Time Turned Back
by TaraSoleil

Summary

Broken and angry after losing Sirius fifth year, Harry recklessly puts himself in harms way, dragging Hermione along for the ride. Now they are stuck in another time with some all too familiar faces. Will the time with lost loved ones heal Harry or end up doing more damage?

Notes

I must give credit where it is due. This story is based on Turn Back Time by SStarLuna, a sadly abandoned fic over on FanFiction.net that had great potential. This is not a scene for scene, chapter for chapter rewrite. Despite the changes, this is still very much inspired by the original and a lot of its idiosyncrasies will make more sense if you follow the link to SStarLuna's original work.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hello, Goodbye Apathy

Harry Potter was not a normal boy. Most teenagers lived for summer, where Harry hated it. Most spent their days outdoors, Harry didn't. Most spent their time dreaming of girls, Harry refused to dream. When he did, he dreamed of a man, Sirius Black. He had loved Sirius like a brother and friend, and he was dead now, too, just like Harry's parents and Cedric Diggory before him.

His memory was sharp and accurate. It showed him the truth of Sirius's death. He remembered clearly the green light and shocked expression that slackened and turned to a peaceful nothingness before he fell behind the veil at the Department of Mysteries. That was what had happened, and Harry knew it. But in dreams, his guilt twisted the truth and by the first day of summer the shock turned to pain and the peaceful nothingness turned to hatred directed at Harry. In his dreams, Sirius called out in agony and anger, cursing Harry for being so stupid and causing his death.

So there he was, nearly sixteen years old and orphaned twice, lying on the cool, bare floor of the smallest bedroom of Number 4, Privet Drive with his eyes shut in a restful half-sleep. It was all he allowed himself. He never permitted himself to drift into the deep sleep where dreams would come.

He never dared close his eyes at night when the house was full. Only when Uncle Vernon was at work, Dudley was out tormenting the local children and Aunt Petunia was in the garden or out shopping did he allow himself to close his eyes. He was under-aged and not permitted to perform magic outside of school, so he couldn't silence his room. If he fell asleep properly, he would wake up screaming and someone would hear.

No, this was all he was allowed.

A plate was pushed through the flap in his door, but he ignored the food. The idea of eating turned his stomach. He kept his eyes closed and put all his energy into staying awake. The beautiful white owl hooted softly from atop her cage, alerting Harry to the approach of two owls, large and dark brown. He rose quickly and met them at the window before they could hoot too loudly and annoy his Aunt.

His fingers fumbled as he untied the package from their legs. It was a mixture of fatigue and nerves. He was excited to get into the package. Uncle Vernon had only let him release Hedwig the previous week and after two days of waiting for her to return with a letter from Ron, he sent her off with an order to Flourish and Blotts. The weeks prior to Hedwig's release, with nothing to do at night but think about his failures, made Harry realise that he needed to take control. He needed to control his brain from Voldemort, his emotions and his magic from himself and his destiny for himself.

"Here," he said and offered the birds his lunch – dry toast and water. "It's all I have, sorry." They nipped at it, hooted indignantly and flew off.

He tore into the thick paper and found the books he had been waiting for. Intermediate Duelling: How to Win Any Duel against Even the Trickiest of Opponents, Occlumency Unravelled: The Secrets of Clouding Your Mind and The Uncluttered Mind: Meditation Practices for Every Level. He sat on the floor and flipped through the books, wishing he could practice the magic required for Occlumency and duelling. Instead he turned his attention to the meditation book, reading it cover to cover before dinner was pushed through the flap in his door.

As the Dursleys settled down in front of the television for the night, Harry settled down to practice
the techniques of the first chapter. It wasn't easy with the family downstairs bursting into snorting laughter whenever the laugh track on the situation comedy told them the joke was funny. He glared at the door and considered marching down there; his mere presence was enough to send the Dursleys screaming from their own house.

"No," he chided himself. "That's what gets you into trouble. Focus, Potter."

He closed his eyes and pushed away all his thoughts; whenever Sirius entered in his head, he put the man aside and went back to counting his breaths. Whenever Voldemort's red eyes appeared inside his eyelids, he did the same to the thoughts of the Dark wizard. It took time, weeks, but Harry managed to sit in calm meditation without falling asleep, his mind focused yet unthinking.

That was how Dumbledore found him.

The old wizard had promised Harry to take him from his Aunt's house in July, yet the boy hadn't packed his trunk. It worried Dumbledore that the boy didn't believe he would come. It worried him more that Harry was even skinnier than he had been at the end of last term. He waited patiently for Harry to open his eyes, which took some time, but finally he came around.

"Professor!" he scrambled to stand.

"Good evening, Harry," Dumbledore smiled. "Are you ready to go?"

Harry looked around at his scattered books and clothes, the plates of uneaten food by his door, Hedwig's empty cage and the dead mouse she had left on the windowsill as a present for him. "Nearly," he said, and hurriedly threw his belongings in the trunk while Dumbledore moved back down to the front door to wait for him. The boy rushed down the stairs, his trunk slamming down on every step.

"Come, we have to make a stop along the way," the Headmaster said apologetically.

"Right," Harry said, not really knowing what he meant. He was leaving his Aunt and Uncle's house and that was all that really mattered to him. He glanced at the sitting room, where the Dursleys stood as far from the strange wizard as was possible. He didn't bother saying goodbye.

oOo

Harry's stomach turned as they Apparated to the edge of the Burrow's wards. He wondered if Apparition-sickness was like motion sickness, that it only affected passengers. Maybe if he were in control of the Apparition, he wouldn't feel so queasy. He didn't have time to ask as hands grabbed hold of him and he felt himself being crushed in a loving, if very painful, hug.

"Harry!" Tonks greeted, her arms still cracking his ribs and her pink hair tickling his ear. "Hullo," he said as best he could with no air. The young Auror pulled him into the safety of the magical wards before letting him go. He glanced back and saw Dumbledore had already gone.

A moderately sized bit of his brain resented this treatment. He had been used to lure an old man out of retirement and then been dropped at the Burrow without a 'thank you' or a 'goodbye'. The boy was still annoyed at Dumbledore keeping the prophecy from him, and using him in this way was not doing anything to endear the old man to him.

"Gods, you're skinny," Tonks commented. Her hands slipped under his oversized jumper and roamed his torso, feeling the protruding ribs and sunken chest. He probably should have protested or been slightly put off by her intrusive behaviour, but he knew it was simply her way.
time he met her she had winked at him and marched up to his bedroom to help him pack his trunk. She was just the sort who had no concept of personal boundaries. "Are you eating?"

"Some," Harry lied. He hadn't eaten anything in days, nor did he wish to start. The thought of food, even Molly Weasley's delicious roast, made him feel ill.

"Molly will have a fit if you don't eat," she warned. "Best humour her."

Harry nodded as he walked through the door and he was engulfed in welcoming arms. Three more ribs were broken as Molly hugged him and fretted over his size and lack of colour. Two more cracked under Hermione's embrace, and another to Fred and George who fought over who would get to hug him the longest. It was a joke, but they weren't particularly gentle about it. Remus, thankfully, settled for a handshake.

"Have you been eating?" Harry questioned, grateful to have the attention on someone else if only for a moment.

"Probably about as much as you," Lupin smiled sadly. "Come on, we've got something for you." He pulled Harry away and up the stairs before Molly could crack the remainder of the poor boy's ribs. Tonks hurried behind, eager to see Harry's reaction.

He followed Remus up the stairs. The boy made to go up the next flight to Ron's attic bedroom where he always slept when he was a guest at the Burrows; Remus shook his head and pointed to Percy's old room. Harry's brow knit in confusion but he went where the man pointed. The room was still furnished with Percy's old bed and dresser.

"Am I helping move Percy's stuff?" he questioned, looking at the trunk and bed covered in bags and packages.

"No," Tonks bounced on her toes. "It's yours."

"What is?" Harry frowned.

"All of it!" she grinned and pushed him forward. He stood, staring at the bed and everything on it. Many of the items were wrapped like presents but most were parcels and bags like he had seen his Aunt Petunia come home with around the holidays. Someone had gone shopping for him?

"What is all this?" he asked.

"Presents," Tonks said, her happy tone tainted slightly by sarcasm, clearly she thought the bows and colourful paper on some of the packages gave it away.

"For me?" Harry couldn't keep the astonishment from his voice. Tonks and Remus frowned, knowing he had been deprived of more than just his parents but not realising that the idea of being loved and lavished with gifts would seem an impossibility to him.

"Of course!" Tonks said, even more brightly. "There's a ton of clothes in there for you."

"Who... Why?"

"The Ministry," Remus said quietly and smiled at Harry's incredulous snort. To Harry, the Ministry was still a bunch of gits that wanted him imprisoned or committed. "They've admitted that you were right and now they're trying to rally the wizarding world around you... you've become their symbol of hope, beacon of light and all that rubbish."
The boy smiled a bit at Remus's disregard for the Ministry's opinion of 'Harry Potter'. He knew that his old teacher saw him for who he really was, not as some mythical figure. "What's that have to do with clothes?"

"They think their beacon of light and hope ought to look a bit better," Tonks grinned as she took his arm and dragged him closer to the bed. "Apparently, it's no good being The Boy Who Lived if you're the boy who lived in a cupboard."

Harry laughed. He tried to picture what the Ministry had in mind for him. Traditional wizard robes, most likely. Although, he was a symbol, so perhaps something more symbolic… a toga and flaming torch perhaps? He bit back a laugh as he wondered where one might purchase a crown of laurel leaves nowadays. Was there a Caesar's Crowns for All Occasions in Diagon Alley?

"They had set aside an account at Gringotts for you," Remus chuckled. "I don't think they intended for Tonks to get a hold of the money first."

Tonks grinned as Harry understood the meaning of Remus's words. "You bought my clothes?"

With a mischievous grin, the pink-haired witch practically swan dived into the packages. Harry stood back as bags began to fly out. He was uncomfortable with the idea of being given so much. Having new school clothes had been weird enough for him. He had lived in old, oversized and worn-out clothes his whole life, new clothes just felt wrong, too thick, too stiff, too tight. His thoughts were interrupted when a tee-shirt draped itself over his face. He reached up and pulled the shirt away. It was navy blue or at least it had been once; the shirt had been washed into a faded ghost of its former colour. The cotton was worn thin and soft.

"This isn't new, is it?"

"Vintage!" Tonks informed him with a grin. "Nearly everything is. I—" Her speech was impeded as Harry launched himself at her, cutting off her ability to breathe with a hug. She was surprised he had so much strength in him, he had grown so thin.

"There's more," Remus said and rapped his knuckles on the trunk. "Courtesy of Alastor Moody. A place for everything and everything in its place, he said... or something to that effect." Harry took in the trunk, smaller than his old one and looking slightly better around the corners. His name, Harry J. Potter, was engraved on the brass plaque just above three locks. Remus handed him two keys. "The third lock will take either key. Apparently it's to throw off anyone trying to break in."

Harry nodded and unlocked the trunk. He leaned into it, amazed at how spacious it was. "It's bigger than my cupboard in here," Harry said, his voice echoing off the sides of the cavernous storage space.

"That is just depressing," Tonks muttered and pulled Harry back out by the waist of his oversized jeans. "Focus on the clothes, Harry. I want to hear how awesome I am!"
Harry dug into the bags as Tonks handed them to him. He barely had time to register what was in his hands before she thrust another bag into his lap. Jeans, trousers, socks, underwear (how exactly she knew what type and size he wore was a slightly worrying mystery), jumpers and tee-shirts, more tee-shirts than he thought made sense to own.

There wasn’t a blank tee-shirt among them. Every shirt bore the name of some band or other, which struck Harry as odd. Tonks wasn’t one to force her tastes on anyone. She had never once suggested Hermione chop her hair short and dye it a wild colour, never tried to drag Ron into a shop to get something pierced, yet she had given Harry shirts for what he assumed were her preferred bands. Remus watched his expression and understood.

“In memoriam, Tonks?” he asked with a soft chuckle.

“Of course!” the pink haired woman replied brightly. Harry stared at them both and then back at the heap of shirts. “Sirius gave me my first punk album, ‘Never Mind the Bollocks’.” A wistful smile overtook her cheeky grin as she remembered. “It was so beat up. The cover had been spell-o-taped back together at least twice. I can’t imagine how many times he listened to it before he handed it off to me.”

“I tried to stop him,” Remus said. “She was only eight.”

“It was the greatest present he could’ve given me,” she insisted, slightly annoyed at the man’s long ago interference.

“You were eight,” he repeated with more emphasis. “That was far too mature for you.”

Harry, while amused by the light-hearted argument, was sad. He hadn’t known that his Godfather liked punk, or that he had influenced Tonks to her current state of spiked and pierced. What else didn’t he know? “So,” Harry said a bit too loudly. “Sirius liked the Sex Pistols?”

“Not as much as the Buzzcocks,” Remus smiled. “He dragged me to a show once… once was enough.”

“When was this?” Harry questioned, eager for more information about the friend he had lost.

“Uh… ’78, I think. It was the middle of winter, rubbish everywhere,” Remus frowned, remembering the smell rolling off the piles of uncollected garbage in the street. The Muggles had been having some sort of row over money and the dustmen refused to do their jobs until it was sorted to their satisfaction. It was no wonder that the witches and wizards that ventured into Muggle London thought so poorly of Muggles when that was what confronted them that long, cold winter. Remus hadn’t thought particularly well of them either.

“How did he even know about them?” Harry wondered aloud. His Godfather was pure-blooded and lived with his domineering mother until he was sixteen. He then removed himself to the pure-
blood Potters, where Harry couldn’t imagine there being a vast collection of contemporary Muggle music.

“Tildy Moorehead,” Remus said without pause. “She was Muggle-born and dated Sirius for about five minutes in our seventh year. She loved music, all of it. I think if she hadn’t found out she was a witch, she would have been studying composition at some Muggle conservatory. Her parents sent her a new record every week. That album he gave Tonks was one Tildy had given him.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He felt stupid for not knowing what to say, for not knowing what Sirius liked or who he got what from or who he had dated even briefly. He knew so little about his own Godfather. He was starting to think he had no right to mourn the man since he was such a stranger.

“Sirius would have told you,” Remus said when he saw the pained look on Harry’s face. “He would have told you everything if there had been time.”

“I know.”

“Wait!” Tonks said and flung herself onto the bed beside him. “You inherited all his old records. Oh, Harry, please let me borrow some! Please!” She hugged Harry around the middle and squeezed him tightly as she pleaded.

“I wouldn’t even know where to find them,” Harry gasped between his laughter.

“I’ll search the whole house—I’ll clean the whole house. I won’t break anything,” she promised. “Please!”

“Fine, you can borrow them… once we find them,” Harry wheezed.

“Yay!” she squeezed him even tighter and planted a kiss on his cheek before pulling away and thrusting a wrapped box into his hands. “Happy Birthday!” Harry stared at it for a moment. Surely, he had enough gifts already. “It’s from Charlie. You can tell by the rubbish job he did wrapping it.” Her eagerness got the better of her and she stole the box back and started shaking it next to her ear, trying to see if the sound would give away any hints to what lay inside.

“Oh,” Harry said and took it from her before she broke it. “You know my birthday isn’t until the thirty-first, right?”

“Yeah, but you’re already opening stuff…”

“And Tonks can’t stand not knowing what’s in a wrapped package,” Remus grinned. “We’ve had to keep the door locked and warded against her for the past four days. Caught her picking the locks last night.”

“Curiosity is not a crime,” she sniffed and edged closer to Harry, eager for him to open the present. Even as he laughed, Harry’s throat felt tight and dry and his eyes itched as he thought about receiving a gift from someone he barely knew. Tonks prodded him in the arm and he tore into the paper to make her happy, opening the box. “Wow. Is that a tooth?”

He lifted what had to be a dragon tooth from the box and brought it closer to his face. A series of small gems had been inlaid into the serrated tooth, which hung from a leather thong. It was larger than the tooth he remembered hanging from the man’s ear, but at least it wouldn’t require him to pierce anything. Even without having to modify himself to wear it, he suspected it would drive Mrs Weasley to distraction. Tonks tore it from his hand and tied it around his neck, using a charm to fix the knot and make sure it wouldn’t come undone. The charm would also ensure Harry wouldn’t
chicken out of wearing it.

“Harry, that looks wicked!” She grinned and turned the tooth so the light caught the gems. “Charlie’s properly clever, so I’m sure these have meaning. Damned if I know what they are, though.” She thrust another present into his hands. She kept him tearing wrapping paper until it his bed was cleared of all bags, boxes and parcels. It was the most he’d ever gotten in his entire life.

“Now that it’s nearly midnight and your bed is free, I think some sleep is in order,” Remus suggested. “Tomorrow we’ll go to Diagon Alley and I’ll give you Sirius’s present. Don’t get too excited,” he smiled when he saw Harry’s hopeful grin. “It’s to get you some new glasses. We all agreed those are far too old and broken to be fitting the symbol of light and hope.” He chuckled as Harry snorted.

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“Wear something cool tomorrow, and give me your old clothes. I want to set them on fire. They are seriously awful,” Tonks insisted and hugged him tight. “No one as dead sexy as you should hide under someone else’s nasty old clothes.” She pulled back and winked at him before heading out the door. Remus gave him a sound pat on the back as he left, and Harry was alone again.

His smile fell quickly without his friends to keep him distracted. He looked at the bed and considered sleeping, knowing that he wouldn’t have time to rest during the day if he was going to Diagon Alley. Thankfully, he was in a wizarding house, so the Ministry couldn’t prove he performed any magic. With a flick of his wand, he set a silencing charm around his door and fell onto the bed, dropping off in minutes.

Sirius came into his mind, young and carefree. His shirt was torn and safety-pinned back together; he wore a chain and padlock around his neck and the air of a young man eager to get into a fight. Harry followed him through the Muggle streets, dodging picketers and stepping around bags of rubbish until he found an alley. He ran into it trying to chase after Sirius, only to find him waiting.

“Why are you still following me?” he demanded and shoved the boy. “Leave me alone. Can’t even rest in peace with you around.”

“Sirius, I’m sorry. I was trying to save you,” Harry pleaded. “It wasn’t my fault.”

He laughed, cold and hard and not at all like a bark, “I went to save you, and look where it got me. I’m dead now ‘cause of you!” He sneered. “Should’ve let Wormtail take you. Useless.”

“Please, it wasn’t my fault. Voldemort tricked me,” he grabbed at his Godfather, trying to pull him closer and keep him from falling away. “I love you. You’re all I have left.”

“Like I care what you have or what you feel,” he shoved the boy to the ground and walked away.

“Come back!” Harry yelled. “Don’t leave me alone. Sirius!” He shot up in bed and felt in the dark for him, but Sirius was gone in life and in dreams. Wiping the sweat off his face, Harry stood and threw the window wide open, desperate for air. He could barely breathe. The dream was different. Sirius had never sneered at him before, shoved him or denied him before. He had yelled at him, blamed him, but never since the dreams started had he been so cold. Shivers chased down his thin frame as he sat in the cool breeze. Morning was still hours away, but he wouldn’t try to sleep again.

Sitting below the open window, Harry forced his mind to clear and let himself drift in a half-conscious state until the first sounds of life came to the house. He stole into the washroom as Mrs
Weasley busied herself in the kitchen, making herself breakfast and preparing enough food to feed a small army. He took his time showering and gathering his wits for the coming day.

“Oi! Hurry it up!” Ron banged on the door.

“Just a minute,” Harry called and threw his new clothes on. The vintage shirt and jeans felt as comfortable and familiar as anything he had ever worn, and he made a point of hugging Tonks as soon as he saw her that morning. “The clothes are brilliant. Thank you.”

“You’re still too skinny. That shirt should be way tighter,” she commented and poked at his ribs. “Eat something, would you?”

“Well, since it’s you asking,” he smirked and sat at the table, though he had no intention of eating much of anything.

“Eat, Harry,” Remus insisted. “You’ll need your strength for today… Tonks is coming with us as rear guard.”

“Do we really need guards?” Harry asked, trying to keep the man from focusing on how much he wasn’t eating.

“Someone has to watch your back,” Tonks insisted. “And I’m more than happy to do it – you’ve a nice back to watch.” She winked at him and turned back to her breakfast.

Remus shook his head and smiled at the woman’s behaviour. She was so like her cousin, somehow making people feel welcome and at home even as she flirted shamelessly. “Eat, Harry,” he insisted and pushed a plate in front of him, watching the boy like a hawk as he forced a few bites of egg, half a sausage and a slice of toast down his throat. It was all he could manage and even then he felt sick. Remus nodded and ate a similarly small portion in solidarity.

“The full moon was only last week. You should eat more,” Harry said seriously.

“Pot. Kettle. Black,” the man said with the barest hint of a smile as he pushed his plate away, leaving it heaped with as much food as Harry had his own.

Harry knew he was being manipulated, but didn’t care. Remus was his friend and the last connection he had to his parents and to Sirius; he needed to keep the man from killing himself by slow starvation. “If I ate more, would you?” the boy asked.

“I would,” Remus smiled.

“Deal… just not this morning,” Harry put a hand to his stomach as a wave of nausea washed over him. “Can we go?” The others were starting to wake, filling the kitchen with noise and cheer that Harry just wasn’t up for.

Remus nodded and stood. “Thank you, Molly, but we’re in a hurry. I’m sure the boys won’t let this go to waste.” He gave the woman a kiss on the cheek and held the door for Harry to follow, giving them no time for argument or sentimental hugs. They were only going shopping and would be back well before dinner. Tonks chased after them, still chewing on the last of her bacon.

