

They turned a corner and the tunnel opened into a giant hall lined with stone snakes. At the end sat a huge bust of Salazar Slytherin that stretched from floor to ceiling.

"Modest guy, huh?" Harry remarked.

"What's that?" Malfoy pointed to something in the middle of the room.

"I think it's Ginny!"

They ran over. Sure enough, Ginny's prone form lay before them. She didn't move when they shook her.

"Oh, Ginny, please don't be dead!"

"She's got a pulse, but it's faint."

"Then why won't she wake up?"

"She won't wake," a new voice said.

Harry whipped around. Somehow, against all logic, he recognized the speaker as Tom Riddle, still sixteen and still wearing his Hogwarts robes despite the passage of fifty years. Ginny's wand was clutched in his hand.

"Riddle, you've gotta help us."

"Didn't you hear me? She won't wake." Riddle pointed Ginny's wand at Malfoy. "I know who you are, Potter, because you were foolish enough to stumble right into my grasp. But who is this?"

"Dr-Draco Malfoy." Malfoy had gone even paler than usual. "Who are you?"

Riddle laughed coldly. He wrote "Tom Marvolo Riddle" in the air with Ginny's wand, producing burning letters that floated above their heads. He waved the wand and the letters rearranged themselves to read "I am Lord Voldemort."

"How the fuck-?" Harry began.

"When I opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago as a student at this wretched school, my efforts to cleanse the student body were thwarted by Dumbledore and other misguided do-gooders. And so I preserved my memory in a diary, so that one day another student might find it and continue my work. Miss Weasley turned out to be that student."

Harry looked down at Ginny and noticed the diary clutched in her hand.

"Ginny would never-"
"Oh, she had no choice in the matter. At first she thought the diary was harmless, that I was harmless. I was a friend to her when she was lonely. I gave her advice when she needed it.

"And once she felt she couldn't live without me, I began to control her. I forced her to open the Chamber of Secrets to rid the school of tainted blood. But she began to resist me, and so I forced her to write her own death sentence and come to the Chamber to assist me one last time.

"You asked why she won't wake? It is because as she grows weaker I grow stronger. She is still alive for the moment, but once her heart stops I will cease to be a memory and become flesh and blood once more."

"You're sick," Malfoy said. Riddle made a slashing motion with Ginny's wand and a sickening crunch, followed by a cry of pain, told Harry that Malfoy's leg had just been magically broken.

"We won't let you get away with this!" Harry yelled.

"And how are two twelve year olds going to stop me? Come to me my pet."

Pet? Was Riddle still talking to him? Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was staring in horror at the statue of Slytherin. Its mouth opened, and a snake the size of a train appeared. Riddle had spoken in Parseltongue.

"Shut your eyes!" Harry told Malfoy, squeezing his own shut. How were they going to fight off a basilisk if they couldn't see? "Leave us alone," he tried telling the snake.

"There's no point," Riddle chided. "It only listens to me. Kill the boys."

Harry heard the snake slithering closer. It repeated the order under its breath as it went. "Kill boys. Kill boys. Kill boys!"

"What are we going to do?" Malfoy whimpered.

"Can you walk?"

There was some rustling and a cry of pain as Malfoy tried to stand. "No."

"We need help!" Harry cried in frustration.

"No help is coming, little boy," Riddle laughed.

The basilisk's voice was getting louder, as was the slide of scales on stone. Harry needed a plan. He heard Malfoy rustling again, and wondered dully what he was trying to do.

"Obscuro!" Malfoy yelled.

"Master help!" The basilisk's progress across the chamber halted.

"Harry, you can open your eyes."

Harry obeyed warily. A large blindfold covered the snake's eyes. It was almost comical.

"We need to get out now, while it's distracted."

"I can't drag both of you! I'm going to have to fight it."

"With what?"
At that moment, a large red and gold bird soared over to them from the entrance. It dropped a crumpled bit of brown fabric on them, which turned out to be the sorting hat.

"What the-CLOSE YOUR EYES!"

While they were talking, Riddle had managed to remove the blindfold from the basilisk. Their reprieve was over.

Out of sheer desperation, Harry shoved the hat onto his head.

"What good is that going to do?" Riddle laughed.

Then two things happened at once. The bird gave a musical cry that was shortly followed by the sounds of a brief struggle and a blood curdling shriek of "My eyes, master!" from the basilisk.

At the same time, Harry felt something heavy bump him on the head. He pulled off the hat, and reached in to find a sword. It was silver with ruby inlays. "Godric Gryffindor" was engraved in the blade. Then he registered the basilisk's continued cries.

"I think it's safe to open our eyes now," he told Malfoy, who gasped when he saw the sword.

"You idiot, you can still smell them!"

"Yes master."

The snake resumed its progress towards them. It was time for Harry to act. He darted away from Malfoy and Ginny, hoping he was the more interesting target. "Over here," he called.

It worked. The basilisk changed course to follow him. But now came the hard part. With great difficulty, Harry looked up at the huge snake. The bloody holes where its eyes used to be nearly made him puke, but at least they could no longer kill him.