Wands raised in anticipation of attack, Remus and Tonks held onto Harry and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

The plan had been made well ahead of time, and their path from store to store was an odd zigzag across the cobbled street and back again. It would have been impossible to predict where they
would move after leaving Flourish and Blotts or Madame Malkins. Harry, who had been coming to Diagon Alley since he was eleven, found himself turned around and practically lost by the time they had gathered all his school supplies. He was getting angry and tired. It had been weeks since he had exerted himself this much.

He was ready to call it a day and go rest, but Remus’s words energised him. “And finally, Sirius’s birthday gift to you,” he said and handed Harry the scroll of parchment. “It’s just a voucher for whatever you need at the ocular healer.”

“I don’t care what it is,” Harry said and gripped the scroll as if it were gold. To him it was. It was proof that Sirius wasn’t like the sneering boy in his dream but really was the man he remembered. Sirius was someone who cared about him, even cared about such mundane things as his glasses.

Remus cleared their path across the lane to the shop, Tonks keeping watch from behind, her eyes missing nothing as they walked the short distance. She stood out front while the boys went in. Her training had her standing at ease in front of the shop’s window, scanning the crowds of shoppers for potential threats, but if she had her way she would be bouncing on her toes to look inside and gesturing which glasses Harry ought to choose. She was so annoyed that she couldn’t go in and help. Her sense of style was impeccable, even Sirius had agreed.

Her sense of decorum failed her when Harry stepped out. “Fabulous choice!” she said and forced the poor boy’s head in every direction to examine his new look. “Much better than those beat up old things.”

“Thank you,” Harry said as best he could with her hands crushing his cheeks against his teeth.

“We’re done,” Remus said quietly. “Let’s head back and you can admire Harry’s good looks in the safety of the Burrow.”

“Will do,” Tonks winked.
The wild-haired Auror stared intently into the boy’s eyes, neither of them daring to blink. She brought her hand up, just one finger extended, the other hand braced on his face. She could feel him tense beneath her fingertips as her other hand drew closer. The single finger reached out, pointing to his eye, growing steadily closer until finally he blinked and jumped back.

“Harry,” she groaned.

“Sorry,” he apologised yet again. “There’s just something about intentionally being poked in the eye that doesn’t sit well with me.”

Tonks forced him back in front of the mirror again and went back to staring at his eyes again. “It’s not poking, dummy. It’s placing, gently, on the eye. No contact between finger and eyeball, I swear.”

“Remind me why I got talked into contact lenses again,” Harry sighed without moving.

“You’re a push-over for a pretty face… and a nice arse,” she grinned. Remus wasn’t interested, but he sure was her idea of a handsome bloke, and he did have a mighty nice backside. Harry was so distracted by her lascivious eyebrow wiggle and her cheeky grin that he didn’t see her finger move in and drop the magical lens into place. “One down, one to go. This’ll go plenty quick now that I know what sort of dirty thoughts will distract you…” A few inappropriate jokes later and Harry was seeing the world clearly without glasses for the first time in his life.

“Harry Potter, you are one sexy beast,” Tonks commented and kissed him on the cheek. “Now, my sexy friend, read the directions.” She thrust the box into his hands and continued in a worldly and important tone, “I may not be the cleverest of witches, but I have learned many a hard lesson about the dangers of failing to follow proper safety instructions. I have a permanent scar on my left buttock because I failed to follow directions once and it’s not something I would wish upon you.”

Harry failed to hold his laughter in and ended up snorting loudly.

“Oi! I’m trying to help you learn from my mistakes, Mr Potter!” she insisted and smacked him on the arm.

“That is no way to treat the symbol of hope and light!” Harry protested and ran from the washroom.

“Symbol of annoyance and irritation, more like,” she countered and chased after him until she crashed into a wall of Weasleys.

“Sounds like you two are having fun,” Ron grinned.

“I recall a time when such irritated words were never spoken in this home, don’t you, George?” Fred looked to his twin.

George sighed and nodded sadly. “I do. Lovely, quiet years, they were. No one yelled or cursed or talked with their mouth full.”

“What changed?”

“Ron was born,” George said.
“Oi!” Ron shoved at his older brothers, but was outnumbered even before Ginny turned against him.

“Enough!” Arthur called. “We’ve got to get a move on or we’ll be later than usual. Harry, you’re in the front car with Remus and Tonks.” He gestured for Harry to move, but the boy’s path was blocked. Fred and George bowed formally.

“Mr Potter,” they chorused.

“As our most generous benefactor,”

“We feel duty-bound to provide you with all your skiving and pranking needs.”

“Please accept these, our most popular products,”

“As a way of showing our gratitude.” They thrust a bag into his hands. “We’ve shrunk it for ease of transport.”

“Aren’t we nice?” Fred said with a smart grin.

“Free refills are available upon request and only to you, Mr Potter,” George bowed again.

“Uh… Thanks,” Harry said a little stupidly.

“You shouldn’t thank them,” Hermione huffed. “I’m going to be cleaning up after their Skiving Snack Boxes all year, I just know it!” She pushed past them and climbed into the second car. Harry was surprised the Ministry had sent cars after the way they had treated him all last year, but he was their beacon and symbol and all that rot.

Sighing, he realised that he was never going to just be normal; he would always be at one extreme or the other – The Ministry’s greatest hope or highest threat, the most popular boy at Hogwarts or the most reviled or feared. Was it really so bad to want people to see him as just average Harry Potter?

Tucking the bag into his trunk, he went to the first car and climbed in. Tonks followed so he was wedged in the backseat between her and Remus. In the front, the Ministry driver sat silent beside Alastor Moody, who held his magical eye aloft in a glass of water where it spun around in every direction, looking up, down, left right and everywhere in between.

“Potter,” he greeted.

“Professor,” Harry said. “Thank you for the trunk.”

He nodded curtly. “Figured you’d need it with all that Tonks was buying for you. Make good use of it.”

Harry nodded and fell silent as the car pulled away. Another year at Hogwarts, the only place that had ever felt like home to him. He wasn’t sure how he would take to it after the previous year under the Ministry’s tyranny. He wasn’t given much time to consider it. As the car left the country lanes for the highway, Moody cleared he throat and his eye spun around to look pointedly at Remus.

“Ah, yes,” the werewolf said. “The Order’s arranged another precaution to keep you safe, Harry.” He dug into an inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out a bracelet. It wasn’t the thin, decorative and delicate sort that Ginny might wear, but a leather cuff with a large buckle that made it look as
if it had once been a belt before someone cut it down to fit a wrist. Harry accepted it and put it on, but his confusion must have shown on his face.

“It’s a Portkey, Potter,” Moody said gruffly.

“It’s for emergencies,” Remus said. “It’s charmed to activate only to your voice. You can trigger it with the word ‘Lily-flower’, your mother’s nickname. It will also activate without the word if you are under attack.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Where will it take me? To the Burrow?”

“No, to the entrance hall at Hogwarts,” the man said. “Nearly every teacher is a member of the Order or sympathetic to our cause, someone will be able to help you there.” He patted Harry’s shoulder and they fell once again into silence as Harry considered the extraordinary precautions being put in place to protect him.

As much as he didn’t wish this life on anyone, he wished more than anything that Voldemort had mistaken the Longbottoms for the family of the prophecy.

Keeping his dark thoughts from showing in his expression, he sat out the rest of the ride imaging what life might have been like if Neville Longbottom was the Boy Who Lived. Would his own parents have been tortured into madness? Would he have been raised by Sirius Black, who never would have gone to Azkaban? So many possibilities and lost opportunities, and all because of a prophecy made by a dippy teacher he didn’t even respect.

“We’re here,” Tonks whispered and squeezed his hand.

Moody swept through King’s Cross, frightening Muggle commuters and worrying the police on duty. Tonks and Remus rushed Harry through the barrier and set him up in a compartment after sweeping it for danger. Remus hugged him and wished him well. Tonks forced him to promise he would write.

“You wouldn’t leave me worrying until Christmas, would you?” she demanded. “You will write to me once a week, understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry said.

“And none of those one-line letters Ron always sends home, either,” she wagged a disapproving finger. “I expect details and gossip and a dirty joke or two. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he grinned.

“Good. Now give me a hug,” she said and didn’t wait for him to initiate it, pulling the boy into an embrace so tight he thought he heard something pop out of place. “Be good.”

“I always try,” he commented dryly and dropped onto the seat. She winked and waved and left him to his friends. Hermione and Ron dropped their trunks before running to the Prefect Compartment, leaving Harry alone. He pulled his trunk down and dug into it to find his Occlumency book. Leaving the trunk down as a footstool, he read until Neville and Luna joined him.

“I’ve been keeping up on the news,” Neville said after a brief and cheerful greeting. “Very exciting the way things have changed, isn’t it? Now that everyone believes...”

Harry nodded. ‘Exciting’ wasn’t quite the word he would put on it. ‘Horrifying’ was more what he had in mind. The Daily Prophets that he had managed to read while at the Burrow had told of little
but death and terror at the hands of the Death Eaters. Even after so many had been put in Azkaban and forced to reveal the names of their conspirators, dozens were still free to harm whomever they chose. But Neville didn’t mean anything by it, and Harry knew it.

“Bloody first years,” Ron swore as he opened the door and practically collapsed, exhausted, on the floor. “I know for a fact we were not that annoying. I never once tried to do magic without some training.”

It was tempting to prove him wrong, to remind him that on the train ride to Hogwarts first year, he had tried a spell. But to do that would mean mentioning Scabbers, which was still a taboo subject even two full years later. That pet rat had been a man, a man who had slept in Ron’s bed with him, shared his pillow. The very idea disgusted the boy to the point where he had tried to burn his sheets before Hermione stopped him. So Harry just nodded.

Hermione joined them a moment later, sighing her annoyance rather than shouting it. “Everyone is just so rowdy this year. Was it this bad last year?”

Ron shrugged.

Luna opened her mouth, no doubt ready to suggest the cause as being some invisible and never before heard of creature that would make Hermione scowl and Ron and Harry fight to hold their laughter in. She was a nice girl, but she was rather odd. Whatever the non-existent cause she might have blamed they never knew because her words were lost as the door was thrown open again.

“Potter,” the normally drawling voice of Draco Malfoy cut into their pleasant chatter with a crisp and hard tone.

“What do you want, Malfoy?” Ron said his name like it was a curse word.

“A world without irritating gingers,” he sneered, “and revenge for my father.” He drew his wand and pointed it at Harry. “It’s your fault my father’s in Azkaban, Potter.”

Harry stood, a bored look taking over his face. “I think you’ll find it’s his own damn fault for being stupid enough to follow Voldemort,” he smirked to see Malfoy flinch at the name. “What’s the matter, Malfoy? Scared Voldemort will come and get you?” He taunted the boy.

“No, happy he’s coming for you, actually,” he grit and glared at the black-haired boy. “That dog was first, and you’ll be next.”

Harry stepped forward, his chest inches from the wand. “Get out before we make you get out.”

“Harry,” Hermione whispered. “Don’t…” She could feel the tension rising in the compartment even if Harry didn’t. He couldn’t see everyone rising to their feet, wands at the ready and spells on their tongues. She pulled at her friend, bringing him farther back into the compartment, so that the spells aimed at Malfoy wouldn’t hit him.

“For my father,” Malfoy sneered and started throwing hexes. The members of Dumbledore’s Army closest to Harry retaliated, sending a barrage of their own hexes.

Hermione didn’t know what happened, which spell caused it or who had cast it, but Harry was thrown backwards into her. They fell together atop his trunk and she felt the hook take hold behind her navel. A portkey had been activated and she was pulled from the train to some unknown location. Her head collided with Harry’s and she saw stars and then nothing.
Rabbit Heart

Chapter Summary

In which the style finally arrives. By which I mean the Marauders, because those boys have serious style.

Sixth year. This would be their greatest year yet. Remus had proven the previous term that even with a Prefect among them they could not be caught or stopped. They were the greatest pranksters that had ever stalked the halls of Hogwarts and would live in infamy, their names whispered down the ages until they became the stuff of legend. Future students would hear their names and shake with fear or laughter at the pranks they had pulled.

Nothing could stop them.

“Evans!”

Except perhaps a love-sick idiot.

“Oi! Evans!” James called again. The girl refused to turn around and continued to pretend she didn’t hear him shouting her surname at the top of his sizable lungs. “Don’t make me come down there!”

“Give it a rest, Prongs,” Sirius grumbled and pulled his cloak around him like a blanket. James had kept him up all night with his poetic descriptions of Evans and her beauty and of his plans to win her this year. Those plans were not going well and the train had only been moving for an hour.

“She’s a Prefect, James,” Remus reminded him. “She has responsibilities and an image to maintain.”

James snorted. “Like you ever managed to maintain an image, Moony.”

“I have a very good air of authority with people who aren’t in this compartment,” Remus sniffed and crossed his arms. “You three just don’t listen.”

“Why ever would we need reprimanding from a Prefect?” James asked, his hazel eyes huge.

It was Remus’s turn to snort. “That look only works on first years and anyone too stupid to realise what a devastatingly manipulative devil you really are.”

“What a devastatingly handsome devil he is, you mean,” Sirius corrected with a smirk and a wink at his friend. James bowed appreciatively and turned his attention back to the corridor where Lily Evans was moving steadily away from him.

“I could cause a commotion down this end for you,” Peter offered. “That would bring her closer.”

“Brilliant as ever, Wormtail,” James grabbed the boy’s chubby wrist and dragged him to the door. “Do your worst. By which I mean do your best.” He grinned and shoved the boy out into the corridor.
Remus shook his head. “Are you really so desperate that you’re willing to torture a compartment full of unsuspecting Hufflepuffs? You could try walking down there and talking to her as if she were something resembling human.”

“What?” James gaped. “That’s an insult! She is not something resembling human. She is a goddess!”

“And you greet all female deities by yelling their surnames at inappropriate, inconvenient and embarrassing times?” Remus questioned, his eyebrow rising with his words.

James blinked and fought the feeling of stupidity. “…Yes.”

“Git.”

They fell into silence as the train continued to speed north. Remus left for his rounds, purposely ignoring the worrying smells coming from the compartment beside theirs and heading toward the front of the train. Far be it for him to interfere with Peter’s plans to bring Lily closer to James. Normally at this point in the train ride they would have at least a full month of pranks planned, and a general outline of their goals for the coming term. But Sirius was snoring in the corner and James was sitting in worried contemplation. He liked Lily Evans, he really did, but everything he did to prove it just seemed to annoy her more. He had charmed a bouquet of flowers to read her love sonnets last Valentine’s Day, which he thought was a damn romantic thing to do. She had sent them back to him, buds crammed into the vase and stems sticking in the air. He hexed anyone who insulted her, but she took that as a major defect of character. What was so wrong about protecting the honour of the girl he might possibly love?

“You worry too much,” Sirius said sleepily. “Just relax and let it come.”

“What if it doesn’t just come?” he tore the glasses off his face and cleaned them on his robes. It was a nervous habit very few had ever witnessed. “What if she never realises that I’m not just being a prat?”

“Two more years to prove it to her,” the other boy said casually and stretched his long limbs, scratched his side and sat up in his seat, fully awake and ready for some plotting. “Should that be our goal for the year?”

“I’d hate to horde the Marauders’ valuable time…” James smirked.

“Please. You are the Marauders,” Sirius pulled him into a one-armed hug. “So, end of term goal: Make Evans realise you aren’t a prat. That might take some doing, I’m afraid.” He grinned.

The door crashed open and Peter stumbled in, holding his nose and coughing. He turned his watery eyes up to James in apology. The bespectacled boy frowned his lack of understanding, but soon grasped Wormtail’s desperate stares when Lily Evans filled the doorway.

“Of all the low-down, disgusting tricks you could have pulled…” She drew her wand and pointed it at him.

“I didn’t do anything, I swear,” James held his hands aloft, hazel eyes wide in honest innocence, but, as Remus had said, no one but an idiot or first year would believe James Potter was innocent.

“Up!” she said and he stood without question. “Out!” and he hurried into the corridor. She prodded him forward until he stood before the door of the next compartment. Noxious gas drifted out from below the closed door and he could hear the Hufflepuffs inside coughing and gagging on the air.
She threw the door open and shoved him inside.

“Clean up your own bloody mess!” she ordered then walked away wiping her hands on her robes as if she had just touched something particularly nasty.

“It’s going to take a lot of doing,” Sirius muttered to himself and dropped back onto his seat.

The train ride could not end quickly enough after that. The stink from Peter’s prank still hung around him and clung to James’s robes, making their eyes water. Remus escaped to the Prefect compartment and stayed there for the rest of the trip. This was not shaping up to be their best year ever, despite earlier claims to the contrary.

As the train whistled its approach to Hogsmeade Station, Remus returned to collect his trunk, and all four readied themselves for the crush that inevitably came when the train emptied. They fought to keep together as they exited their car and stepped onto the dark platform. Peter was lost in a rush of fourth years and they did not miss his smell. James somehow got swept away by a group of seventh years, but Moony and Padfoot pressed on. They climbed aboard the horseless carriages and laughed at the faces James had made when he gagged on his own stink near the end of the train ride. They both agreed that trying to prove him anything but a prat would be nearly impossible, but that wouldn’t stop their attempting it.

The Marauders were masters of the impossible.

“Mr Black, Mr Lupin, come with me,” the crisp voice of Professor McGonagall met them at the stairs to the castle. They looked between one another in momentary panic. Surely they hadn’t gotten into trouble already; they hadn’t even done anything yet. “Quickly, please,” the woman insisted.

The witch walked at a surprisingly brisk pace through the castle toward a section that Remus knew well – the hospital wing. She pushed open the door and gestured for them to enter. “The Headmaster is waiting for you.”

Remus shrugged and went in. He knew he had done nothing wrong. Sirius knew the same, but that didn’t stop him worrying. He followed Moony in. “Professor?” he asked.

“Behind the curtain, Mr Black,” Professor Dumbledore’s quiet voice called to them. He sounded strange. Was he ill?

The privacy curtain was pulled aside and they saw the Headmaster standing tall and proud in his vibrant blue robes. He gestured to the bed where a boy with messy black hair lay, unconscious.

“James!” Sirius shouted and ran the short distance to his friend’s side, grabbing his wrist and feeling for proof of life. He felt the heartbeat, rapid as a frightened rabbit’s and probably just as quick as his own. His heart was hammering on his ribcage in panic. “What happened? He was just with us on the train!”

The Headmaster’s gaze shot to Remus, demanding confirmation. The boy nodded and Dumbledore’s brow knit together, “Curious.”

“Professor Dumbledore?” a voice called from the door. “Professor McGonagall told me to come see you.”

“James!” Sirius shouted again as he launched himself across the room, gripping the boy in a hug so tight it hurt.
“What the hell?” James wheezed.

“Gentlemen,” Dumbledore said, his voice carrying a seriousness they rarely heard. “Would you be so kind as to tell me if you recognise this young woman?” He waved them forward to another privacy curtain, pulling it aside as they drew near enough to see the figure. A girl probably their age, hair a mess of light brown curls and wearing a creased brow even in unconsciousness, lay on the bed.

“I don’t know her,” Remus said, though something in his voice suggested that he would like to. Sirius fought the smirk. He had just thought his best friend and near-brother was dying, smirking would be inappropriate.

“Did she come with him?” Sirius asked and looked to the boy he was very glad wasn’t James Potter, studying the boy. Like the girl, he wore an expression of deep worry even in unconsciousness. He wondered if they were in pain, or possibly suffering from nightmares.

“She did,” Dumbledore said, but offered them no further explanation. “I apologise for frightening you, Mr Black, Mr Lupin. You may continue to the feast.” He nodded them toward the door as he lingered by the bedside of the boy who wasn’t James, frowning at him as if he were a particularly tricky puzzle in need of solving.

“That was weird,” James whispered. “That kid looked just like me. Did you see?”

“Nose was different,” Sirius shrugged and pretended that he had not just had a heart attack thinking the boy, whoever he was, was James. After the initial scare, he had looked a bit closer, and had seen the differences in the face. The boy on the bed looked skeletal compared to his friend but even then his face was rounder, nose slightly wider. They weren’t identical but on first glance the similarity was uncanny.

James glanced at him. “You worry me sometimes.”

“Behold the power of observation, Prongs,” he said and walked a little quicker. Remus smiled knowingly and matched the boy’s pace, eager for the feast and to hear what the Headmaster might tell them about the pair currently unconscious in the infirmary.

Dumbledore had summoned them assuming it was James in the bed, and questioned if they knew the girl. That told Remus that the pair had not been expected. He considered what that might mean, two school-aged teens on Hogwarts grounds. Was it a Death Eater trick? The Prophet had been filled with news of dark events all summer: Muggles tormented, Muggle-borns attacked, Dark Marks thrown high in the air over ransacked houses. Several articles had been published without names because the victim had been under-aged. Remus had spent the summer worrying that Tildy or Evans had been attacked.

As they rushed to join their table in the Great Hall, Remus’s eyes travelled the length and he saw Tildy and AJ and Michael and all the other Muggle-borns and half-bloods he knew well. He relaxed onto the bench beside Peter and let out the breath he had been holding.

“Worried?” Sirius asked, eyebrow quirked up in question.

“Not anymore,” he replied and smiled.

After a few words (‘Ekki, ekki, ekki, pitang’), the Headmaster bid them eat, which they did. And then the speech came. Three of the four Marauders sat straighter up to watch the crafty old wizard’s face as he spoke, gauging his level of honesty as best they could when his words finally
brought up the two curious guests.

“Hogwarts shall be playing host to two transfer students this year. Unfortunately, their arrival was more traumatic than anticipated and they are currently recovering under Madam Pomfrey’s expert care. When they have recuperated and join you in classes, I hope that you will show them what it means to be a Hogwarts student. Now…” He continued the speech, but they weren’t listening anymore.

“‘Anticipated’ my muscular buttocks,” Sirius said quietly. “Dumbles had no idea who those two were. He thought that bloke was you, Prongs.”

James nodded his agreement. “There’s something odd, and I’m thinking we ought to find out what.”

“Second goal of term, then?” Sirius suggested, mischief glinting in his eyes.

“Absolutely.”
Two black-haired Gryffindors lingered at their table long enough to watch the brief but intense discussion pass between the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress. They knew the topic of conversation was the two unexpected arrivals in the hospital wing. As they watched, the Headmaster drew himself up and walked calmly, though rather quickly, from the high table and out of the Great Hall.

James would have given anything to have his invisibility cloak handy at that moment, but it was locked in his trunk. “Who do you think they are?”

“I don’t know,” Sirius said. “But if they caught old Dumbles by surprise, they must be something special. Let’s go before Minnie gives us detention for snooping.” He hooked his arm through his friend’s and strolled from the Great Hall, dragging James along with him.

“Do you think they’ll be Gryffindors?” the bespectacled arm ornament asked.

Sirius considered the look of concern that both of the unconscious students had worn. It was a look James only wore when he was deep in thought over a homework assignment or particularly complicated prank. “Ravenclaws, I’d say.”

James nodded, but still wondered about the boy who looked so much like him.

As he wondered, the boy woke.

Harry blinked his eyes and could not understand why he was able to see clearly. He felt neither the familiar weight of his glasses on his nose nor the pressure of them against his temples, yet he could see. It took a moment of blurred thought for him to recall that Tonks had helped him put in the magic contact lenses that morning. As he thought, he remembered the train ride, the attack by Malfoy and the portkey. He sat up and felt his chest for damage, but there was none.

“Ah, you’re awake,” a familiar voice said. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine, Professor.”

Dumbledore studied his face, his twinkling blue eyes moving over every feature slowly as if memorising the boy. It was unnerving.

“Um, Professor,” Harry said, eager to get the old wizard to stop studying him. “How long have I been out?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Presuming you were conscious before your arrival, nearly ten hours.”

“Have I missed the Sorting?” He registered that it was rather a silly question to ask, but it was the first one that entered his brain.

“You’ll forgive me for being so blunt, but you seem to know a great deal about this school,” the old man said calmly, “yet I don’t know you.”

Harry frowned. Was this a joke? “I’m Harry, sir. Harry Potter... You just collected me from my Uncle Vernon’s house a few weeks ago... I went with you to convince Horace Slughorn to come out of retirement...” He waited but no recognition lit the Headmaster’s eyes.
“I’m sorry, Mr Potter, but Professor Slughorn has not yet decided to retire.”

“Not yet decided?” he repeated slowly, considering the choice of words slightly off. Unless... he studied Dumbledore with the same intensity as he had Harry, taking in his two pale, usable hands, neither was blackened and shrivelled. The man was still old, but he could see the touch of brown on the tip of his beard. Professor Dumbledore’s beard ought to be fully white. Even a false Headmaster disguised by Polyjuice potion would have a beard white from chin to belt buckle.

“What’s the date, sir?”

The old wizard smiled at the boy’s quick wit. “The first of September 1976, though not for too much longer.” He watched the boy’s eyes grow wide. “Given your surname and the similarity you bear to our current Mr Potter, I feel it safe to conclude that you are a relative from the near future.” Harry nodded dumbly. “How was it that you came to be in this time?”

Harry frowned as he realised he didn’t know. “I… I’m not sure, sir. Where did I arrive?”

“Most curiously inside the castle grounds,” the man said, the mystery of it thick in his voice “In the entrance hall to be precise.”

“Ah!” Harry shoved the sleeve of his jumper up. “My Portkey; it’s set to bring me to the entrance hall if I’m attacked… which I was.”

“You carry a personal portkey with you?” Dumbledore questioned. That seemed to intrigue him more than anything else had so far.

The boy opened his mouth to explain but thought better of it. He didn’t think he could provide an adequate reason for having a portkey without giving too much away. After all that he had been through, Harry knew enough to know that he should not tamper with the past. Dumbledore waited patiently for him to decide what to say, but his mouth turned down slightly when Harry did speak.

“Sorry, Professor, but I think it best if I not answer any more questions.”

He glanced up at the Headmaster. When his eyes met the old man’s, thoughts came to his mind of Remus giving him the cuff and explaining how it worked. Strangely, Harry had not been the one to summon these thoughts. He had been thinking of his friends, not the portkey. His eyes widened in realisation and he forced a barrier around his thoughts, as thick and impenetrable as the physical walls of Hogwarts.

“Don’t do that,” he said, his voice shaking with the twin efforts of erecting a mental barrier and of keeping the anger from coming through his voice. “You made it a point that I learn Occlumency, sir. I know when someone is poking around my head.”

“An old man’s mistake, Mr Potter,” he said by way of an apology. Harry could see the questions glittering in his eyes, and, if he was capable of Legilimency, he might have considered looking to see just what the old man was thinking about him. “You are how old, Mr Potter?”

“Sixteen, sir.”

“And your friend?” he gestured to the bed across the ward. Harry hadn’t noticed anyone else, but now that the man stood aside he could see the familiar shock of mousy brown curls.

“Hermione!” he jumped from the bed and ran across to her side. “Why didn’t you tell me she was here?”
“I presumed you knew,” he said, again without apology. “You travelled via portkey; I thought that you brought her with you.”

“It activated because I was attacked,” Harry repeated, unable to keep the anger from his voice this time. This was not the same Dumbledore who kept secrets from him, who hid the prophecy and helped set the stage for Sirius’s death, Harry reminded himself. But the way he continued to make presumptions and not apologise for his mistakes was starting to wear on Harry’s already strained nerves.

“Harry?” Hermione groaned as she opened her eyes. Whatever potion Madam Pomfrey had given her wasn’t as effective as she would have liked; her head was clearly killing her. “What happened?”

“It’s difficult to say…” Harry said and glanced up at Dumbledore.

“Oh, Professor,” she looked up. “You have to speak with Slytherin’s Head of House. We were attacked on the train. Mal—“

“Hermione!” Harry interrupted her Prefect report. “We have a problem.”

Seeing his worried face, her eyes narrowed automatically. She knew she ought to be concerned, but her head ached and she couldn’t help but think that just once she would like to have a normal school year. “What sort of problem?”

“Time travel,” he said apologetically.

“What?” she shrieked, her voice painful to even her own ears. “How?”

“I was hoping you’d know,” Harry said and dropped onto the bed beside her. “Did you hear what hexes everyone was throwing?”

She shook her head. “There were too many at once, I couldn’t make out any of them. Besides, Mal—he probably went out of his way to find a spell I wouldn’t know and would have difficulty countering.”

“Fat chance of that,” Harry smiled.

The Headmaster cleared his throat to remind them of his presence.

“Oh, wait! I’m so thick!” Hermione said, her voice hopeful. “We could just use a Time-Turner and travel back where we belong. They’ve a range of about twenty-five years… are we very far behind?” She looked expectantly between Harry and Dumbledore.

Harry didn’t even bother asking how she knew which direction they’d travelled in time. She was smarter than him and probably recognised the difference in the Headmaster much quicker than he had. “Twenty years back.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. That’s well within the available range of a Time-Turner –“ She stopped, eyes wide. “Oh, no!”

“Whatever is the matter, my dear?” Dumbledore asked gently, far more gently than he had addressed Harry.

“If it’s 1976, then Time-Turners were only invented last year. They probably haven’t even managed one that could take us five years.” She kicked her feet, taking her frustration out on the bed and blankets, and gave an annoyed growl. Her hissy fit stopped abruptly and she stared wide-
eyed at Harry. “Oh, Harry, your parents are here!”

His eyes grew to unprecedented roundness. It was 1976. How had he not made the connection sooner? The possibility of meeting his parents, of talking to them made his heart swell even as it made his stomach churn. And Sirius was alive. He felt like there was a balloon filling his chest.

“We should stay away from them,” Hermione said. “We can’t risk interfering with events. Just being here is dangerous.”

“You are quite sensible, Miss…” Dumbledore waited for her to fill in her name.

She frowned as she considered whether he ought to know it. “Granger,” she finally replied. “I’m Muggle-born, so there’s little chance of my name being dangerous information.”

“Miss Granger, excellent,” he nodded. “Well, now that you are both awake, it is time to be sorted.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Sorted, Miss Granger. You are each wearing Hogwarts robes – Gryffindor, I see – so you are familiar with the process.”

“You can’t be serious, Professor,” Harry said. “We know too much. We can’t stay here.”

He looked into the boy’s eyes and let the twinkle die to show the gravity of his words. “The danger posed by you is far less within these walls than without. The Dark wizards out in the world would use your knowledge to rewrite all that will happen, changing the course of this struggle in their favour. I cannot have that.” Harry was amazed at how forthcoming the Headmaster was being. “So you will be sorted and you will remain until a solution can be found.”

“And if we can’t find one?” Harry asked, his voice tinged with his worry.

“Let us remain hopeful, shall we?” He blinked and the twinkle was back in full force.

“Why get sorted, Professor?” Hermione asked as she stood, brushing away Harry’s anxious hands as he readied himself to catch her. “We’re Gryffindors. Unless you want us to get re-sorted into a house where we won’t cause trouble.”

The old man chuckled. “The Sorting Hat doesn’t work in such obvious ways, I’m afraid. Personal preference can only sway it so far,” he paused to open the door for them. “If you don’t possess the requisite traits, it would never agree to place you in the house of your asking.”

Harry preferred not to respond. The Sorting Hat wanted him to go to Slytherin. What if he couldn’t talk the Hat out of it a second time? And hadn’t the Hat wanted Hermione to go into Ravenclaw? What if they ended up separated? The questions and possibilities, none of them pleasant, continued to pile atop one another as he followed Dumbledore through the dark corridors. The castle looked no different, yet he felt it suddenly alien and dangerous. It wasn’t his Hogwarts. This was his parents’ Hogwarts, Sirius’s Hogwarts. One slip of the tongue and the entire future might change.

“Here we are,” the man said, breaking Harry from his disturbed thoughts. “Ladies first.” He placed the tattered hat on Hermione’s head and they waited for the announcement. Hermione’s brow was knit and her mouth turned down in a frown as if she were arguing with it.

“Gryffindor!” the Hat shouted, though not quite as loudly as it would have in the Great Hall.

“Mr Potter,” he placed the Hat on Harry’s head.
“Hmm, another one!” the Sorting Hat spoke in his head. “Well, let’s have a look then.”

‘Can’t you just put me in Gryffindor?’ Harry asked in his head.

“That’s not how it works and you know it,” the Hat insisted, a bit annoyed at being questioned. “Not a bad mind, though you’re a bit lazy, I see. Courageous. Too courageous for your own good. You could do with a bit more cunning, I think; balance out the blind, stupid bravery, but let’s call you a...

“Gryffindor!”

“Thank goodness,” Hermione let out a sigh of relief and hugged him in congratulations.

“Excellent,” Dumbledore smiled and levitated the Hat back to its place on the high shelf. “Now that that has been sorted, your background needs sorting. We must be clear on your story before joining the students in the dormitory and classes; they will ask you many questions and your lies cannot show.”

Hermione bit at her lip. She was never a very good liar, but Harry thought he saw a way around her deficiencies. All they had to do was weave his sad background into hers and she would have very little to lie about.

“Pleased to meet you, I’m Harry Granger. I was orphaned as an infant and raised by a Muggle family in Oxfordshire. We moved to South Africa a few years ago, but I’m very happy to be back in England.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr Granger,” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled at the boy and he shook his hand. “What happened to your birth parents?”

“It’s too painful to discuss,” Harry shook his head.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Where did you go to school?”

“At the local primary until my sister, Hermione and I learned we had magic,” he grinned. “Then it was Saint Brutus’s School of Magic in Johannesburg.”

“Ooh, I do actually know quite a bit about African shamanistic magic! I read a fascinating book all about it over the summer,” Hermione glowed with the excitement of being able to put her knowledge to use in conversation.
Remus woke earlier than usual. The light sneaking through his curtains was dim and low, predawn light. He closed his eyes against it and tried very hard to go back to sleep, but there was something wrong with the room. It had been changed. He could smell it. He took a slow, deep breath through his nose and let his drowsy mind work through the individual elements. Peter still stunk of his prank from the train, acrid and sharp. Sirius smelled of sex, so Remus knew what he had been doing before he fell asleep. James smelled of ink; he had probably been writing a letter to Evans. Those aromas were all recognisable and belonged.

There were other smells. Furniture polish and fresh from the laundry linens. Those were the scents of a new bed not yet slept in. The clean tang of ozone lit on his tongue; it was the same as ocean air but also of magical transportation such as Apparition or a portkey. That didn’t belong, certainly. Apparition was impossible inside Hogwarts’ grounds, and the House Elves moved without noise or smell, so it had to belong to something or someone else.

If he could only explain it, he could fall back to sleep.

Grumbling, he pulled the curtain aside and glared his confusion at the room. Even in near-darkness, he could see that James’s bed was too close. There had been enough room for Sirius to lie on the floor between Remus and James’s beds without his head or feet touching either, now the other bed was two feet closer at minimum. He stepped out, careful not to stub his toes on the now too-close bed. He blinked and saw the reason for the alteration to the room. A new bed, four posts polished and heavy scarlet curtains tied back, had been slid into the space between James and Sirius’s beds.

“Oh, that explains it,” he yawned and went back to his warm mattress. The mystery solved, he fell back into sleep until shouting roused him a few hours later.

“Oh! Bloody, buggery! Who put this stupid trunk here?” Sirius shouted and stumbled back onto his bed, gripping his foot where it had made contact with the offending trunk. He glared his anger at the offending trunk, reading the plaque so he would know who to blame. “Who is this Harry J. Granger prat?”

James grumbled a sleepy reply, rolling over and falling back into his dreams. Remus stepped around the trunk and extra bed easily even as he yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes; that did not aid Sirius’s mood. “He’s probably the bloke from the hospital wing,” Remus said after a yawn. “Guess he’s a Gryffindor… wonder where the girl is.”

“In your dreams apparently,” Sirius smirked and watched his friend flush. “No worries, Moony. We’ll find a way to make her yours. I’m sure it’ll be much easier than bringing Evans around.”

“Well, thank you,” Remus replied with a hint of sarcasm and left for the washroom.

“Harry J. Granger,” Sirius muttered and looked back at the trunk. So that was the name of the unconscious boy from the hospital bed. Sirius had held his hand, felt his frantic heartbeat. The part of him that Remus would approve of stirred with desire to help him, to show him the way to classes and make sure he avoided fights with Slytherins. But the Marauder won out and he decided a prank would be the best welcome the boy could hope for.
Having his underpants garlanding the common room would be a fine ‘Good Morning’ to Harry J. Granger, Sirius decided.

He knelt by the trunk, pausing to listen for Remus’s feet in the hallway. All he heard, though, was Peter snoring and James muttering about Evans and a Quaffle in his sleep. The Marauder set about trying to pick the locks before Remus came back. Magic didn’t work; his spells rebounded back at him and knocked him on his ass. Cursing, he tried to open the trunk manually. He was very good at picking locks, having learned at an early age after all the times his mother would lock him in his room. No lock stood a chance against Sirius Orion Black, but apparently no one had informed these three locks because they were not opening.

“What are you doing?” Remus asked in his Prefect voice, as stern and crisp as McGonagall’s.

Sirius yanked the pin from the stubborn lock and deftly slid the thin bit of metal into the crease of his palm. “Just… admiring the quality…” He gave the lock a polish with the hem of his shirt.

“Leave it, Pads,” Moony warned. “Come on. I have to meet the kid and show him the way to classes, and there’s no way I’m leaving you here to defile the poor boy’s things on his first day.”

“Right!” Sirius said. “Save the defiling for next week.” He grinned, jumped up and dug through his own trunk for a uniform and robes. He dressed quickly and hurried after Remus, eager to see if Harry J. Granger acted anything like the black-haired, hazel-eyed boy he so resembled.

Following his friend into the common, he found it unnaturally empty at that early hour of the morning. Professor McGonagall stood by the fire, her spine stiff and tartan dress heavy. On the woman’s left stood the pair from the infirmary. They looked extremely nervous. The girl’s fingers were working manically, kneading her knuckles raw. The boy’s eyes darted up every few seconds to study something of interest before darting back to the floor. Sirius noted his eyes almost glowed with excitement and curiosity, and that they were intensely green.

“Harry and Hermione Granger,” McGonagall introduced them, “Remus Lupin, Sirius Black. Mr Lupin is your Prefect. You can rely on him when you need direction or assistance.”

“And Sirius?” the boy asked, the tone and tenor of his voice sounding so like James Potter it was startling. Sirius hoped he wasn’t imagining the cheeky quality.

“Well, I think you might disregard most anything Mr Black tells you unless you can confirm it with Mr Lupin or Miss Evans,” McGonagall replied.

“I am insulted, Professor,” Sirius protested. “When have I ever steered a fellow Gryffindor wrong?”

“There was the time just last year when you convinced Silvia Dunn that the best way to pass OWLs would be to answer every question with a question,” Remus said, his eyebrow raised in challenge. “Or perhaps when you talked Fenton into transfiguring his owl into a crocodile and leaving it in the first years’ washroom… or when you managed to—“

“Yes! Thank you!” Sirius said, his voice affecting anger while his face clearly showed pride. “I might have done one or two things to Gryffindors, but I wouldn’t dare prank these two.”

“And what makes us so special?” Hermione inquired.

Sirius swept her into his arms. “I’m a sucker for a pretty face,” he winked at Harry and gave the girl a quick kiss on the cheek that left her flushed bright red and stuttering.
“Be careful of Mr Black and his friends,” McGonagall warned in a mild tone as if this was simply the behaviour she had come to expect from the boy. “Your schedules.” She handed them each a parchment and left them in the care of the prefect.

“What’s this? Introductory Healing?” Harry frowned at the timetable in his hands. “They don’t have that in our ti—old school.”

“I think it’ll be good for you to learn that with all the trouble you get into,” Hermione commented. Harry shrugged and nodded at her logic while Sirius’s eyes lit up at the prospect of another troublemaker. “At least they didn’t force Divination on me. Transfiguration this morning; I wonder how it compares to our old class.” She stopped. “Oh, no! My books!”

“You can borrow mine,” Harry said. “I’ll write to Flourish and Blotts for a spare set after class.”

“No, Harry, I can’t have you spending your money on me,” she insisted with a shake of her head. He looked at her meaningfully. “You’re my sister, Hermione… why shouldn’t I spend it on you?”

“Oh, right,” she muttered and noticed the pair of boys staring at them and listening intently to their every word. “Um… Breakfast?”

Remus watched her nervous fidgeting for a moment. “Right,” he said, not at all sure what to make of them. “That’s in the Great Hall. I’ll show you the way.”

He led them through the corridors, pointing out vanishing steps or moving staircases, which paintings could be relied on for accurate directions and reminding them repeatedly to watch out for Peeves. Hermione put on a very good show of being interested in what he had to say while Harry struggled with having his dead Godfather walking along beside him, staring at Harry as if he were the most interesting thing ever to enter Hogwarts.

Ever since Tonks had begged him for Sirius’s old record collection, he had been haunted by dreams of a Sirius this young. While this boy looked very little like the one in Harry’s dreams, he was still having a hard time believing this was a not dream now.

“Harry,” Hermione touched his arm. “You’re staring off.”

He blinked, refocusing his mind and eyes on the present, “Sorry, got lost in thought.” He turned toward the Great Hall, but remembered half a second later that he wasn’t supposed to know where it was. “Um… Where are we?”

“The entrance hall,” Hermione said, feigning a hint of confusion. “Remus says the Great Hall is this way. Where will we sit?”

“Next to Remus and me, of course,” Sirius declared with a disarming smile. He took hold of her arm and pulled her into the Hall, pushing her down onto the Gryffindor bench beside Remus, who looked exasperated by his friend. Sirius settled down beside Harry, his eager grin now shining on the slightly anxious boy. “So, Harry J. Granger, what’s the J stand for?”

“James, my father’s name,” Harry replied in a quiet mumble.

He nodded. “We’ve got a mate named James… looks a lot like you. If you’re willing, I can think of more than a few pranks involving twin Potters,” he smirked and let his eyes drift to the enchanted ceiling as he imagined the possibilities. He was so wrapped up in his devilish thoughts that he didn’t notice Harry choking on his juice at being called a Potter.
“Morning, Marauders,” the jovial voice of James Potter greeted as he dropped onto the bench opposite them. “Ooh and guests.”


“Harry James Granger, middle name from his father,” Sirius said and looked meaningfully at his friend.

“There are loads of people called James, stop making a fuss,” Harry grumbled and took another drink of juice. He kept his eyes trained on his plate, knowing that if he dared look directly at James Potter he would not be able to stop staring.

“Um… Harry James Granger,” Sirius said, his tone in no way joking. “Are you ill?”

Harry looked at him sideways, “No. Why?”

“You’re not actually eating anything,” the tall Marauder observed, “and you’re making James over there look like a heavy-weight.” He poked at Harry’s side, feeling the ribs directly beneath the boy’s skin.

Harry slapped the invasive hand away and glared at him. He was almost as bad as Tonks. This was awkward and stressful enough without him acting all worried. He forced his eyes back toward his empty plate, remembering the last time someone had mentioned his lack of appetite.

It had been Lupin who had pointed it out. Lupin had worried about him, worried enough to make a pact to get the boy to eat. They had been eating the same miniscule portions since he had arrived at the Burrow in July. Glancing over, he saw Remus eating a sickening quantity of eggs and bacon and couldn’t imagine being able to hold that much down.

As Sirius stared, Harry took a piece of toast and a slice of bacon, eating slowly and not enjoying the sensation of having food in his mouth.