Harry adjusted the ancient sword in his grip. He didn't know much about swords, but he could tell it was well balanced and very sharp. Now all he had to do was kill the basilisk with it.

The basilisk was almost upon him now. Its breath reeked of poison. It lunged and Harry darted out of the way. He slashed with the sword, but the blade bounced off its thick scales. A weak point would be necessary.

He thought about Spot. Her only weak point was her mouth, right behind the fangs. The trouble was, this snake's fangs were half the length of Spot's body, not to mention venomous. He would only get one shot.

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. He looked over at Malfoy and Ginny. They were counting on him to get them out of this.

"Hey! Ugly!" he shouted at the basilisk. It swung its horrible head towards the sound and lunged again. As it did so, Harry stabbed the sword up into its pallet.

The basilisk screamed as it collapsed. Harry rolled out of the way just in time to avoid being crushed by its body. He walked triumphantly back to Malfoy, clutching Gryffindor's sword.

Instead of looking grateful, Malfoy's face was still twisted with terror. He pointed to Harry's sword arm. Harry looked down and noticed the fang embedded in his bicep.

"Oh." Harry's legs gave out from under him. Malfoy dragged him up to a sitting position.
"Oh indeed," Riddle gloated. "You may have killed my basilisk, but you will shortly be too dead to stop me. I have all the time in the world and you only have about one minute."

Harry pulled the fang from his arm. There was less blood than he expected. "You've gotta stop him," he told Malfoy as his vision began swimming.

"How?"

"I don't know. You'll think of something."

"Thirty seconds," Riddle crooned. His voice sounded far away.

"Tell Sirius I'm sorry."

Harry felt a weight on his arm. It was the bird, and it appeared to be crying.

"Thanks for the sword," he whispered to it. He expected those to be his last words, but then his vision cleared. Harry looked down at the wound. It looked several days old, not minutes.

He sat up.

"You're not dead?" Malfoy asked. Harry shook his head.

Riddle looked horrified. "You're supposed to be dead! How? Phoenix tears, of course. No matter, you're still too late to stop me."

Beside them, Ginny stopped breathing. Without thinking, Harry plunged the basilisk’s fang into Riddle’s diary. Riddle screamed in agony as the small, black book spurted ink like blood from a deep wound. Malfoy looked stunned. Harry held the fang there until the ink stopped.

When he looked up, Riddle was gone. Ginny snapped awake beside them. When she caught sight of the dead basilisk and destroyed diary she burst into tears.
Seventeen

Remus woke up with a headache worse than he’d ever had before, including the morning after James’ bachelor party. The lights, when he opened his eyes, were so bright he felt like he was staring directly into the sun. Then something blocked the lights. His eyes adjusted, and the thing turned out to be Sirius’s face. He reached up to caress it, winning a rumble of laughter.

“Am I injured?” he asked.

Sirius’s grin disappeared. “Moony, you were petrified. Don’t you remember?”

Remus thought hard. Then he recalled the basilisk’s awful reflection in his mirror. “How . . . how long-?”

“You were only out for about a day. The mandrake solution Dumbledore ordered came in this morning. Now, no more questions until you’ve eaten and taken this potion Madam Pomfrey left for you.”

Sirius helped him into a sitting position and handed him a mug filled with a foul smelling potion. Remus drained the goblet in one go, hoping to get the unpleasant taste over with quickly. It was disgusting, but he felt marginally better. In fact, now that the headache was subsiding, he realized he was hungry.

"Food?” he asked, too famished for eloquence.

Sirius laughed and held up a bowl. "Beef stew." Rather than handing the bowl over, however, he insisted on feeding Remus. As endearing as his ministrations were, Remus silently thanked Madam Pomfrey for the curtains that hid them from the room at large.

"Where’s Harry?” he wondered aloud when his appetite had been satisfied enough to allow for thought.

"Speaking with Dumbledore.”

"About what?"

Sirius wouldn't meet his gaze.

"Padfoot, why exactly is Harry speaking with Dumbledore?"

"The culprit has been found and, er, dealt with."

"Culprit? You can't mean the person who opened the Chamber of Secrets?"

Sirius nodded.

"That still doesn't explain why Harry is talking to Dumbledore."

"Harry figured it out."

"And-?"

"And he took matters into his own hands."
"What?" Remus ripped off the bedclothes and jumped to his feet.

"Hey! You're not supposed to get out of bed yet!"

"And Harry wasn't supposed to put himself in harm's way! Now, we're going to Dumbledore, and you're going to catch me up on the way."

Dumbledore didn't seem surprised when Remus burst into his office with an apologetic Sirius in tow. He smiled benignly as Harry gasped and ran over to hug Remus, but once the boy's back was turned he flashed them a grave look.

After a bit of everyone--minus Dumbledore--fussing over each other, Harry was dismissed to visit Hermione in the hospital wing. Remus plopped down in the vacant chair opposite the headmaster.

"Sirius gave me the gist of the situation, but I want your explanation, now. Especially about how my son met Voldemort and nearly died."

"It appears someone, the prime suspect being one Mr. Lucius Malfoy, slipped an old diary into Ginny Weasley's school books at the beginning of the year. The diary once belonged to Tom Riddle, better known to the wizarding community as Lord Voldemort, and contained a portion of his memory.