“No worries,” Sirius grinned and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “A few weeks trying to keep up with us and you’ll be putting it away like a champ. Right, Peter?”

“Right,” the boy agreed.

Harry’s head shot up and he looked at the boy sitting beside James. He was unremarkable next to the charismatic James Potter, so unremarkable that Harry hadn’t even noticed him.

But he noticed him now.

The traitor. The rat. Voldemort’s cowardly and submissive follower. He had cut off his own hand to bring the monster back to life and power.

Harry had not felt a surge of anger like this since the previous term, and then it was always accompanied by a searing pain in his forehead and a proximity to Albus Dumbledore. He wanted to strike the fat little coward opposite him, cut him down and prevent all the problems that he would cause – deaths, betrayal, imprisonment and heartbreak.

The narrowed green eyes remained fixed on the boy longer than anyone thought normal. They accepted he would study them, learning their faces and trying to remember their names for later, but he was keeping his eyes trained on the round-faced Peter Pettigrew far too long. He was not studying the boy so much as glaring at him.
The boy under scrutiny shrunk under Harry’s hard gaze, trying to make himself as small as possible and hide behind James. He looked like a mouse caught in the mesmerising eyes of a venomous snake, too frightened to break eye contact, knowing that the moment he did the strike would come.

As the two boys stared at one another, the others watched in confusion and morbid curiosity, unsure whether they wanted to interrupt or just let the action play out to the end.

Harry’s jaw clenched in anger; with minimal fat to disguise the movement, every flexed jaw muscle was visible. His thin fingers gripped a butter knife until his knuckles turned ghostly white, desperate to send the dull knife across the table into the other boy.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered and placed a hand on his arm. “No.”

The boy jumped at the contact, dropping the knife from his hand. He blinked away from his own dark thoughts and looked around at the fear, worry and anger his reaction had caused.

“Sorry,” Harry said hurriedly and ran from the Great Hall.

They watched him go, and then they turned their demanding eyes to Hermione.

“What the bloody hell was that about?” James asked as he pushed Peter back to his seat on the bench. The round-faced boy looked nervously between his friend and Hermione, clearly concerned that she would take up her brother’s angry posture.

“That’s no way to make friends around here,” Sirius commented lightly as if having a friend threatened was something that happened on a daily basis. Although, given their pranks, it might well be something that occurred regularly, Hermione concluded.

The girl looked everywhere but their faces, certain they would see her lack of absolute honesty if she looked into their eyes.

“I’m sorry. He,” she pointed toward Peter, “looks a lot like someone that hurt Harry,” she told them quietly. She hoped it wasn’t too much information, but she had to tell them something.

“And that makes it okay to threaten me with a knife?” Peter demanded in an outraged squeak. In his mind he had evaded several swipes from a dangerously sharp knife and thought himself rather brave for keeping his composure.

“Harry wouldn’t hurt anyone,” she defended. “It’s just been a difficult journey. He’s tired, that’s all. Besides, he hardly ‘threatened’ you.”

“That’s true,” Sirius nodded. “Hooper did you more harm last month in Diagon Alley.” The others murmured an agreement and dropped the subject.

Annoyed that his brush with death was being ignored, Peter sat back on the bench and eyed the girl with suspicion. “You don’t look alike, you and your brother.”

“He’s adopted,” she said, keeping her eyes on her food so that he wouldn’t see the guilt she felt about lying.

“Oh,” Peter said, unsure what else to say.

“That’s unusual,” Sirius commented.

“Not really,” she said. “I’ve known several adopted children.”
“I’m sure you have,” he allowed. “But all the families I know wouldn’t dream of bringing unknown stock into their lines.”

“Snobs,” Remus said.

“And completely untrue,” James added. “My parents have practically adopted you, Padfoot.”

“That’s his nickname,” Remus informed her quietly as James and Sirius began to bicker about whether he was really adopted or just an extended guest in the Potter home.

Hermione put an appropriately confused look on her face and asked, “What sort of nickname is that?”

“Difficult to explain,” replied the boy vaguely. “I’m Moony, by the way.”

“Pleased to meet you, Moony,” she smiled and offered her hand in greeting.
Remus insisted they wait in the Great Hall for Harry to return. He assumed the boy would not know the way to class and would need help getting there. But as the tables emptied, Harry still had not come back and they were all in serious danger of being late on the first day of classes.

“Come on,” Hermione said. “He probably… uh… found someone and asked for directions… or something.” Without waiting for anyone to follow, she collected her bag and hurried into the entrance hall. Remus ran to catch up.

They walked together to Transfiguration, Hermione asking him about classes and teachers as much out of interest as to distract him from asking any questions of his own.

When they entered the classroom, Harry was already there. He was sitting in what had always been his usual seat. Ron was not there to sit beside him this time, and Hermione could see the sadness in his posture and eyes as he looked at the vacant spot where his friend ought to be.

“I’ll help him out,” Sirius grinned and dropped into Ron’s seat, startling Harry with his proximity and friendliness.

“You can sit next to me if you want,” Remus offered. “I’m pretty good at this subject, and I can help you out if you need it.” She held her tongue as she sat down next him. Dumbledore hadn’t said anything about disguising their skills, nor had he questioned their level of abilities outside asking if they had managed to pass their OWLS in each subject. She assumed it was safe for her to continue on as if she were back in her own time.

Professor McGonagall quizzed her students in far greater detail that she generally did on the first day of class. Hermione wondered if it was because they had reached NEWT level or because McGonagall was interested to see the two new students’ abilities and understanding of her subject. Whatever the reason for the in-depth review, Hermione’s hand was first to rise with every question, her answers always textbook perfect. McGonagall’s face betrayed none of her astonishment; James and Sirius, however, turned in their chairs to stare open-mouthed and impressed at the girl.

“What?” Hermione whispered when she heard Remus chuckle quietly.

“It looks like they won’t be pestering me for help on their homework this year,” he smiled.

“Oi! Harry James Granger,” Sirius whispered when the professor had turned her back. “Would she help us write our essays if we asked really nicely?”

“Or flirted shamelessly?” James suggested.

Harry shook his head, “No.”

Sirius and James bit back curses. The perfect student dropped into their laps and she wouldn’t help. Cruel fate!

“But,” Harry interrupted their overly melodramatic thoughts, “if you ask her to check your essays, she’ll fix the mistakes for you.”

“Brilliant!” Sirius shouted and hugged his new best friend.
“Gerroff!” Harry cried and tried very hard to keep the goofy grin off his face.

“Mr Black, whenever you’ve finished assaulting the new student, would you kindly tell me how to interpret this diagram?” Professor McGonagall asked. Harry swore he saw a hint of a smile and a glimmer in her eye.

“Of course,” Sirius smiled as he pulled out of the hug, leaving one arm wrapped around Harry’s shoulder. “That is a diagram of The Time Warp. See, it’s just a jump to the left—"

“Yes, thank you Mr Black,” McGonagall cut off the boy’s words. “Mr Granger?”

Harry swallowed his laughter and looked from the tight-lipped teacher to the diagram she had drawn on the board. “Uh… that’s the… um… I… I don’t know what that is, Professor.” Harry hung his head as James snorted and Sirius patted him on the back consolingly.

“Of course you don’t, Mr Granger. I haven’t explained it to you yet,” McGonagall said and began to dissect the meaning of each of the diagram’s quadrants. Harry took notes furiously, certain she would be quizzing him again before the end of class.

oOo

True to his word, Harry handed over his textbooks as soon as they had finished with lunch.

Hermione felt extremely awkward in the boys’ dorm. She used to visit Harry and Ron there all the time. Dean and Seamus and Neville never complained; she had been hanging around with Harry and Ron since first year and to all the Gryffindor boys of her year she was a boy in all but plumbing. But Sirius’s wolf whistle as she followed Harry into the sixth years’ bedroom confirmed what she had already known – this was not at all the same.

“I like a girl with daring,” Sirius declared and circled her appraisingly. “Not afraid to push boundaries, Hermione Granger? You got a middle name?”

“Yes, I do,” she replied and did her level best to ignore him.

“Leave her alone,” Remus threw a pillow at him.

“She’s a girl in the boys’ dorm,” Sirius said as if it excused any behavioural flaws he might be exhibiting. “I think I’m allowed to treat her as something special.”

“Tildy’s up here all the time begging for help on her essays, so you can give it a rest,” he countered.

Sirius opened his mouth to reply, but Harry slammed his trunk shut loudly enough to distract him. He struggled to stand under the weight of the books in his arms. “Here, I’ll get some new ones later.”

“Are you sure, Harry?” she asked, taking the pile of books as if they weighed nothing. Compared to what she usually hauled around, the stack was rather light. “I don’t want you to fall behind because you didn’t have your books.”

He shook his head and fought the derisive laugh. “How long have we known each other? Do you really think I’ll read those yet?”

She scowled at his flippant approach to schoolwork. “If you put a bit more effort in, you might have made prefect last year instead of Ron.” She paused, realising what she had said. “I still don’t
know why he made prefect. His grades were rubbish.”

Harry shrugged, “Dum—Uh, the Headmaster never said why Ron got it, only why I didn’t.”

She glanced over to where the other boys were sitting, pretending not to listen to their conversation even though that was clearly what they were doing. Sirius, by contrast, was leaning against the post of Harry’s bed, making absolutely no effort to pretend he was doing anything but eavesdropping.

“Write to Flourish and Blotts this minute,” she commanded Harry, eager to have their conversation done with so she could leave.

“He can borrow anything he likes from us,” Sirius said. “Not like we’ll be using our books straight away.”

“Thanks,” Harry mumbled.

“Oh, it’s not generosity,” the boy grinned wickedly. “It’s a favour. And favours require repayment… I let you borrow something, so I get to borrow something in return.” As he said this, his eyes raked over Hermione slowly, his face taking on a decidedly wolfish quality.

“Borrow something like my sister?” Harry rolled his eyes and pushed the girl toward the door before Sirius said something that would set her off. She had done very well at controlling her tongue so far, but he wasn’t sure how much more of Sirius’s innuendo she could take before indignation overrode her desire to keep a low profile.

“Come back and see us again,” Sirius called, a world of meaning hidden in his words.

“You—“ Hermione began, turning around to shout at him even as Harry pushed her through the doorway.

“I’ll write for new books and send an owl off before dinner,” Harry interrupted her.

Nodding her acceptance and glaring at Sirius, she spun around and marched from their room. She could hear Sirius’s voice, loud and confident, from the stairs as he declared, “I like her. She’s got spunk!”

Shaking her head and simultaneously fighting a smile and a scowl, she went down to the common room with Harry’s books in her arms. There were far too many eager faces looking her way, curiosity evident in their eyes and questions perched on their tongues. She did not want to say anything without Harry there; their stories had to be kept the same and she was afraid that she would say something that might contradict what he was telling the other sixth year boys.

Without giving anyone time to say so much as ‘hello’, she turned and ran up the stairs to the girls’ dorms.

It was the first time she had set foot in the dormitory since June of 1996, some two months past and twenty years forward. The beds were the same, thick mattresses covered in school linens and surrounded by heavy scarlet curtains that kept the light out in the early hours and body heat in on the cold nights. She had not expected that to have changed at all, but there were some slight differences.

There were only three beds in her day – Lavender’s, Parvati’s and her own – but here there were five. The room was large enough to accommodate them all, but they seemed so much more crammed in than in Hermione’s time. She knew which bed was hers by the lack of any decoration
around it. There really wasn’t much around it in her time, either; she would spell-o-tape revision
schedules to her wall and notes on things that she wanted to look up when she got the chance.
Lavender and Parvati always shook their heads in dismay when they saw her doing that, but it was
what she enjoyed. Their walls had been covered in moving posters of sports stars, actors and
musicians.

The posters she was looking at now were of musicians, too, but they were unmoving. Muggle
musicians, she realised. She also recognised them as men she had only heard about in the past
tense, handsome young men in tight jeans or leather trousers showing off their pale, lean chests and
stomachs. In her time the men on the posters would be tan and muscled and wearing pants so loose
they showed off skin as if by accident. Not these men, they showed everything on purpose and
with pride.

So engrossed was she in the thoughts of being alive and young in the same time when her mother
was swooning over these same young men that she didn’t hear the voices on the stairs or see the
movement of the door opening. The girls barrelled into their dorm, their laughter stopped dead
when they saw the girl staring intently at a poster, looking sad and lost.

One girl cleared her throat, bringing Hermione’s attention away from the wall. “Bowie fan?”

“What?” Hermione asked, too distracted to form a polite response.

“David Bowie,” the girl walked up and petted the poster lovingly. “I adore him. He’s brilliant.”

“Wants to have his illegitimate children, she does,” one of the other girls chimed in.

Hermione smiled at the blush that covered the girl’s cheeks. “Tildy Moorehead,” the girl
introduced herself and held a hand out, realising a bit too late that Hermione’s arms were still full
of books. She smiled at her own foolishness and took half the heavy textbooks from her, dropping
them onto the empty bed that Hermione had known was hers. “Please no jokes about my last name,
I get enough of them from the boys.”

“Hermione,” she offered in reply.

“Nice to meet you,” Tildy smiled a wide and toothy grin that made it look as if she had slipped
someone’s false teeth into her mouth.

“We have over here…” the girl pulled Hermione across the room, “Mary Macdonald. She will try
to force a makeover on you with every new issue of Witch Weekly. Silvia Dunn, do not start her on
Quidditch,” Tildy warned. “Your ears will drop off and you’ll die of starvation before she’ll stop
talking about how fantastically wonderful the Puddlemere Canons or whoever are.” Silvia made to
protest, but Tildy kept talking and the other girl didn’t get the chance. “And our resident prefect,
Lily Evans. Practically perfect in every way except for Transfiguration, where she is, if possible,
worser than me.”

“Thank you,” Lily replied sarcastically. “I’m getting better.”

“You’d get better quicker if you accepted Potter’s help,” Tildy winked.

“Never going to happen,” the girl said flatly, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Tildy leaned in close to Hermione and began to explain in a conspiratorial stage whisper, “Potter’s
the one with the glasses. A little on the short side but more than makes up for it in good looks.
Charming and super brilliant—“
“And he knows it,” Lily interrupted. “Conceited prat thinks he runs the school.” Hermione just smiled. The flush in the Lily’s cheeks spoke far more loudly than she did on the matter of James Potter.

“Moving on!” Tildy said, transitioning their conversation with the subtlety of a Bat Bogey Hex. “What are you into? I love music, and David Bowie. Silvia’s crazy for Quidditch. Mary’s going to rule the fashion world as soon as she graduates. And Lily is going to marry Potter and have a dozen of his children. So… what do you do?”

All eyes, even the pair of indignant green eyes that would rather be glaring at Tildy, turned to her, and Hermione wasn’t sure what to say. “Um… I like to read.”

“Ooh! Study buddy!” Tildy declared and wrapped Hermione in a possessive hug. “I call dibs!”

“No fair!” Silvia whined. “You were closest. Re-do.”

“I don’t hear you whinging like that when Gryffindor Seeker nabs the Snitch because he’s closer when it’s spotted,” the girl countered. “Same rules apply. I win fair and square.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Hermione wondered, slightly put off by her sudden popularity yet feeling an incredible warmth in her chest at being around girls who actually wanted to talk to her. Lavender and Parvati were dismissive of her since first year, only Ginny and Luna ever sought her company.

“Sticking with the Quidditch analogy,” Tildy said. “A Snitch doesn’t have any say in who catches it.”

Hermione gave a deep and theatrical sigh, “Fine.”

“Yay! This is going to work out so much better. I used to annoy the boys, but now I have a study buddy in my room,” Tildy squealed and hugged her tighter. “Are you taking Arithmancy?”

“Yes,” Hermione managed to squeak out.

“Enough bone crushing, Future Mrs Bowie,” Evans declared and pried the girl off Hermione. “It’s her first day. She doesn’t need you scaring her off.” She flapped her hands at the hyperactive girl, forcing her to back up and give Hermione a reasonable amount of personal space. “You okay? Frightened? Overwhelmed?”

“A bit,” Hermione replied, a smile on her face despite how flustered she really did feel.

“Okay,” Lily said in a purposefully calm tone. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask. It’s what I’m here for.” She smiled and let Hermione retreat to her bed and books.

Eyeing the familiar covers and titles, Hermione realised there were some missing.

“Actually,” she said quietly. “Does anyone have an Arithmancy book I can borrow? Harry’s not taking that class and I lost my books on the way here.”

“Of course!” Tildy said brightly, eager to please her new study buddy. She bounced across the room and handed over her textbook. With her wild hair, seemingly endless energy and exuberant mannerisms, she reminded Hermione so much of Tonks it made her want to cry.

“What’s the matter?” asked Tildy.
“You just remind me of someone we left behind,” she replied, her throat so tight the words barely made it out. No one knew how to respond, so no one did. It was just as well since Hermione did not want to say anything that might give the identity of her lost friend away. Tonks would be three years old in 1976, and it was entirely possible that they might have met the excitable little Metamorphmagus in Diagon Alley or at King’s Cross. She wasn’t entirely sure how close the Tonks family was with Sirius.

“We’d better hurry if we want to be on time,” Tildy said in a voice so subdued that Hermione hadn’t realised it was her speaking. Hermione nodded and followed her from the dorm, leaving the others to consider the girl’s sudden turn towards despondency.
Sirius grinned as Hermione left their dorm. It wasn’t often that a girl was daring enough to come up the steps to the boys’ dorms. It was normal for first years since; for the most part, they were oblivious to the sex of their friends. But a brand new sixteen-year-old girl boldly coming up the stairs, even in the company of her brother, was something special.

“I like her,” Sirius declared loudly. “She has spunk!”

“She’s got the best command of hexes in the country, too,” Harry informed him, trying very hard to keep the laughter from his voice. The Sirius he had known wasn’t always so polite about Hermione’s ‘spunk’ even after it saved him from Azkaban and the Dementor’s kiss. “Don’t annoy her. You will regret it.”

Sirius considered his chances silently for a moment before coming to the conclusion: “Might be worth it. She’s got nice legs.”

Indignation overrode the shock that his Godfather was talking in such a way about his friend and Harry found himself shouting at the boy. “Oi! That is my sister, you git!” Harry threw a tee-shirt at him.

Sirius caught the garment without any effort and stretched it out to read the front. “Sex Pistols? Harry James Granger, you are officially my new best friend. I’m borrowing this next Hogsmeade weekend.”

“What do I get in return?” Harry asked, his mouth turned up in a satisfied and rather mischievous grin.

“He learns quickly,” James commented.

“He does, indeed,” Sirius nodded approvingly. “Well on our way to expanding our ranks and we’ve only known him six hours.” Remus shook his head at their idiocy and Peter frowned disapprovingly.

“The sister might not approve,” James countered, eyeing Harry with concern, and continuing to discuss the boy as if he were not directly in front of them. “Might be wrapped around the girl’s little finger…”

“Like you want to be wrapped around Evans’s?” Sirius asked innocently.

“I was thinking more like how you’re wrapped around my mum’s actually,” James grinned and leapt clear of the taller boy’s reach, running around the room and hiding every time Sirius managed to find something to throw at him.
“Cheeky bugger!” Sirius called after him, but never managed to catch him even in the confined and circular space. James was simply too fast.

Harry was amazed at how like his own friends they were and how quickly they made him smile. He remembered the sickening display of bullying from Snape’s Pensieve. Since viewing that painful memory and realising that his father really was as cocky and cruel as Snape had always claimed, he had expected James to behave the same way toward everyone outside his small group of friends. But he was nothing like the boy in that memory.

James was welcoming and funny. Yes, he made fun of Sirius, but it was not done with malice. Harry would have said something similar to his own friends and they to him. If anything, James reminded him of Fred or George Weasley, whom Harry would never call cruel or bullies.

Sirius, meanwhile, was jovial beyond any sense; Harry knew his history – or at least part of it – and had not expected him to be so loud or so quick to grin.

He turned his eyes on Remus, a man he knew well, and saw his eyes bright with laughter in a way he had never seen in his own time. He sobered with the realisation of why he saw that light so rarely in the man’s tired blue eyes. As an adult, he had very little to make him so happy.

As if sensing the turn in Harry’s mood, Sirius pulled him close. “Are we prone to melancholy, Harry James Granger?” His face was smiling and his voice was light, but there was no spark in his eye.

“Aren’t we all given the right thoughts?” reasoned Remus, ever the practical Marauder. “His first day at a new school, sees you lot acting… well, like gits, to be honest. He’s bound to miss his own git friends.”

“Is that true, Harry James Granger?” Sirius tightened his hold. “Are your friends gits?”

Harry laughed despite the dark mood he felt. “All but Hermione.”

“Ah, but she’s not your friend, she’s your sister,” he waved a finger. “One must never insult one’s sister if one intends to live a long and happy life. Mind you, I haven’t got a sister, so I wouldn’t really know.”

“Same here,” James chimed in. “And for them…” he pointed at the other two boys in the room.

“So, I’m the only expert on having a sister, then,” Harry concluded. “And therefore, I claim her as both family and friend.”

“Cheeky,” Sirius grumbled and pinched his gaunt face until it hurt.

“Oh! Arithmancy,” Remus called and smacked Sirius on the head. “Let him be.”

“You’re taking Arithmancy?” Harry asked, watching three of the Gryffindors gather their books for class, his heart sinking that his father and mentors were far cleverer than he was.

“Yeah,” Sirius shrugged. “The birds dig it when you deconstruct their personality based on their name. Works a treat at parties.”

Harry nodded doubtfully. “I’m sure it does.”

“Ignore him,” Remus instructed. “He likes people thinking he’s stupider than he is, but he’s smarter than anybody else in our year.”
“Oh, Moony, you say such sweet things about me!” the boy cooed and kissed him on the cheek. “You wanna go out sometime?”

“Yeah, next full moon,” Remus muttered with wry smile. “Call it a date.”

“Quit your flirting before we put the new kid off,” James ordered. “You two, behave yourselves while we’re gone. No blowing the place up while we’re in class.” He pointed a warning finger at Harry and Peter.

“Yeah, no dungbombs in the stairwell,” Sirius said.

“Or firebombs in the toilets,” Remus added.

“Ooh, we’ve never tried that,” the tall black-haired boy realised. “Wonder what that would do…”

“Aside from make a mess?” the young werewolf considered it a moment and shrugged. “I don’t know, but there’s only one way to find out.” He grinned so impishly that Harry barely recognised him as the same Remus Lupin he knew in 1996. Of all the people he would meet, Harry somehow expected Remus to be something of a constant, but when he was alone with these two the boy changed completely. Gone was the reserved young prefect. Instead there was a devious and glinting Marauder.

Harry wondered how Lupin ever managed to keep a straight face while reprimanding Fred and George at Hogwarts when some cheeky part of him wanted to congratulate them and make suggestions on their next plot.

“Peter can keep you out of trouble while we’re away,” James suggested.

“Uh…” Harry’s smile fell and he glanced over at Peter with his ratty little face and watery eyes. “No, I’ve got to write to Flourish and Blotts before dinner. I promised.”

“Wrapped around her little finger,” the bespectacled boy shook his head sadly. “What did I tell you?” He sighed heavily as if he were the one burdened by an overbearing sister and trudged from the room followed by a snickering Sirius and Remus.

“Gits,” Peter said with an equally sad shake of his head, but his voice was filled with laughter and reverence.

Harry gave a brief “Hmm” in reply as he pulled out some parchment and his list of required books. He took an unnecessarily long time writing out the letter, making sure his spelling was correct, his margins were even and his lines parallel. His brief, one paragraph letter ended up taking an hour to write. He rolled it up, counted out the coins from his moneybag and locked the rest back in his trunk.

“You don’t have to lock it,” Peter said quickly. “No one locks their things here.”

Harry just hummed a noncommittal reply and left the boy alone in the dorm.

‘Not lock my trunk with you around? Dream on, you bastard,’ Harry spat, gripping the coins so tight in his fist that they bit into the flesh of his palm. ‘Why can’t I do something to stop him? Why can’t I warn them?’

‘Because,’ a very sensible voice replied in his head, ‘things have to stay the way they are. Everything would change if you tried to warn them.’
Harry didn’t care for that voice even if it did sound rather like Lupin. ‘Who’s to say things wouldn’t change for the better?’ he demanded of the voice. ‘What if changing things means that we kill Voldemort quicker? What if changing things means Sirius doesn’t have to die?’

‘Even if you did manage to make things better,’ the sensible voice replied, ‘you wouldn’t change. You are protected from the timeline, and would always be who you are now – The Time Traveller’s Burden is to remember. Don’t you recall what Hermione told you third year?’

‘I remember it bored me to sleep,’ Harry retorted petulantly.

‘Liar,’ the Lupin-like voice chided. ‘You were riveted, imagining all that you might do to make your life different.’

Harry ignored the voice, hoping it would go away.

‘What?’ he could hear the cheeky grin. ‘No smart reply?’ Harry wished the voice had a body so that he could glare at it with all the anger he possessed. It had not been part of his conscious brain for more than ten minutes and it was already shifting from being down-to-earth Lupin to cheeky Remus.

“No. Now go away,” Harry told it, too annoyed to realise he was speaking his words rather than thinking them.

‘You started it with all your pointless questions,’ it sniffed, but thankfully it was silent for the rest of the walk to the Owlery.

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its legs. He took a small moneybag from a hook on the wall and filled it with Galleons. “I don’t know if they’ll try to send you back with my order, but you might want to wait a bit.”

The owl hooted a reply and took off as soon as it felt the bag was secure.

Harry watched the tawny owl disappear into the afternoon sky before he turned to a white owl that was sleeping on a perch nearby. He stroked its feathers gently. “I miss Hedwig,” he mumbled.

Peter frowned, wondering who Hedwig was. More importantly, he wondered where Harry got so much money and why he had books and his sister didn’t. Thinking about it, there were quite a few off things about the Grangers. He hoped the others would not notice. They loved a mystery almost as much as they loved a prank. If they realised how many question marks were hovering around the pair, Peter would be as good as forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

I survived one full week of full-time teachertude! There were no deaths, no blood, only a little vomit and just one potty accident. WIN!
Sirius leaned back in his chair, the personification of relaxation and cool. It was what he wanted everyone to see, so that is what they saw. Inside, however, the boy was scowling, a deep and severely dissatisfied scowl. He had intended to charm the new boy’s sister, but she wasn’t even looking at him. Girls always looked at him. He was not being conceited; it was a simple fact of being Sirius Black. Girls just looked at him. But apparently Hermione Middle-Name-As-Yet-To-Be-Determined Granger was not the average girl.

“Get over yourself,” James muttered under his breath and nudged him hard in the ribs.

Sirius realised a bit too late that he had been staring in a very obvious and non-flirtatious way. Even without the scowl marring his face, staring was not how he worked. He was subtle and smooth… most of the time. “Maybe South Africa was filled with blokes that looked as good as me and she’s immune,” Sirius whispered.

“So,” his friend said in a low voice, “she just doesn’t like you.”

“Nonsense.”

“Has been known to happen from time to time,” Remus commented.

Sirius gave them his best glare. That glare was one of the very few things he appreciated having learned from his mother. Sadly, his friends were used to it after five years and it had about as much effect on them as his pretty face did on Hermione Granger.

“Are you going to go chasing her down now just to prove a point?” Remus asked, his tone implying how stupid he thought that idea was.

“I was thinking about it,” Sirius admitted.

“We can hear you, ya know,” Tildy whispered and grinned over her shoulder at them. “I don’t think Hermione liked that idea.” She glanced at her new Arithmancy partner.

Hermione looked pointedly at Sirius with a dull look of boredom and shook her head.

“No,” Tildy said for her. “She definitely thinks that was a very poor plan, Sirius. I suggest you find someone else to flirt with... you’re welcome to flirt with me any time you like.”

Hermione nodded her agreement with the girl’s offer then went back to the Arithmancy problem Professor Featherstone had put to them.

“Grangers are strange,” Sirius muttered and focused on his work as the professor moved past.

“Shut up, Padfoot. I’m trying to work,” Remus told him in a harsh tone.

“Remus,” Tildy sang quietly. “Come sit with us. I need you to check this for me.” He grinned but didn’t move. “Come on… we’re prettier and don’t whinge nearly as much as Sirius does.”

“No whinging? I’m sold,” Remus said, and when Professor Featherstone had her back turned he jumped over his desk and claimed the seat beside Hermione. As he dropped down beside her, the girl could only stare in open-mouthed wonder at the boy who would grow up to be her Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. He was far more like his brash friends than she had ever imagined.
He raised an eyebrow at her as she continued to stare, “Too much? Should I have just walked round?”

“Nah,” James replied for her. “Had a touch of the theatrical. It works for you, Moony.”

The boy grinned, his scars all but vanishing in the folds of his skin, making him even more handsome. Hermione couldn’t understand why he did not grin more often as an adult. Well, she knew why, there wasn’t really all that much for him to smile about, but she still wished he would have done it anyway.

Remus was beginning to feel rather uncomfortable under her prolonged gaze. People usually only stared at his scars, which is what he assumed she was doing now. He turned his attention back to his Arithmancy work, hoping to inspire Hermione to do the same, but her eyes stayed on him. Featherstone would be making another turn around their side of the room soon; the woman was not one for students slacking off in class, and it wouldn’t do for Hermione to get into trouble on her first day.

He gripped her chin gently and forced her to look at her parchment instead of at him.

At the touch of his warm fingers, Hermione jumped and blushed furiously. She turned her enormous eyes to her work and kept them locked there until Professor Featherstone spoke again to ask for their answers. Remus grinned and kept to his own work as well, ignoring the kicks Sirius and James were giving his chair.

“I hate you, Moony,” Sirius said with a poorly concealed smile as they walked from the classroom.

“I’m sorry, but remind me what second goal of term was again,” Remus said in a low voice. “Because I don’t think it was getting the girl to notice you.”

“I got a bit carried away,” he replied with a shrug. “I do that when people ignore me. Can you at least find out what her middle name is for me?” He batted his lashes at his friend and whined like a puppy. “Please? Pretty please?”

“Don’t you try that puppy dog stuff on me,” Remus warned.

“Works on Prongs and Wormtail,” Sirius said. “Bet it would work on Harry James Granger.”

“Well, go flirt with him then,” the prefect waved him away and slowed his pace to walk beside Tildy and Hermione. The girl blushed a delicate shade of pink as he fell into step beside her, which only encouraged him more. “So, Sirius is begging me to find out what your middle name is. Do you want to tell him to piss off or shall I?”

“Jean,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“My middle name is Jean,” Hermione told him. “Tell him if you want, I really don’t care.”

He held her eye as they walked, considering whether he wanted to share the name. “Let him figure it out on his own,” he decided. She smiled approvingly and Remus could only assume that he had passed some sort of test.

“Well, I’m off,” Tildy declared.
“Where are you going?” Hermione asked. The other girl had not mentioned going anywhere after class, and it seemed strange that she would leave Hermione alone after calling dibs on her as a ‘study buddy’.

“I never liked being a third wheel,” she smiled. “You two keep flirting, you won’t miss me.” She waved and skipped away singing a song to herself.

“Tildy’s a bit odd,” Remus said.

“I noticed,” she agreed. “But I’ve known odder people. I have a friend… had a friend… There’s a girl who insists that everything strange in life happens because of invisible creatures that nobody has ever heard of, like Nargles.”

He frowned his confusion, “What’s a Nargle?”

“I still don’t know,” she admitted. “I’ve given up trying to talk any sort of reason into her. Generally, I just smile and nod.”

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Tildy’s not quite that strange. And she does make up for it by having the best record collection in the whole school.” He helped her onto the staircase as it started to move. “So,” he said, leaning back on the railing as the whole staircase shifted down three levels, “judging by your brother’s shirts, he’s a fan of punk. What are you into?”

Hermione groaned and slumped against the rail opposite him. “Not again. I hate being new. Everyone asks the same questions and I never know what to answer.”

“The truth generally works a treat,” he smirked. Like he had any right to give such advice.

“No one wants to hear the truth. They want to hear something interesting, but I don’t care about sports or music or fashion,” she insisted. “I like to read. I like going to classes and researching and doing extra credit. By anybody else’s standards, I’m boring.”

His smirk stayed firmly in place as he replied. “So do I, but no one would say I’m boring.”

She waved a dismissive hand at him as she started up the stairs, “True, but you’re also a w–“ She froze as she realised what she was saying. The word ‘werewolf’ had nearly escaped her lips. She was not supposed to know anything about him, least of all his most closely guarded secret.

“I’m a what?” he asked, his voice calm even as his eyes burned into her.

“You’re a…” she scrambled for anything that might save her – werewolf, best professor I’ve ever had, Order of the Phoenix member, wonderful mentor to Harry. ‘No! Dammit, you shouldn’t know those things!’ she shrieked. ‘He’s only sixteen. You’ve only just met him. What do you know about him? He’s a…”

“Prefect,” she said. “You’re a prefect.”

That single statement washed away the tension of his body and cooled the fire in his gaze. As she continued, he relaxed and the smile on his face turned genuine.

“No one would ever insult a Prefect for fear of losing points.”

“You don’t know my friends,” he laughed, clearly relieved. “Prefect or no, they’re merciless.”

She shook her head, smiling as she remembered her friend, Ginny, and her tactless charm. She
could cut through all manner of pomp and façade and find the nugget of truth in any situation. Often it was annoying, but there were times when the girl’s insight was worth her weight in Galleons. “That’s what friends are for,” she said warmly.

He smiled. “So I take it your friends aren’t gits like Harry’s?”

“We have the same friends,” she informed him, a bit hurt by his implication that she was a git. “They can be stupid, but so can Harry sometimes.”

“And after he said such nice things about you,” he shook his head sadly and sighed. “Some friend and sister you are…”

“He said nice things about me?” she asked.

“He did. He said all his friends were gits except for you,” he informed her. “James and Sirius insisted it didn’t count, but he was quite adamant.”

She grinned and blushed at the second-hand compliment. “He really is the best friend I’ve ever had.”

“You’re lucky,” he said. “I know a lot of siblings that can’t stand each other most of the time. I don’t think Sirius has spoken to his brother in months.” He cringed and would have kicked himself if he were not in the presence of a girl he was trying to impress. How could he have given away such private information to a girl he barely knew? Someone else’s private information at that. Why not just walk up and introduce himself as a werewolf?

“Well I suppose that’s a given since he’s so different from the rest of his family,” she agreed and promptly bit her lip.

Remus frowned. “You know about his family?”

“Oh….” she said eloquently as she tried to think of a reason to know his history that didn’t involve rescuing him from Dementors and spending a summer with him in his miserable childhood home. “Well, I read…” she paused and saw the hint of a smile on his face, “I read a lot of books on the Wizarding world when we first got our letters from… uh… St Brutus’s. There were quite a few references to the ‘Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.’” She drew slightly sarcastic quote marks in the air.

“Yeah, very noble,” he agreed bitterly. He had seen first-hand the damage the ‘noble’ Walburga Black was willing to inflict on her eldest son whenever she disapproved of his actions. If that was what being a pureblood wizard was all about, then he was more than happy to be a half-breed.

“Tempus Fugit,” he said absently to the waiting portrait, which nodded and swung wide to allow them entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

“Moony!” Sirius shouted, his voice light and happy and in complete contrast to the grim way they were just discussing him and his family.

“What took you so long?” Sirius asked jovially, but his grin fell as they approached, “Oh, this conversation looks much too serious.”

Hermione snorted. “I agree, far too Sirius,” she smiled up at Remus and he laughed as he fell onto the couch.

“Oi! No private jokes with me standing right here,” the boy grumbled.
“Yeah, no jokes about privates,” Peter declared.

“His privates are enough of a joke already,” James whispered into Hermione’s ear, making her blush and hide her face in her hands. Harry would never have said anything like that in his life especially not to a girl. She could not imagine how different her friend might have been had he been raised by so outspoken a young man as James Potter.

“Perfect timing!” Sirius shouted, drawing the attention of the entire common room to Harry’s arrival through the portrait hole. “Harry James Granger, rescue me from their blatantly cruel private jokes about me.”

Harry shook his head. “I think you can take it.”

A devilish smirk drew across his face, “That’s true. I’m a big boy.” He winked at Hermione and fell onto James’s lap. “Isn’t that right, Prongs?”

“Whatever you say, Pads,” he patted his friend condescendingly on the head.

Hermione hurried up the stairs to her dorm, determined not to let them see her laughing at their childish games. They needed absolutely no encouragement, though she was certain they were getting enough of it from the rest of the Gryffindors in the common room.

How on Earth was she going to survive this? How was Harry? She could only imagine the mental image he had built of his father; living and studying with the boy was certain to shatter any idealised portrait he might have developed over the years. Harry was fairly well-grounded, but even he wouldn’t have included dirty jokes in the words that frequented James’s lips.
No, this wasn’t difficult, Harry thought as he waited outside the Potions classroom.

Their first day had gone perfectly. He ate a bit, had a good class and even won a few points from Professor McGonagall. Hermione had made friends with the girls and with Remus. Harry found that his young father was surprisingly easy to talk to, as were two of his friends. He avoided speaking to Peter entirely, but no one seemed to notice. Lunch, homework, dinner and the evening spent in the common room were as comfortable and normal as anything.

But that was yesterday.

This was a new day, Friday. A day with Potions. A day with Slytherins.

He stood outside the classroom between Hermione and Sirius. His ‘sister’ was carefully studying a borrowed textbook. He glanced over her shoulder to scan the page, anything to avoid having to look across the corridor at the Slytherins. A particularly thin and angular boy was glaring at him as if Harry had insulted him, though Harry hadn’t said a word since leaving the entrance hall. Still the boy’s black eyes remained fixed on him; even as he leaned over and whispered to a rather dangerous-looking classmate, his eyes followed Harry.

“What’s got you so intense this morning, Snivelly?” Sirius smiled. “I see you staring at my new friend. Sorry, but I don’t think he swings your way… not into spiders.”

The boy’s eyes moved slowly from Harry to Sirius as a cold sneer formed on his thin lips. “I doubt anyone of quality would swing your way, Black. A pity Regulus has to have such unfortunate relations.”

As the deep and disdainful voice left his mouth, Harry knew immediately who the boy would grow into. Snape. Looking at him, he was surprised he hadn’t recognised him sooner. He looked almost the same as he did in adulthood, a bit shorter perhaps.

“I’d say it’s a shame he has to have such unfortunate housemates,” Sirius retorted, earning a disapproving scowl from Snape. The boy’s Slytherin housemates grumbled under their breath at the insult from a pureblood wizard who ought to have been one of them. Snape flinched as the Slytherin nearest him leaned in and whispered into his ear, no doubt spurring him on.

“And now you’re going so far as to associate with Mudbloods,” Snape’s emotionless black eyes focused on Hermione, who sucked in a shocked breath. He looked back to Harry again and the sneer reformed.

“Muggle-raised, actually,” Harry grinned cheekily. He could finally say what he liked to Snape. The man had no power to take points or give detentions or expel him. It was liberating and potentially the greatest thing that had happened to him since discovering he had a Godfather.

“Little difference, Granger,” Snape spat his new name as violently as he had Harry’s old one; apparently his physical similarity to James Potter went a long way to making Snape hate him on sight. “That only makes you a blood traitor.”

“Are you as bored with this as I am?” Sirius asked and all but turned his back on Snape. He was not actually foolish enough to make himself vulnerable to attack, but the slight turn was enough to insult the Slytherins. “So Harry James Granger, you into Quidditch?”
Harry smiled and took up the boy’s light tone just to annoy Snape. “Yes. I don’t have much opportunity to follow the professional teams, but I play.”

“What position?” James asked eagerly. “It’s a rebuilding year for us, so we need new… just about everything but one Chaser and a Beater.”

“I was Seeker on my school team,” Harry said proudly. Hermione jabbed him in the ribs and shook her head pointedly while she glared at him. Being good academically was a great deal different than outshining everyone on the Quidditch pitch. He knew as well as she did that people still talked of the great Quidditch players decades after they had graduated Hogwarts and gone on to mundane jobs at the Ministry or Gringotts. Harry was an exceptional Seeker; they would certainly be talking of him for generations if he joined the team.

“Oh… but I don’t think I’ll be trying out.”

“What?” Sirius balked and slapped him on the head. “Why not? Didn’t you hear the man?”

Harry’s brain scrambled for a viable excuse. He couldn’t claim to be injured; they’d cart him to the infirmary to have him looked over. Unexpectedly developed a fear of flying, maybe? That would never work. He lit on an idea.

“Well, I was set to be Captain of my team and I don’t think I could settle for anything less after all those years of hard work.”

James nodded. If there’s one thing he appreciated it was pride in one’s accomplishments. “Okay, but if we can’t find a decent Seeker, you are going to try out whether you like it or not.” He levelled a look on the boy that left no room for argument.

Harry nodded though he had no intention of playing.

“Very nice,” Hermione whispered.

“Thank you,” Harry grinned.

“Harry James Granger,” Sirius interrupted their private exchange. “Care to be my potions partner? I’m quite good.”

“Brilliant,” Harry beamed up at the handsome face of his young Godfather, amazed that he would want to spend more time with him. “I need all the help I can get in Potions. I still don’t know how I managed to get an E in it. I don’t even have a book; I assumed I wouldn’t get to take it this year.”

Sirius studied the boy, his grey eyes taking in Harry’s honest amazement. “If you’re so rubbish, why keep at it?”

He shrugged, “I need it if I want to become an Auror.”

“You’re trying to become an Auror?” he took a step back and looked at him appraisingly, nodding his approval. “Not bad, Harry James Granger. Not bad at all.”

“It’s the only career I’ve ever considered. I’m not sure what my father did for a living before he died,” Harry said, looking briefly at James. “But a professor suggested it might be good for me… well, it wasn’t a professor, actually. It was a crazed murderous lunatic disguised as a professor with Polyjuice, but the advice still held.” Harry said with a shrug, oblivious to the incredulous looks he was getting from James and Sirius.
Hermione stomped hard on his foot. He was saved her opinion of his little speech by the arrival of the Potions professor.

“Good morning,” the professor greeted them jovially and opened the door wide for them to enter. Harry stumbled to a stop and stared at the large man with his ridiculous robes and matching waistcoat, polished brass buttons and waxed mustache. It was Horace Slughorn, the man he had helped lure out of retirement just a few weeks earlier. He looked, if anything, more preposterous than he did when Harry met him over the summer.

He was the Potions teacher?

“No…” Harry whispered in astonished disbelief as his eyes darted to Snape. If Slughorn was taking over Potions from Snape, that meant Snape was moving to a different position. The only open position, as it was every year, was Defence. Snape would finally get to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts. What had Professor Dumbledore been thinking when he agreed to that? The man was a reformed Death Eater. Dumbledore might as well have gone down into Muggle London and conjured a wet bar at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

“Come in, Mr Granger,” Slughorn smiled and pulled him into the classroom. Harry hurried to the empty seat beside Sirius, still watching the fat professor in horrified wonder.

“Grotesque, isn’t he?” Sirius whispered. “He’s head of Slytherin House. Tried talking me into switching houses so he could have a whole ‘set’ of Blacks. Freak.”

Harry nodded numbly, barely listening to Sirius as he wondered how Snape could be such polar opposites of the man who taught him his subject.