"When Miss Weasley wrote in the diary, this part of Riddle befriended her and then used their connection to possess her. Thus Riddle used her body to reopen the Chamber of Secrets, as he had done when he attended Hogwarts fifty years ago.

"After Harry found the diary and presented it to you, however, it was clear to Riddle that Miss Weasley would soon be discovered. He therefore forced her into the chamber in order to use her life force to give himself a physical form once more.

"What he did not take into account, however, was the strength of Harry and his friends' desire to rescue Ginny and seek retribution on behalf of the other victims. Harry and Draco Malfoy killed the basilisk and destroyed Riddle's diary, though they might have died without considerable aid from Fawkes."

Remus chose not to ask how close Harry and Draco came to dying. He figured he'd find out eventually. Instead, he inquired as to the diary's wearabouts. Something about it rang a bell.

Dumbledore produced the diary. It was ink-stained and marred by a large hole through the middle.

"Harry stabbed it with a basilisk fang."

He picked up the diary and inspected it. It felt a bit like handling the skull of a recently dead animal. "A basilisk fang you say?"

Dumbledore nodded. Remus decided not to ask how Harry got the fang.

"This was a horcrux, wasn't it?"

"That was my theory as well," Dumbledore said after a long pause.

"Horcrux?"

Remus, with the occasional addition from Dumbledore, explained horcruxes to Sirius.

"So Voldemort should be dead, now? Since his extra piece of soul is gone?"
"Unfortunately, I do not think so."

Remus stared at Dumbledore in horror. "He didn't. Did he? As far as I know no one else attempted to make more than one."

"I believe he set out to split his soul into seven pieces."

"Seven?" Sirius yelped.

"The information I have gathered thus far suggests he managed to create five horcruxes before he fell. This diary is one of them."

"Four left," Remus whispered. "Do you know what the others might be?"

"I have my suspicions. Am I correct in assuming you wish to leave Hogwarts to track down the remaining horcruxes?"

Remus blushed. Sirius stared at him incredulously.

"Then I would ask only that you finish out the school year first. During that time I can provide you with all my research into the matter."

"Sounds reasonable to me."

Madam Pomfrey was furious that Remus left the hospital wing without being discharged. She kept him overnight, while the other victims were released in time for the celebratory feast. He didn't argue, though. The opportunity for solitude was nice. He had a lot to think about.

Harry visited just before curfew. Paradoxically, he was both clingy and afraid that Remus would be angry at him for putting himself in grave danger. Remus was angry, but he swallowed his anger because he knew railing at Harry wouldn't do anyone any good.

Hearing the whole story of Harry's visit to the Chamber of Secrets directly from the source was difficult for Remus. He nearly cried when Harry described finding the fang in his arm. Only Sirius’s grip on his shoulder stopped him.

“How do we stop this from happening to him again?” Siris wondered aloud after Harry left.

“We track down all Voldemort’s remaining ties to power and destroy them. That’s why we’re going after the horcruxes.”

Sirius sat on the edge of the bed. “Not me. I talked to Dumbledore; next year I’ll be taking your job. I’ll help your search where I can, of course. But Harry needs us to watch over him more than ever.”

“You’re going to teach?”

“I have some experience defending myself and others against the dark arts. Besides, I can just steal your curriculum.”

“There’s the Padfoot I know and am annoyed by.” Remus laughed.

“You mean, know and love?” Sirius pouted. Remus kissed him with a smile.

Thankfully, the winter term passed without much further incident. Life at Hogwarts returned to normal, and after a few weeks the Chamber of Secrets was a distant memory. Harry was more
prone to mood swings than he had been, which Remus guessed was a combination of his response to trauma and the beginning of adolescence. He and Sirius responded by giving Harry his space when he wanted it and showering him with affection when he needed it.

Draco spent a lot more time in Remus’s office during the rest of the year. His remedial lessons from the previous term quickly transformed into accelerated lessons. Remus suspected the boy was pouring his trauma from the incident into learning everything he possibly could about dark creatures.

Remus was also happy to see Harry’s friend group slowly absorb Draco. He supposed that just as the shared experience of fighting a troll had created a bond between Ron, Harry, and Hermione the previous year, Harry and Draco couldn’t fight a horcrux-controlled basilisk together without altering their relationship.

Before he knew it, the end of the year was at hand. Remus’s students all performed excellently in his exam, not because he set an easy one (he didn’t) but because his unorthodox teaching methods and constant pushing helped them grow. Then it was time to say goodbye to Hogwarts once again, though he suspected that with Sirius teaching next year he would still be spending a significant amount of time there.

They let Harry take the train back to London so he could have a few more hours with his friends before the long break began. There was some talk of trying to plan a midsummer get together, but who knew when that would be. Remus closed the door to his now-empty office for the last time, took Sirius’s hand, and smiled grimly. This year had been a wild one—and his plans for the immediate future didn’t promise an end to the turmoil—but for tonight, at least, he and his family would get to have a quiet night in their cottage again before the work began.

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