The man smiled at each face as he took silent roll; like McGonagall, he had been at his post for years and knew each student in his class. Harry felt a tiny thrill as Slughorn looked up at him and checked him as being present. He made no comment about Harry and continued on to look Hermione’s way. As he watched Slughorn introduce the potions they would be learning over the course of term and set them to brewing, he noted the man’s pleasant and easy smiles, quickness to praise and eagerness to get students interacting and interested in his subject.

No part of his teaching style had rubbed off on Snape.

As if sensing Harry’s thoughts, the greasy Slytherin turned and glared at him.

“Bloody Slughorn’s bloody set of bloody Slytherins,” Sirius muttered under his breath. “Bloody Snivellus.” He turned his anger toward his potions ingredients, chopping the fidgety newt eyes in half with worrying disregard for the safety of his own fingers.

“Sirius, calm down,” Harry hissed. “It’s just Snape.”

Sirius looked hard at Harry and replied in a low voice only he could hear. “He’s not just Snape. He’s Snivellus. He’s a git and I hate him.” His abrupt shift to anger did not fit at all with the light and teasing attitude he had shown out in the corridor. The insults Snape had thrown at him had simply rolled off his back, but now he was clearly affected. “Don’t you defend him!”

“I’m not defending him,” Harry protested quietly. “I don’t know him well enough to defend him.”

He did know Snape well enough to hate him. The man had tormented Harry since he first stepped foot into the Potions classroom and had nearly forced him from his chosen career path because of his dislike of Harry’s father. But he remembered what he had seen in the Pensieve on the last night of his Occlumency lessons – James and Sirius and Peter gleefully tormenting Snape, attacking
without provocation and humiliating the boy. Yes, he had insulted Lily Evans, but that happened after he had been harassed and hurt publicly; he lashed out at whatever and whoever he could, and it happened to be Harry’s mother. Would he have called her a Mudblood if they hadn’t angered him first?

“I think,” Harry said calmly, “that you should just let him be.”

“Where’s the fun in life if I can’t torment Snivelly?” James chimed in from the table in front, not bothering to lower his voice. Snape raised his head enough to glare through a curtain of dark hair.

Even after viewing Snape’s memory in the Pensieve, part of Harry still held onto the hope that his father was not as Snape had made him out; that the memory was flawed or skewed against him. What he had seen of James Potter since arriving in 1976 had been nothing like the boy in the memory. He had seemed very nice to Harry, if slightly over-confident and overshadowing. Seeing him interact with the Slytherins, however, in was clear that the memory had not been altered.

James really was as bad as Snape had always told him, he realised with a sickening twist in his gut.

Harry looked at the boy that would become his father and found it hard to believe the girl he saw in the Pensieve would ever agree to date and marry him. Remus and Sirius had each explained to him that this boy was not who he really was; this was the incomplete James Potter before he had added the compassion and dedication that would make him worthy of Lily’s attention and Dumbledore’s respect. Even knowing that, Harry couldn’t believe people could look past his cruelty. He was fine and pleasant and funny to most people, but he quite clearly could be horrible if he decided he did not like a person.

Worse still, that decision was as seemingly arbitrary and impulsive as anything else he did; James Potter didn’t need a reason to dislike someone, the dislike was reason enough. His arrogance didn’t sit well with Harry.

“Harry? … Harry!” Sirius poked his arm, making him jump at the unexpected contact. “You were staring. Mind wander off on you?”

“Sometimes,” he said apologetically.

“Can’t say I blame you, having to listen to James go on,” he smirked, all animosity gone from his system.

“Oi! I resent that! I’m perfectly charming in every way except where a certain Slytherin is concerned,” James protested and threw a fistful of newt eyes at them.

“Behave, you two!” Remus chided sharply.

“Oh, no! He’s pulling out his Prefect voice,” James moaned and held his fingers to make a cross at arms’ length, warding off the boy’s authority.

Sirius grabbed Harry and ducked behind him. “Protect me!”

Harry glared over his shoulder and saw his young Godfather staring up at him with enormous puppy dog eyes. He had to blink several times to figure out if Sirius had actually transfigured his eyes into those of his Animagus form, but they were just normal, very round, very adorable human eyes.

‘Adorable?’ Harry snorted. That was probably the last description he would have ever thought to apply to Sirius Black.
He might have spent the rest of class looking at the eyes of his playful Potions partner, but he was saved that awkwardness by the sizzling coming from their cauldron.

“The potion!” Harry said and hurried to lower the flame and stir the concoction. “Enough playing for now, alright? I’d like to not get on Slughorn’s bad side my first class.”

“Yes, sir, Harry James Granger, sir,” Sirius barked and returned to readying the newt eyes, this time with considerably more care for the placement of his fingers in relation to the blade.

Sirius, Harry found, was a far better potioneer than he had imagined, not that he ever really thought much on his Godfather’s abilities to brew a healing salve. But he worked with as much speed and efficiency as young Severus Snape, while leaning on the table in casual conversation. Snape, by contrast, remained hunched over his table working with silent and furious diligence for the entire class.

Harry wondered if their comparative skills in Snape’s best subject was part of their dislike for one another. Given the comments about Regulus Black, he suspected there was much more to it than just classroom competition.

As he considered the possibilities, he grabbed a handful of dried leeches and aimed them at the simmering cauldron. A large hand closed around his wrist and pulled him back.

“Careful,” Sirius warned. “It’s still got five minute of low simmering before we can add those safely. Unless you’re so keen to escape that you’re willing to destroy half the classroom to do it.” He smirked and held Harry’s wrist firmly in his hand, thumb brushing lightly over his pulse.

‘Useless Potter,’ Harry thought angrily, glaring his frustration down at the shrivelled little worms. ‘What the hell kind of Chosen One can’t even brew a bloody potion? If Voldemort really wanted to kill me all he’d have to do is lock me in a room with potions ingredients and tell me to brew something as simple as a goddamn healing salve. I’d blow myself up inside of an hour.’

“Don’t,” Sirius whispered so close to his ear that Harry jumped.

“I wasn’t doing anything.”

He smirked at the quickness of the boy’s denial. “You were thinking you’re useless. That you should be perfect, capable of doing everything asked of you the first time without any trials or errors, that you’ll never be as good as the rest, that you can’t possibly compete... Stop me if I’m getting close.” He said it with such certainty that Harry began to wonder if he was a Legilimens.

“No, I—Why would you think that?”

“Experience,” the boy said darkly and tended the potion for a moment before turning those familiar grey eyes back to Harry, a strange, tense look on his face.

Harry did not have to feign confusion. He knew some of Sirius’s history, but, as the summer had taught him, there was so much more to Sirius Orion Black than he could ever hope to know. That he could ever feel useless was an impossibility; the Sirius he knew had been full of confidence. Even as he died, Harry could see it in his posture.

He blinked back tears at the memory and bit back consoling words. He wasn’t supposed to know about Sirius’s mad family or that he had only just moved in with the Potters after finally running away from home. Thankfully he was spared Sirius noticing any of this as it played across his face.
The boy had turned away to throw in the leeches and stir vigorously until they dissolved and thickened the brew to the consistency of chilled honey as per Slughorn’s directions.

For lack of anything better to do, Harry cast a charm on the vials to make them unbreakable and labelled them just as Slughorn called their time to an end, requesting samples of their work.

“Shortest takes the samples up,” Sirius said quickly.

Harry stared at him and his abrupt mood shifts. In the space of a single Double Potions class, Sirius had run from taunting to violently angry, playful to depressingly sombre. He was back at playful again, which suited Harry just fine. “Are you going to pull that every class?”

“Probably,” he smiled and thrust the vials into Harry’s hands. “Now go on, I’m hungry and won’t risk you getting lost in the dungeons.”

“I think I know how to climb stairs, thanks,” Harry retorted and walked away.

His world took an unexpected turn and he felt his feet fall out from under him. He tumbled to the stone floor, landing hard and knocking himself cross-eyed in the process.

“Oops,” a familiar deep voice said in a sarcastically innocent tone, earning a chuckle of appreciation from the Slytherin side of the room.

“What the hell was that for, Snape?” Harry spat as he rose.

The Slytherin stepped closer, “I thought a blood-traitor like you should get accustomed to the view, since you’ve so lowered yourself by the company you keep.”

“That ‘company’ is my family, you git,” he sneered as he had only ever seen Malfoy manage.

“Now, now, Mr Granger, Severus,” Slughorn called to them. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Granger fell and blames me, Professor,” Snape said as his housemates snickered. “Can’t imagine why.”

“Perhaps because you tripped him, Snape.”

Harry’s defence came not from his left where Sirius stood but from his right; the boy had to grip the table to keep from falling again as his defender stepped up beside him. Lily Evans, his mother, glared past him, directing all her venom at Snape. “You should apologise.”

Snape’s confident and hateful smirk fell momentarily as he looked at the girl. It had to be Harry’s imagination that he saw pleading in those black eyes. A murmur from the Slytherins behind him set Snape’s features back to anger and he spoke again. “I’m so sorry you’ve chosen to turn your back on your heritage, Granger,” Snape told Harry before turning his seemingly emotionless eyes back to Evans. “There, is everything all better?”

“Mr Snape,” Slughorn said, his joviality considerably diminished. “Twenty points from Slytherin for your disregard for classroom rules, and I don’t think I’ll be extending that dinner invitation to you tonight.”

Snape’s smirk fell and his eyes narrowed at Harry. He sneered, “You still lost your samples.”

“Fuck,” Sirius cursed and kicked a table leg. “I already cleaned out the cauldron.”

“Accio Black-Granger vials!” Harry called with a wave of his wand. The two unbroken glass
vessels rolled from their place beneath a far table and flew into his waiting hand.

“Unbreakable glass. Learned that one a while back.” He grinned sarcastically at Snape and strolled up to place the vials on Slughorn’s desk.

The professor smiled. “Very clever, Harry,” he said. “Ten points to Gryffindor. And I wonder… are you free for dinner? I’m holding a small gathering tonight, nothing fancy, just dinner and talk among friends. Lily will be joining us, of course.” He looked at Harry expectantly, his moustache quivering excitedly.

Harry remembered from summer that Slughorn had a ‘collection’ of students from years of teaching at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had used his love of acquiring bright and talented witches and wizards to bring the old man back to teaching; Slughorn had been eager to collect the famous Harry Potter. Harry didn’t like the sound of being collected, like he was just a bug that Slughorn was anxiously waiting to pin into a frame and hang on a wall.

“I’m still getting settled in, Professor,” Harry replied quietly. “Maybe next time.”

“Nonsense, my boy,” the rotund man proclaimed. “You have the entire weekend to settle yourself in. Besides, who better to educate you about Hogwarts that its most promising students?”

After two more excuses failed, Harry was forced to accept the invitation; it seemed that he would end up as part of Slughorn’s collection regardless of the decade.
In honor of the first day of autumn and the fact that it actually FEELS like the first day of autumn down here in the South, I bring you another chapter! My having been deathly silent for about a month there might also have something to do with another update, but whatevs.

Hermione started fretting over Harry the second they left the classroom. Her hands flew to his head, feeling through his hair for bumps and pulling his face down so she could look into his eyes for signs of concussion. He tried to wave her away, embarrassed to be so babied in front of James and Sirius, but she was having none of it.

“Oh, Harry, I was so worried.”

“What for?” he looked at her as if she had gone mental.

“Well, the last time you were attacked...” she gestured to their current surroundings and companions as if it were obvious. The three Marauders looked at each other, trying to sort out her meaning.

He sighed and shook his head. “I wasn’t attacked, Hermione. He tripped me. I think it would take a lot more than a git with a big foot to make that happen again, don’t you?”

She huffed and agreed, but continued to study his eyes. “Harry, how long can those stay in?” the girl worried aloud. “Don’t they need cleaning?”

Harry frowned. Tonks had given him the box for the contact lenses and told him to read the instructions or risk getting a scar on his buttock like she had... or something like that. He had thrown the box into his trunk without reading it and had not gotten the opportunity to look at the box since arriving. The ocular healer told him that the lenses were charmed to resist dirt and grime, but he couldn’t remember for how long. “I dunno.”

“Harry,” she said gravely. “If even a single grain of dirt gets under and scratched your cornea, you could go blind!”

He laughed. “I’m already nearly there without my glasses, what’s the last of my sight?”

“Harry!” she snapped.

Grumbling, he fished into his bag for his glasses and the case for his contacts. He stopped walking just outside the Great Hall and tried hard not to shake as he brought his finger dangerously close to poking his eye out, touching each lens in turn and bringing them to the case.

“Oh, help me out here, Hermione... I can’t see the case to put it away.” She pushed the glasses onto his face. “Cheers,” he said, put the lens in the case, stowing it in his bag.

He frowned at the way the world turned fuzzy around the frames of his glasses and at the weight pressing down on his nose. Two days without glasses and he was reluctant to have them back
again. The risk of poking his eye out suddenly seemed well worth it.

His eyes fell on James, who was staring in open-mouthed astonishment, looking as much like a mirror to the boy as anything else.

“What?” Harry asked, worried that he looked stupid in the frames Lupin had helped pick out.

James didn’t answer; he turned to Sirius and their mouths stretched into devious grins.

“We have to take advantage of this, Prongs,” Sirius said as the grin cracked his face. He grabbed Harry and pulled him to stand beside James, studying the two bespectacled boys. “I thought it was uncanny before, but now… If he keeps his eyes down… No one would know the difference!”

Remus and Hermione cleared their throats simultaneously, each sporting a disapproving scowl.

“Excuse me, but what exactly are you planning to drag my brother into?” she demanded, her voice hard with displeasure.

“And precisely how large a mess am I going to have to clean or cover up?” Remus inquired.

James and Sirius froze. They knew what to do with Remus – ignore him. But Hermione was an unknown variable. Was she seriously as strict as she appeared? Would she report them to McGonagall or Dumbledore? They glanced at each other, hoping to see an answer, but found only worried questioning in the other’s face.

Harry snorted, shattering their fears.

“Don’t you laugh at me, Harry Granger!” Hermione warned, which only made him burst into proper laughter. “Harry!” she said and stomped her foot. She wasn’t smiling, but her face had lost its hardness.

She was a pushover, James grinned. This year was going to be the best yet. He watched Harry hurry away from his sister as she tried to smack him. The boy, who now looked even more like James Potter than seemed possible, ran into the Great Hall and dropped onto the bench, knowing Hermione would never make a spectacle of herself in the presence of half the teaching staff. She glared at him, though without much venom, and sat further down from him.

“You should be careful, Hermione,” Lily warned.

“What?” Hermione looked at her, confused and slightly panicked.

“You should be careful of Potter,” she said. Hermione’s eyes went immediately to Harry, the first Potter she had known and still the first that came to mind when she heard the name. “And Black and Pettigrew. They’re troublemakers, and they’ll take advantage of you for not knowing any better.”

Hermione doubted they were as bad as Lily made them out to be, but she nodded her understanding anyway. “Not Remus, though?”

“No,” Lily thought about it, “Remus is okay. He lets them get away with far too much, but he’s a solid bloke.”

Hermione said nothing. She knew that much about Remus without Lily telling her. Remus was the best professor she ever had, and a good friend to Harry. It would require no stretch of the imagination to claim that he was one of the best men she had ever met, possibly the best. She had
worried that seeing him so young might alter her opinion, but, theatricality and quick grins aside, he was the same Remus Lupin as he ever was. It was comforting.

Not wanting any further attention drawn to herself, she redirected the conversation, “So you’re going to Professor Slughorn’s dinner?”

The girl rolled her vibrant green eyes. “Don’t remind me.”

“How is it that bad?”

Lily sighed, taking a moment to gather her thoughts into words that a new student might understand; all her friends knew her stance on the Slug Club already so she had yet to have to explain herself to anyone.

“It’s… Well, it’s all a bit contrived,” she said slowly. “Slughorn handpicks the best students or the ones related to talented or prominent witches and wizards to be in his club. He has us over for dinner and holiday parties. Sometimes his former students come and it’s all very impressive, really, how many of his students have gone on to high positions in the Ministry, Gringotts or been on Quidditch teams all around Europe. I mean, you should see his quarters. You can barely move for all the tosh he’s got in there – all gifts from members of his club. It’s a monument to ‘Look Who I Know’.”

“If it’s just a bit annoying, then why don’t you want to go?” Hermione asked.

“I’ve nothing against Slughorn,” Lily insisted. “He’s a great teacher and really does a wonderful job at making sure we understand Potions…”

“But?” Hermione prompted.

Lily paused again to consider her words.

The girl was far more deliberate than Hermione had expected; given Harry’s frequent outbursts over the past year, she had assumed his temperament came from his mother since James had shown no signs of being quick to shout.

“I really don’t like the idea of being part of a collection,” she frowned. “I’m not something to be paraded around and talked about as if all my own work and accomplishments – even in other subjects – are because I’m in his club.”

Hermione couldn’t imagine any professor, even the preening Horace Slughorn, attempting to claim the hard work of a student and another teacher. She tried to picture McGonagall or Flitwick standing up in the Great Hall and proclaiming all the students’ Outstanding levels in Potions was because of their own influence. It was ridiculous. Slughorn was clearly a far cry from the man who would take over as Potions Master.

She certainly couldn’t picture the scowling and sinister Snape fostering goodwill and career opportunities for any of his students, regardless of their house, blood status or level of dunderheadedness.

“I suppose in a way it’s good to have connections, especially when you’re Muggle-born,” Hermione commented. “Even if you do have to put up with a bit of glory-hogging.”

“How did you know I’m Muggle-born?” the redhead asked. Her green eyes sparkled with curiosity in just the same way Harry’s did. It was more than a little strange being around someone so like her best friend and false sibling.
“Oh… no, I was talking about me,” Hermione backpedalled quickly, fighting with herself to keep focused on the present and not reveal too much because her thoughts had wandered off. “I meant it would be nice for me, since I’m a Muggle-born. But I’m glad I’m not the only one.”

Lily smiled. “No, there are a few others. Tildy and AJ in our year, and Michael’s one year ahead of us. Joss over there in Hufflepuff and his sister Mina, obviously, but she’s over in Ravenclaw.” She pointed to them each in turn. “There’s more, but I don’t know their names. It’s not like we have a special club or anything.”

“That elitism is best left to the purebloods, I think,” Hermione laughed her agreement.

“So you’re brother isn’t Muggle-born?”

Hermione’s smile fell. She knew the subject of Harry would turn up eventually, but she had hoped she could have put it off until getting to know people a bit better. “No, he’s from a wizarding family. His mum was Muggle-born, though.”

“What are the odds that the Muggle family that adopted him would have a witch, too?” Lily wondered aloud.

“Well… I was already born, so maybe they knew I was a witch and thought it would be a good placement,” she replied quietly, crossing her fingers under the table that it wasn’t too much of a stretch.

Lily nodded, accepting the idea as being more plausible than simple coincidence. Their conversation turned to classes, Hermione eagerly asking the girl about what to expect from the courses and teachers. Lunch passed with Lily hardly getting a question of her own in, especially once Mary, Tildy and Silvia joined them.

Mary had gotten a new *Witch Weekly* that morning and, having read it surreptitiously during Potions, she took over the second half of lunch paraphrasing the article on Muggle make-up techniques being the craze in Wizarding Paris. Hermione, an expert in faking interest after years of listening to Harry and Ron’s Quidditch talks, easily slid through the conversation without saying anything, paying only enough attention to recognize that Mary was winding down.

As the girl paused for breath, Hermione managed to sneak a question in. “Are you taking Herbology?”

They all nodded.

Mary replied, “Yes, I’m not all that good with plants, but I did well enough to keep going for NEWT levels. Professor Sprout is great. She started our third year, and is easily among my favourite teachers. You can tell she loves her subject. But she hates if you turn up late.”

“We’d best hurry,” Lily agreed. “I’ve got to go swap out my books.”

They rose and hurried from the Great Hall, rushing through the corridors and up the staircases to Gryffindor tower and back again. The girls were amazed that Hermione could remember the complicated route after only a day and a half. Mary opened her mouth to comment, but the sight of the Gryffindor boys took attention away from Hermione’s prodigious memory.


Lily’s smile fell as she saw the messy black hair of a boy that could only be James Potter; Sirius was standing beside him talking nonstop. She huffed and marched ahead ready to tell him off for
being so presumptuous, “Potter!”

Harry turned and James grinned as he saw her approach. Her indignation faltered. She wasn’t sure which one she was supposed to be nice to and which she disliked on principle.

“Harry,” Hermione pointed to the boy who was smiling sheepishly. “Not Harry,” she pointed to the boy with the enormous and hopeful smile.

“Right,” Lily said, still frowning at their similarity. “I’ll make you nametags later.” She grabbed Harry’s arm and pulled him through the door to Greenhouse Six. It was not as overgrown as it was in their proper time. Hermione supposed that Professor Sprout had built her collection of magical plants up in the twenty years between now and then.

“I’m not the best at Herbology, Harry, but you can partner with me if you like,” Lily offered.

“Yeah, sure,” Harry mumbled quickly. His mum wanted to be his partner. An excited flush covered his face, one that did not go unnoticed by James or Peter.

“Prongs,” Peter said quietly.

James narrowed his eyes at them, watching their interaction. Harry was blushing, but he wasn’t doing anything that would qualify as flirting. “I see it. It’s the heat… it had damn well better be the heat.”

Peter’s watery eyes flicked between James and Harry, watching them each intently as he dug lazily in the dirt and pretended to listen to Professor Sprout. Harry glanced sideways at Lily whenever she was too busy to notice, a tiny smile touching his mouth. He kept a respectful distance, his hands never once ‘accidentally’ brushed hers and he barely spoke a word to her. His sister did most of the talking. Still, he was blushing and smiling in a way that did not sit well with Wormtail.

“Quit staring, Peter,” Sirius said. “You’ll make Granger think you’re in love with him.” Peter stuttered and turned a deep, embarrassed red, dropping his eyes to the dirt and not looking at Harry again for the rest of the class.

As they were dismissed, he dropped to the floor, pretending to tie his shoes when really he was listening to the conversation between Evans and the Grangers.

“Hermione, would you mind helping me with my essay?” Lily asked. “I’m such rubbish at Herbology.”

“As a Prefect, I think it’s your responsibility to set a good example and perform to the best of your ability without outside help,” Hermione said with a smile. “But Harry’s pretty good and I’m sure he’d be willing to help you if you asked.”

“Harry?”

The boy mumbled something that sounded like a ‘yes’ and Peter looked up in time to see Evans give Harry a quick, one-armed hug. “Thank you!”

He mumbled again, blushing deeply and glaring at his sister.

Evans hurried off to join her waiting friends, but the Grangers remained. Harry, showing more energy than Peter had ever seen the boy demonstrate in the brief time he had known him, threw down his trowel and turned angrily on his sister. “Hermione, what are you thinking?”
“What?” she asked with innocence no one would believe.

“Offering my help to Lily,” he gestured wildly to the space the redhead had just occupied, his voice growing to a near-shout that sounded like James when he yelled at his Marauders… well, when he yelled at Peter, since he was the only Marauder who ever needed to be properly yelled at. “Do you have any idea how awkward that’s going to be? Did you even think at all?”

“Harry,” she sighed, not in the least bit annoyed that he had just insulted her intelligence. “I know how much you want to talk to her. You were stealing glances at her all through class. Now you have something to talk about.”

Running a hand through his hair, Harry growled even as his shoulders slumped, “But she’s my mo —"

“Mr Pettigrew,” Professor Sprout called cheerfully, making the boy squeak and jump up from his hiding place. “Since you’re still here, come and give me a hand arranging the Mandrakes for the second years. That’s a good lad.”

Hermione and Harry stared in abject horror as he scurried off to help the professor, not knowing how much he had heard and how he might have interpreted it. One thing was certain, he had nearly heard Harry confess that Lily Evans was his mother.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about things like this in public,” Harry suggested in a quiet voice, his aggravation severely diminished.

“Quite right,” Hermione agreed with a quick nod and hurried from the greenhouse. She ran headlong into Sirius, who did not seem to mind the contact in the slightest.

“Well that’s more like it!” he declared and wrapped an arm around the girl. “Hermione Granger, I knew you’d warm up to me.”

“Hands off,” Remus instructed and his friend begrudgingly complied.

“You’re no fun, Moony.” Sirius grumbled. “Where’s Wormtail?”

“Helping Professor Sprout move the Mandrakes,” said Harry, glancing over his shoulder to see if the boy was there listening to their conversation again. When he looked back, he saw James eyeing him with a frown.

“How do you know his nickname?” James questioned, his tone held none of the laughter it usually did.

Harry’s eyes went wide. How was he supposed to explain?

“I told him,” Hermione said quickly. “Remus told me you had nicknames… I sorted it out. It’s not as if it was difficult.”

James frowned, but nodded his acceptance of the explanation. He still gave Harry another unfriendly once-over before he turned and started up the hill. The boy was beginning to worry that a prank might be heading his way.
A Night With Friends

Chapter Summary

In which some truths are discovered.

Harry sat uncomfortably on his chair, trying with all his might to Apparate back to Gryffindor tower, though he had no idea how to do it. He had once managed to magic himself to the roof of his school when Dudley and his gang were chasing him, so why couldn’t he muster the power necessary to escape now? Never mind that Apparition was impossible inside school grounds; surely if one was desperate enough, the barrier preventing it would come down.

It wasn’t that the chair was uncomfortable, far from it; it was well-padded and the back seemed to mould itself to Harry’s as if it knew the precise curvature of his spine. As chairs went, it was far comfier than the hard, worn wooden benches of the Great Hall.

The chair was not the issue. It was the room in which the chair was placed and the company sitting on the surrounding chairs.

The chair and Harry were in Professor Horace Slughorn’s private quarters among witches and wizards from almost every house and year. They were names and faces that he knew well from reading his schoolbooks or the Daily Prophet. Nearly every one of them would grow up to be a person of some note in the wizarding world, though not all for good reasons. Ron would have died to be in the same room as Dougherty Hornbuckle, currently a seventh year Hufflepuff, and later Seeker for the Chudley Cannons from 1980 to 1987. Next to Dougherty was a Ravenclaw Harry remembered seeing in the paper over the summer, she had been arrested for killing a Muggle and announcing her support of Voldemort; a later article claimed she had been under the influence of the Imperius Curse, but it still chilled Harry to be sitting across a table from her.

And then there was the particularly handsome Ravenclaw sitting at Slughorn’s right hand. The boy was smiling widely at his placement, offering a hearty and false chuckle every time Slughorn boomed out a belly-shaking laugh.

“Gilderoy, my boy,” Slughorn said and turned his attention to the boy beside him, “do tell us what you’ve been up to all summer.”

Gilderoy Lockhart smiled, his teeth as impressive and white as Harry remembered them. “Well, professor,” Gilderoy began, “I’ve been reading up on my Charms.”

“Your best subject,” Slughorn commented fondly.

“I do try at Potions, sir,” the boy insisted, “but I’ve just a knack for Charms. And it’s a good thing I was studying my advanced Charms, too...”

As the boy began a long-winded story in which he, naturally, featured as the hero, Harry wondered if any part of the tale was true or if his tendency toward theft and deceit was already a part of his character. Young Gilderoy looked to be in his fourth year, hardly old enough to be playing around with advanced charms during the holidays. He was still bound by the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underaged Sorcery, too, and would have been in serious trouble if he had managed a
charm as impressive as he was currently describing.

“—and then I raised my wand and uttered the counter-charm,” Gilderoy paused dramatically and looked around the table to make sure everyone was as impressed by his story as he thought they should be, “and my friends all applauded as I gently lowered the girl back to the Earth.”

“Quite astounding,” Slughorn agreed and patted him on the back. “Lucky you were there.”

“Yes,” Gilderoy said as he ran a hand through his thick hair. “That’s what they told me.”

Harry covered his mouth with his hand so no one would hear the snort escaping. He had somehow maintained a straight face as Lockhart spoke, but the pompous declaration at the end was too much. His ribs ached from trying to hold the laughter in; they ached even more when his neighbour elbowed him sharply.

“Behave, Harry,” the girl chided.

He looked over and saw Lily Evans glaring at him. It was strange looking into eyes identical to his own. Sure, he saw the green, almond-shaped eyes often, but that was in a mirror, looking out from his own face. Those eyes should be surrounded by thin metal frames and topped with black eyebrows. They were not meant to be unprotected beneath a dark red fringe.

It took a monumental effort, but he managed to look away from Lily’s eyes long enough to notice that she was fighting a disbelieving smile, too. She was having far more success than Harry was.

“How can you keep a straight face?” he asked her quietly, pretending to lean over to look for a dropped napkin.

“Two years of practice,” she muttered. “You’ll get better at it.”

“Let’s hope I don’t have to,” he replied and sat up straight. Gilderoy was still talking, which didn’t surprise Harry in the slightest; he always was a glory-hound. Lockhart as a grown man would fight perfect tooth and manicured nail to get his face on the front page of the Daily Prophet. Harry really didn’t care except that Lockhart had been fond of trying to drag him along, too.

His ribs got another sharp jab. Blinking, he realised that nearly the entire table was looking his way.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Harry?” Gilderoy said with a winning smile.

‘Just can’t leave me alone, can you?’ Harry snarled internally. He managed a noncommittal smile and nodded. “Yeah,” he said. It was all Gilderoy needed to keep going.

“Just as I was telling you,” the boy proclaimed. The other diners clapped their hands politely or nodded approvingly.

“Do you even know what you just agreed to?” Lily asked, a smile pulling at her mouth.

“No… what did he say?”

The girl shook her head at Harry’s foolishness, her face set with seriousness. “He said that pansies are the greatest flowers and that a real man would happily wear them in his hair. He’s planning on making this Monday official pansy-lovers day,” she informed him. “You agreed to champion the day for Gryffindor.”
Harry felt his stomach turn and the blood leave his face. Had he really agreed to something so stupid? “You’re joking. Please tell me you’re joking.”

Lily just shook her head again and turned her attention back to the table and the conversation, which had somehow managed to escape Gilderoy’s grip. Slughorn was talking to a Gryffindor who looked rather like a third year Slytherin from Harry’s proper time; he couldn’t remember the boy’s name, but he had the same long nose and deep-set eyes. He found it hard to believe that any Gryffindor family could create a Slytherin child, but Sirius was a lone Lion in a long line of Snakes. So clearly it was possible.

For the first time, Harry wondered if there had ever been a Slytherin in his family. He had only really thought about his immediate family, his mum and dad, both of whom were in Gryffindor. Lily was Muggle-born, the first Gryffindor the Evans family had ever created, so her lineage was not up for much debate. James, however, was from a pureblood line of witches and wizards going back to the founding of Hogwarts or even earlier. Was there ever a time when they were Slytherins?

Consumed as he was by these new thoughts, he didn’t need Lily to further bruise his ribs to see that Slughorn was standing and beginning to wish them a good night. Harry rose with the others, taking the professor’s hand when it was offered and shaking it as the man spoke pleasantries Harry was not particularly interested in hearing.

He escaped into the hall outside Slughorn’s private quarters in the dungeons of the castle, carefully avoiding Gilderoy Lockhart. The Slytherins moved off to their dungeon-level common room, and the pleasant chatter continued among the remaining students as they walked up the stairs. Harry stuck close to Lily, not wanting to get pulled into a conversation with Gilderoy Lockhart about Pansy Day or whatever nonsense he might be on about.

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” Lily commented. “You’ll look great with flowers in your hair. Especially purple ones; they’ll contrast nicely with your eyes.”

“Stop talking,” Harry grumbled, not daring to look at her. He knew she would be fighting laughter and couldn’t bear to think of his mother making fun of him.

“You can’t take a joke,” she muttered as she shook her head.

His head snapped up and he was staring in open-mouthed confusion at her. “Joke?”

Lily could only laugh at the look on his face.

“That is not funny.”

“Yeah, it is,” she disagreed and laughed up three flights of stairs, Harry glowering along behind her, red-faced and thoroughly annoyed.

His indignation grew with each step but he managed to push out a sentence to end her laughter, “And you yell at James for playing tricks on people.”

The girl’s smile dropped off her face. “That is totally different,” replied the girl stonily.

Harry just pushed past her and marched himself down the vacant hallway. As he neared the stairs that would take him up to the Gryffindor tower, he stumbled. His feet refused to move off the stone floor. “Peeves!” the boy shouted. This was so not the time for that irritating poltergeist to be playing tricks on him.
“I think you mean ‘Evans’,” Lily said as she walked up behind him and shoved him rudely. Harry had to flail his arms to keep from falling. The girl, for all the damage she was causing to his ego, simply sat herself down on the stairs and waited for him to right himself.

“What the hell?” Harry demanded as soon as he was certain he wouldn’t fall forward onto the stairs and break his face.

“You need to listen, and if sticking your feet to the floor is the only way to make that happen…” she sighed and twirled her wand in her slender fingers.

“Aren’t you a prefect?” he questioned. The majority of prefects Harry had known would never have done something like this – Ron and Malfoy excluded. He had never thought his mum would be the sort to use her magic and position against someone. Since he knew so little about her, he had filled in her personality with the only other person he knew that was anything like her, imagining her as something of a Hermione. They were both Muggle-borns, Gryffindors, prefects. Surely, the love of rules and setting of a good example came as standard with all that. How wrong he had been.

“Deal with it, Granger,” she spat, glaring at him. She stood abruptly, and poked at his chest. “I am nothing like Potter. He hurts people for a laugh.”

“And what did you just do to me?”

“Taught you a lesson about keeping your ears open,” she insisted.

“Bollocks! You were loving seeing me squirm,” Harry matched her glare.

The girl clenched her fists at her sides, clearly fighting with herself to keep from slapping him. “It would have served you right to agree to something as stupid as that. You’ve no idea what idiot plans Gilderoy comes up with!”

“Believe me, I do,” he replied in a dark mutter.

“You don’t! He landed three girls in hospital last term because they agreed to some stupid scheme of his,” she informed him. “They were out of school for a month while he came out of it smelling like—”

“A pansy?” Harry interjected.

The snort came out of her before she could stop it. “That is not funny. I am trying to help you.”

“This,” he pointed to his feet, “is not the sort of help I need.”

“Well apparently it is,” she poked him again. “You’re the git stupid enough to agree whatever Gilderoy said. Where was your brain, Harry?”

So that’s what his mum thought of him.

Ever since learning that his parents were not useless, unemployed drunks as his uncle had always claimed, Harry had lived with the hope that they would be proud of him, impressed by his accomplishments and skill as a wizard. He had been as wrong about that as he had been about Lily being like Hermione.

Not caring that his feet were stuck to the stones, he let his knees buckle and crumpled into a heap on the floor. “Just leave me alone,” he told her in a hollow voice.
“Harry,” the girl said cautiously and put a hand on his shoulder. He didn’t bother slapping it away, just shrugged half-heartedly to get her to remove it. She sat down beside him. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“Clearly that isn’t true,” she insisted. “I’m not sorry for playing a trick on you, Harry. You need to pay attention to that idiot.”

“I don’t care about him. I know he’s a dangerous moron,” Harry replied in a dull tone. He wished she would just go away, but, for all her dissimilarities to Hermione, Lily was equally as persistent.

“Then what is it?” she demanded, her voice somehow both soft and hard at the same time. He knew he would have heard that tone often as a child, whenever he had accidentally broken something or turned her favourite jumper blue. Even though he didn’t want to, he found himself responding honestly.

“You think I’m stupid.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” he said, burying his head in his hands.

Her arm was around him, but he felt no comfort from it. “Harry, believe me, you wouldn’t be the first person to be duped by Gilderoy. I don’t think you’re stupid,” she said softly. “You’re just new and uninformed.”

“That wasn’t what you said a minute ago.”

“Again, you’re new and uninformed,” she said with a slight laugh. It forced Harry to look up at her; surely she didn’t think laughing at him was a good course of action at that precise moment.

The boy watched in confusion as Lily stood, muttered a spell and waved her wand at his feet before offering her hand to him. Tentatively, he shifted his feet and found them free from her sticking charm. He ignored her hand, standing on his own. The girl refused to be deterred; her hand remained out to him as he tried to walk past her.

“What is this? An apology?” he asked.

“It must come with the green eyes,” she commented.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “It must have.” He had, after all, gotten his eyes from his mum. Apparently, he had also inherited her temper and her tendency to shout things that he later regretted.
The awkwardness considerably diminished, Harry and Lily continued to walk to Gryffindor Tower. It was late when they stepped through the portrait hole. The few students still in the common room were not interested in either of them, and kept their heads down and quills working on the essays due first thing the following morning. The girl sighed her disapproval, but didn’t seem to care enough to tell them off for not doing their assignments sooner.

“You’re a prefect,” Harry reminded her, “shouldn’t you say something?”

“Like what?” she asked with a frown. “If they haven’t learned to do their work on time by now, my yelling at them won’t do anything.” She squared her shoulders and pushed her chin up. “Besides, a prefect leads by example.”

“Not doing a very good job there,” he muttered, receiving a smack on the head for his commentary.

“None of your lip,” she chided, but a smile tugged at her lips. “Now get to bed. It’s late and you’ve had a very long day.”

“Whatever you say,” Harry said, grinning at her turn toward motherly affection. Their misunderstanding had done wonders for the barrier between them. All of the polite standoffishness was gone. Lily treated him as if she had known him for years while Harry no longer worried about offending her or what she thought of him. It was more than Harry could have hoped for after meeting her properly only thirteen hours earlier.

He was still grinning as he stepped into the bedroom he shared with the other sixth year boys. The lights were low and there was snoring coming from James and Peter’s beds, so he didn’t have to worry about explaining why he was so happy or recounting the main events of the evening. Part of him was sad that no one was waiting anxiously for his return; Ron or Neville would have still been sitting up and awake in anticipation of his coming through the door, eager for him to tell them what the Slug Club dinner had been like. But Harry supposed that these four Gryffindors were used to Slughorn and knew all about his dinners. For all Harry knew, they might have attended one. Well, probably not Peter.

Given Sirius’s family, James’s talent on the Quidditch pitch and Remus’ status as a prefect and top-performing student, Harry had been surprised not to see any of them there. “Too many detentions probably,” he concluded in a quiet mutter.

“Oh, you’re here,” Remus said in a low voice, glancing up from his book. “I was hoping you’d be back before I fell asleep and the House Elves put the lamps out.”

“You didn’t have to wait up,” Harry insisted, feeling bad that he had deprived the boy of his sleep.

Remus shook his head and waved the concern away. “It’s the only time I get to read in peace without those idiots interrupting,” he said.

“I resent that!” Sirius declared in a sleepy yet still very impressive boom.

“Resent it all you like, Pads,” Remus laughed. “It’s still true.”

“Well, then go back to reading,” the boy instructed with a lazy gesture of his hand. “I need to speak with Harry James Granger.”
Harry shifted nervously toward his bed, watching as Sirius sat up and yawned. “Uh… maybe that ought to wait till morning. You look kind of tired,” Harry hedged.

“Nonsense,” Sirius shook his head and waited for Harry to sit down. Their beds were directly beside each other’s and carrying on a private conversation was not difficult, but Harry still didn’t care for the stern look on Sirius’s face.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Wormtail,” Sirius said simply.

Harry frowned his lack of understanding, convinced Sirius was too tired to realise he wasn’t making any sense. “What about him?”

“How do you know his nickname?”

“Hermione told me,” replied Harry slowly. They had already been through this after Herbology. Why bring it up again?

A smile pulled at Sirius’s mouth. It made Harry uncomfortable to see that smile because it gave the boy a decidedly smug air. He could have dealt with annoyed, confused, even angry, but smug set his gut to twisting anxiously; smug made him think that he had said too much, given something away.

He might not have known him well, but Harry knew how bright Sirius was. Even at sixteen, his young Godfather was sure to be able to work out that something was different about Harry and Hermione. Granted, even with all the clues laid out before him, the odds of arriving at the correct conclusion were pretty slim. What boy, even an exceedingly clever one with a thorough knowledge of magic, would decide that someone’s strange behaviours were a result of that person being from the future?

No, they were perfectly safe.

“If you say so,” Sirius replied vaguely.

“I do,” said Harry with conviction.

Smirking, the boy laid back in his bed and waved his wand to close the curtains. “’Night, Harry James Granger.”

Harry closed the curtains around his own bed and lay down. He wanted to sleep, to drift off and spend the night recuperating from his trying day. He had not slept at all the previous night; there had been too much to think about, to worry about, to smile about. The stress of his second day in 1976 had worn him down – Potions, the confrontation with Snape, an evening with Slughorn, learning the truth of his mother’s character and now this brief but nerve-wracking discussion with Sirius. Tired as he was, however, he was not about to start believing he would sleep through the night without incident. He raised his wand and performed the charm he had been placing around his bed since July.

“Omni Silencio!” he whispered and sat in silence as he listened for the sound of Remus turning a page or someone snoring. When neither sound came to him through the barrier, he set his wand beneath his pillow and dropped down onto it.

He expected to lay there dissecting the meaning of his conversation with Lily or Sirius for some time, but sleep overtook him swiftly.
He was in Gryffindor Tower, sitting by the fire on the worn old couch. Lily sat beside him, laughing at something someone had just said. Remus was on a chair, reading a book and commenting whenever he felt his words might add something to the conversation. As interested as Lily seemed to be in what they were discussing, Harry couldn’t quite make out what they were talking about. The words were a buzz in his ears like insects in a summer field.

It didn’t matter, anyway; their company and the rest of the world around him faded as someone new entered the common room. He could not tell if everything and everyone had really vanished or if this boy was simply that much more interesting than the world around him, as if he carried a spotlight around to draw attention to himself. Even his hair seemed to radiate light, quite the feat given that every strand was black as midnight.

He dropped down onto the couch beside Harry, sitting so close he was half on Harry’s lap, one arm around his shoulder. Somehow he didn’t mind. This was Sirius, after all. The Ministry and the rest of the wizarding world might have thought him a deranged psychopath, but he had been the greatest thing to ever happen to Harry. Somehow it seemed as if Sirius felt the same way. He was always hugging Harry, amazed to have his Godson safe and in his custody. It was a habit his cousin had taken up after his death. They had been the sole inheritors of a recessive affection gene in the Black line. Now that Sirius was gone, it was up to Tonks to keep that singular trait going.

‘No,’ Harry thought. ‘He’s not dead. He’s alive and here with me.’

That was true. Sirius was there with him, alive and young as Harry could only have dreamed. He was nothing like the young Sirius Harry had imagined while at the Burrow. He wasn’t wearing torn and patched clothes typical of a London punk. His face wasn’t marred by a sneer. This Sirius was impeccably dressed in a Hogwarts uniform, handsome and smiling, his eyes bright as Harry had only ever seen in photographs before landing himself in 1976.

“Harry James Granger,” Sirius said, making Harry smile, “you think too much.”

He could only nod his agreement. “Why can I understand you?” Harry wondered. “I couldn’t understand Lily.”

“Because I’m brilliant like that,” he said with a shrug, as if Harry ought to know this by now.

Again Harry could only nod as Sirius starting talking, reminiscing about a prank he had once pulled on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. It was hilarious and devious and so like Sirius that Harry knew it had to be true even though this was a dream. Every time Harry laughed, Sirius smiled down at him and gave him a small one-armed hug. This was what it would have been like, the two of them together as Godfather and Godson. Laughing and hugging and happy.

This was what it would have been.

This was what it should have been.

But this was wrong.

Sirius should have grown angry at him by now. Every time Sirius appeared in his dreams, which was every night Harry dared to sleep, he was accusing or berating Harry for his stupidity. Lately, he had started rejecting him, too, shoving him away, denying the boy any right to apologise. Slashed and safety-pinned, Sirius would glare at Harry, punch him in the face or stomach and spit his rage down onto the crippled boy as he gasped for enough breath to apologise.

Sirius was still talking, speaking now about a prank he wanted to pull on Snivellus Snape. “—and
then we ought to—"

“I’m sorry,” Harry interrupted, not caring if it turned the dream into something more painful.

“You should be,” Sirius said darkly with a quirked eyebrow. “You weren’t listening, and I am highly offended.”

Harry laughed. Where had this boy come from? Just two days ago, a sneering, resentful Sirius had punched him in the gut and left him lying in a litter-filled gutter of London. Even in his dreams that had hurt… yet somehow Harry felt it was no less than he deserved. He wanted Sirius to make him pay for his recklessness. He had gotten the man killed, when all he had to do was dig into his trunk and find the two-way mirror the man had given him. Sirius had the other mirror in his pocket; if he had just used it he could have seen Sirius with his own eyes. Sirius could have told him where he was, that he was safe and that it was all a ploy.

“No, I’m sorry…” Harry stopped. Did he really want this to end? Did he want to lose this happiness? Did he really want Sirius to know what he had done? “I’m sorry…”

“You’re sorry that you keep interrupting me?” Sirius offered, eyeing him with concern.

“I’m sorry I got you killed. Voldemort, he—”

“You worry me, Harry James Granger…” Sirius said and shifted away from him on the couch; the sudden loss of contact left Harry feeling cold. “Here we were having a grand time and you start talking nonsense.” He turned away and started talking to James, who had apparently been there the whole time, though Harry hadn’t seen him.

“Let me explain,” Harry begged. “It—“

“No, I think that’s enough from you, Granger,” Sirius said dismissively. Somehow it hurt more than when Sirius had punched him. “You’re clearly too odd to make friends with. I’ve enough insanity in my life already, thanks.”

Harry tried to reach out and grab hold of his arm, to turn him around, to make him listen, but his hands refused to move. “But—”

“Just stop talking, Granger,” James chimed in, glaring at the boy for daring to speak to them. “I already have Snivellus to play with. I can’t be bothered with you right now.”

“Really, what were you thinking?” Remus shook his head. “Spouting nonsense about deaths and Dark Lords. Next thing, you’ll be saying one of us isn’t what we seem!”

“But he isn’t!” Harry shouted. “Peter’s not like the rest of you! He’s a rat! A traitor! He’ll get you killed!”

They turned their backs on him, shaking their heads and muttering about him. Their voices lost their distinctiveness and became a loud and painful buzzing in his ears. Every time he tried to grab them, his arms refused to listen. Every time he tried to shout, his mouth remained shut.

“It serves you right for trying to tell them,” Hermione shook her head sadly. “I told you third year about the rules! You cannot alter the past.”

“I just want to apologise!” Harry insisted. “I have to apologise.”

“He can’t know,” she told him firmly. “None of them can ever know. You can’t tell them what
happens or who you are. They can never know you.”

Harry looked to the small pride of Gryffindors sitting so close to him – his mother, father, Godfather and the man he made a mentor. “But… they’re my family.”

“You are nothing to them,” she said flatly. “A stranger. And that’s how it’s going to stay.”

Remus looked up, sadness on his face as he looked at Harry, but it turned to a smile. He raised his hand and gestured welcomingly. Harry thought it was for him, but he still couldn’t move.

“I have to go,” Hermione said. She gave him a small hug and went to sit by Remus, leaving Harry alone. Her voice joined the indistinct droning in his ears and she was lost to him, too.

How could she join them so easily? Sit with them and live life alongside as if they were anything but the most important people in the world? Straining against the bonds of magic holding him in place, he only succeeded in causing himself physical pain.

It was pointless.

He was powerless to save them, to help them, to warn them. He couldn’t even apologise.

He could only sit on the couch and watch them laugh and talk, not understanding a word of it and not being able to join in. They were lost to him, little more than pictures. Unable to watch any longer, he turned his back, but they were still there in front of him. He couldn’t get away. He was stuck, forced to watch the people he loved live their lives unaware of what was coming. He was unable to do anything to change it.

He was alone.

Useless and alone.
Concerns

Hands took him firmly by the shoulders and shook him violently. The black-haired Gryffindor groaned and tried to bat them away, tried to remain sleeping, but his attacker was having none of it. He gripped harder and shook him until sleep-encrusted grey eyes opened.

“Pads,” James whispered. “Wake up. Marauders meeting.”

Sirius groaned and rolled over. He had been having a very pleasant dream that involved no small amount of nudity and was in no mood for a pre-dawn meeting. James cursed and tried to roll him over or shake him back into consciousness, but Sirius refused to cooperate. The Chaser had to resort to his final option, and he threw himself on the sleeping boy. He didn’t weigh much, but he knew just where to aim his weight for maximum impact.

“Son of a bitch!” Sirius swore and sat up in bed, clutching his groin protectively and massaging his thigh where James had elbowed him. “Every damn time! There are spells for that you know! I’m sure they are more effective and a lot less painful… Ow!”

“I know, but where’s the fun in that?” James smirked and smacked his friend’s head. “Meeting on Moony’s bed.”

“Arse,” Sirius grumbled and shuffled across the floor to Remus’s bed. “What’s so bloody important you couldn’t wait until after I finished dreaming of naked—“

“Ah!” James held up his hand. “I’ve said several times already, I do not need to know who you are fantasising about. Keep it in your head where it belongs, Pads.”

“Spoilsport,” Sirius smirked sexily. “You know how much I love making you blush.”

“Gentlemen,” Remus said seriously. “We have something very important to talk about.”

Sirius looked up hopefully, “Is there nudity?”

Remus sighed at the boy’s one track mind. “Well, I’ll be naked, but I understand that has no effect on you anymore.”

“Oh, Moony, I still love you,” Sirius reached out and pulled the boy close in a mockery of a romantic gesture. As their lips drew so close they could kiss, they both started snickering with laughter. Peter’s disgusted look only aided their amusement, as did James’s disapproving scowl. “That’s closer than we’ve ever made it yet. Who knows how far we’ll make it before we start laughing next time,” Sirius commented with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Boys!” James shouted in a tone more befitting a prefect. “This is serious business. The full moon is coming and we’re not alone anymore.”

Sirius dropped his smirk and glanced over his shoulder at the bed where Harry was sleeping. “Uh… should we be talking here?”

“It’s fine,” Remus gave a dismissive wave. “I heard him casting a silencing charm just after you went to bed. We could destroy the castle and he wouldn’t hear a thing.”

Sirius frowned. “Why would he do that?”
“I suspect for the same reason you cast them,” the werewolf turned his lips up in a sexy smile and quirked an eyebrow meaningfully.

“How do you know about that?” the boy asked in an uncharacteristically small voice.

“The nose knows, my friend,” Remus tapped a finger to the side of his nose. “But my nose also tells me that he didn’t cast it to wank in private. He probably just talks in his sleep.” The boy shrugged and tried to keep from laughing at the pink that had crept into Sirius’s usually manicured mask of cool.

“Back to the topic at hand,” James said, clearly getting annoyed at their lack of focus. “Harry seems a good bloke, but we can’t tell him. He might react badly or run screaming to the Ministry.”

“Why do we have to worry at all?” Remus asked. “I can dust off my old excuses. Fake a stomach cramp and pretend to spend the night in hospital like I did first year.” He frowned at the idea. It had been years since he had to hide his condition from someone living in such close quarters. He did not like the idea of having to lie again.

“But what about the rest of us?” James asked, his face implying that the problem should have been obvious. “He’ll notice that all four of us have left for the night. He’s not blind.”

“I can go it alone,” Remus said.

“No!” All three protested.

“We are not leaving you alone with the wolf,” James said.

“Right,” Sirius agreed and wrapped his arm around Remus’ shoulder. “The wolf loves it when we all play together. Besides, when you’re alone he tears you up. I think Harry would notice if your stomach cramp left you covered in disturbingly large wounds.”

Remus laughed humourlessly, “You three didn’t.”

Sirius’ smile fell. “We were eleven,” he reminded his friend. “Eleven year olds are hardly known for their observational skills. Thank you very much, Mr Lupin.”

Remus rolled his eyes, but didn’t argue the point. “Fine, what do you suggest?”

Peter’s face lit up. “Food poisoning!”

“What?” They stared at him like he had gone mad.

His pudgy hands shook with excitement as he explained. “At dinner, we make a point of all eating the same thing and something Harry doesn’t eat – that shouldn’t be too hard considering how little he eats. Then, we all say we’re not feeling well and head to ‘hospital’.” He drew quote marks in the air with his fingers.

“Devious as ever, Wormtail,” James nodded approvingly. “So Wednesday night we have to actually watch what we’re eating.”

“I don’t know about you, but I always watch what I eat,” Sirius said with a dramatic toss of his long black hair. “I have to maintain my girlish figure.”

Remus snorted. “And then he wonders why he can’t find a steady partner…”

“That is odd…” Peter frowned. “Yesterday was Friday, but you didn’t have a date. You always
have a date, sometimes two.” He studied his friend, the handsomest student, not just in their year or house, but in the whole school. Something was off or maybe it was just the irrationally early start to their first Saturday playing tricks on him. Sirius did not shrink under their gaze, nor did he make pathetic excuses. He simply shrugged as if he couldn’t be bothered.

“Any other Marauders business?” James asked.

“About Harry,” Peter said quietly. “I think he might like Evans. You saw what they were like in Herbology.” He blinked nervously and watched as James’s hazel eyes narrowed to slits, glaring past Sirius to Harry’s bed.

He had his suspicions, but having someone else voice concern only added to them.

Knowing how jealous and possessive the spoiled Marauder could be, Remus felt compelled to intervene before the mischievous prankster started to use his creative mind to think up ways to hurt the new student. “She’s not your girlfriend,” Remus reminded him. “She’s turned you down every time you ask, James.”

“I know that!” he said defensively, bridling under the reminder that all his efforts had yielded no results.

“And did you tell him that you’re interested in her?” he asked, knowing the answer would be negative. “Did you specifically say to Harry that you have been trying to win Evans since third year?”

“Well… no.”

“So you just assumed,” he paused and looked hard at his friend, “that a new student who doesn’t know you and has never met you would know to stay away from a girl who never willingly speaks to you?” Remus raised an eyebrow.

How he hated that eyebrow. That eyebrow always made him feel stupid. “Fine, I see your point,” James growled. “I’ll tell him first thing.”

“Why wait?” Sirius smirked. “We had to get up early, maybe he should, too.” He hopped off Remus’s bed and ran the short distance to Harry’s, throwing the curtain wide. He looked down and saw the deep creases marring the boy’s brow, and he stopped.

That was the same worryingly intense look he had seen in the hospital wing before he knew the boy’s name; he had not seen it since that first evening, not even when he faced Snape in anger. Looking more closely, he saw Harry’s face slick with sweat, his shirt was soaked through, his sheets were twisted tightly around his body and his mouth was moving with a steady stream of speech. The silencing spell was in place, and he couldn’t hear the boy’s dreaming words. However, Sirius was certain that whatever he was saying would break his heart.

“On second thought, the kid’s probably had it rough… I’ll leave him be for now,” Sirius said and went back to his own bed, throwing himself down and closing the curtains before the others could see the worry on his face. Sirius Black was not supposed to worry, not about a new bloke he knew nothing about.

He wouldn’t be able to sleep now. His mind was too busy trying to process the difference between waking Harry and sleeping Harry. The two Harrys were as different as, well, day and night.

As he lay behind the curtains of his bed, the Marauder considered his options. He had questions and wanted answers. Simply asking would be the route Remus would likely suggest, but that
lacked a certain finesse that Sirius was famous for. No, some snooping would be far more interesting and much more fun. He had to find a way into the trunk; there would certainly be something worth finding in there. The locks had resisted his attempt at picking, so he needed to find the keys…

“If I were a key, where would I be?” Sirius muttered to himself. “Well, if it were me, I’d keep it around my neck.” He frowned and brought the image of sleeping Harry James Granger to his mind. Had there been a necklace? Yes, a tooth. Very cool, but not in the least bit helpful in opening a trunk.

“What are you hiding?” he wondered.

“You know what they say about people who talk to themselves, don’t you?” a voice that could have been either James or Harry spoke from the other side of the curtain.

“First sign of insanity?” Sirius replied with a smile.

“No, you’ve got an idiot for an audience.” Sirius could hear the smirk in the voice and assumed it was James.

“Prongs, you’re a git,” he informed the speaker.

“I know he is, so what does that make me?”

“Oi! I heard that, Granger!” James called from behind his curtains. “I’ll have none of your lip in my house, young man.”

“Sorry, dad,” Harry replied. Sirius couldn’t see it, but he just knew there was a cheeky grin on the boy’s face. What happened to the boy with the rabbit heartbeat and night terrors? He looked out from behind his curtain and saw Harry digging in his trunk, a clean, dry tee-shirt covering his torso. Beneath his wild hair, his face looked as normal as anyone’s now that he was awake, though the shadows under his eyes hinted at a night that was in no way restful.

“Granger,” James hopped out of bed and stood over the boy, arms crossed and face stern. “We need to have a talk.”

“What did I do now?” Harry groaned and stood.

Sirius smirked at the reaction. The boy was definitely a troublemaker.

If James noticed Harry’s reaction, he wasn’t showing it. He kept his hazel eyes narrowed and demanded, “Evans… what are you playing at?”

Harry frowned and studied him a moment, worry clear on his face. “Uh… nothing?”

“Don’t you lie to me, Granger,” James jabbed the boy’s bony chest with his finger. “Do you like her?”

Harry’s face turned a disturbing shade of green and his eyes went round, as if James had suggested he fancied Snivellus instead of the comely Lily Evans. “No!”


Harry stuttered and flushed and turned green all at the same time. It was a look that did nothing for the handsome boy, Sirius decided. “I… I just… don’t.”
“Okay,” James said. “Good. ‘Cause she’s mine.” He glared at him, though there was no call for it. “I’ve been after her for years and I will not have some look-a-like taking advantage of all my hard work.”

Harry shook his head, eager to move the topic to something less Oedipal.

“So why did you go all blushed and embarrassed when you worked with her in Herbology if you aren’t interested?” Sirius asked. It was honest curiosity, but he managed to make it sound like an accusation, which only added fuel to James’s dying fire.

“Yeah!” James practically shouted with renewed suspicion.

The boy squirmed under their scrutiny and groaned that they wouldn’t just take his word for it and let it go. “She …she reminds me of my mum, alright? They have the same eyes and it… made me nervous.” He shrugged and tried to sound casual about it. He failed.

“Oh,” their eyes fell to the floor awkwardly as they remembered that he was adopted, which meant his mother was most likely dead.

Remus cleared his throat. “Well now that you’ve both made complete arses of yourself, I think some breakfast might be a good plan. Eh, Harry?”

“Uh, yeah…” Harry dashed between the two abashed Marauders and out to the washroom.

“How do things always have to get so complicated so quickly?” he asked his reflection in the mirror. The haggard boy looking back at him provided no answers, just made him wonder how long it would be before they started questioning why he was barely sleeping. He thought he was doing pretty good keeping them from being suspicious. It was easy enough given how friendly they all were; he simply fell into place alongside. He was not pretending to be anyone other than himself – with a different name, past and parents – when he was with them.

Sighing, he washed his face and threw on the clothes Tonks had bought for him. The jeans and tee-shirt were loose on his thin frame, though he could tell they should have been embarrassingly tight. Tonks seemed to think he was a sexy devil and wanted him to dress as such. “Tonks… I miss you already.”

He hurried back and threw his pyjamas on the bed, grabbed a jumper and followed Remus out to breakfast. James and Sirius avoided his eye, too humiliated to even apologise. He had to give their outrageous suggestion one thing – it drove all thoughts of his dream from his head. Although, he would have welcomed an outright fistfight with James over the disturbing thought that he was attracted to his sixteen-year-old mum.

“Sorry about them,” Remus said after a considerable silence. “They’re gits.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed quietly and did not encourage the conversation any further. Unlike the others, Remus was perceptive enough to realise this and didn’t press the issue, even though he was very curious about Harry and his mother and his reaction to Lily Evans. It was only the boy’s third day in their company and such intimate information was more than they should have expected. It was easy to feel comfortable around Harry since he looked so much like their long-time friend, but he was not James Potter. To assume he was as similar in personality as he was in appearance was an insult to the boy.

“Are you going to eat today?” Remus asked, half-joking. He had noticed Harry making an effort to force food into his stomach when it clearly pained him to do so.
The boy smiled. “I’m trying. Give me time and I’ll be eating as much as you.”

“That is not a goal you should strive for…” Remus laughed and gripped the excess weight he carried around his torso. It would be gone after Wednesday’s full moon. His Lunar Diet, James called it. “It’s something I have to have for my condition.”

Harry nodded understandingly before he remembered he wasn’t supposed to know about the lycanthropy. “What condition is that?”

“I get stomach sickness easily,” Remus lied flawlessly. “It comes on suddenly every few weeks. The healers can’t do a thing for me, so I have to eat my fill while I can.”

“Oh,” Harry said, trying very hard not to snort at the lame excuse. Did that really fool anyone? He sat down beside the big fat liar at the Gryffindor table and ate. Harry managed two sliced of toast and an entire egg, though nothing else. Remus shovelled in eggs and beans and mushrooms and tomatoes and toast at a disturbing speed. Harry wasn’t even sure if the boy was chewing or just dislocating his jaw like a snake and pushing it all in.

“The boy has a hard enough time keeping his food down as it is, Moony,” Sirius chided and sat down opposite. “He really doesn’t need to see that, too.”

Remus, the brightest and most articulate Marauder and the best teacher Harry ever had, replied with a highly inappropriate hand gesture.
Tuesday’s Defence Against the Dark Arts with the Ravenclaws was possibly the most worrying class the Grangers had ever attended. The Ravenclaws were the most curious witches and wizards in the whole school, and for the twenty minutes before class started that curiosity was focused entirely on Harry and Hermione. The questions they asked, some bordering on the inappropriately personal, were not the garden variety sort that had been thrown at them so far.

More than just family history, the Ravenclaws were interested in the structure of classes and the current political happenings in South Africa – Muggle and Wizard – as well as how Harry’s adoptive parents had figured into those events. Harry found lies rolling off his lips easier than truths. It was disturbing. Hermione just bit down on her bottom lip and nodded along with whatever Harry said. He hoped that she was taking mental notes of what he was saying, because he was certain that he would not remember it all later. When the tweedy Professor Morven strolled up to his lectern and began shuffling his notes for the day, the Ravenclaws finally retreated to their seats.

“Thank goodness that’s over,” Hermione breathed, not caring that James, Remus and Sirius were sitting so close they could hear her. “I’ve never been so nervous!”

“Not even that night last June?” Harry quirked an eyebrow, his eyes darting to Sirius. The boy in question raised an eyebrow of his own, highly intrigued by their purposefully vague way of speaking to one another in public. It was a form of lying he was quite familiar with, and he was curious what had happened to the pair that they had to hide it.

She glared at Harry and dropped her voice. “No, that was completely different and you know it. Things like that don’t make me nervous. They scare the daylights out of me, but not like this.”

He grinned and pulled her into a hug. His sister. He had always thought of her that way, and now he got to talk about her that way, too. “You, my sister, are braver than you let on.” She blushed and couldn’t find anything else to say.

“Is a little bravery all it takes to win a hug?” Sirius asked with a wicked smile pulling at his mouth. “Because I’m quite brave.”

“Yes, of course you are,” James cooed and patted him on the head as if he were a puppy.

“Do you see the way they treat a man of my stature?” he turned his puppy dog eyes to Harry again, begging for some proper attention.

Harry laughed. The Sirius he had known had never made such ridiculous noises at him, except when he actually was a dog. Part of him still ached for the loss and was desperate to apologise, but he remembered his dream. He knew what would happen if he tried to alleviate his own guilt; they would reject him as mad and he would be alone in the past.

No, it was better to just play along and deal with the guilt and nightmares.

“So demeaning to a member of the noble House of Black. A man of such lineage deserves some respect, Mr Potter,” Harry put on his best imitation of Professor McGonagall’s voice. He was understandably good at it after having to listen to the witch for five years, though the three other boys thought he had only known the woman’s voice for three days and grinned their approval at his skills.
“Thank you, Professor,” Sirius said and batted his lashes at Harry.

“Git,” Harry muttered but smiled all the same. “So, what do we know about Professor Morven, then?”

Sirius dropped his coy act and leaned back on the bench with no fear of falling backwards and cracking his skull open on the desk behind. “Nothing.”

“At all?” Hermione asked, stunned.

“He’s new,” Remus shrugged. “Every year the Defence teacher is new. They never last even when they’re good. Professor Hopstitch fourth year was really good, everyone liked her, but she quit at the end of the year. No one knew why.”

“The post is cursed!” Sirius insisted and made a show of blessing himself in every language and form he knew. Hermione frowned as he spat in the four cardinal directions, narrowly missing her bag.

“Rubbish,” Remus muttered, though he appreciated the power of magic more than anyone. His condition was proof enough that curses were real. He could feel the moon pulling on him already, though it would not be full until the following night.

Seeing the dark shift Remus’s eyes had taken, Sirius cleared his throat and turned the topic back to the Grangers. “What was your Defence teacher like then?”

Both of the Grangers paused with a slightly amused smile on their faces as they simultaneously thought ‘Which one?’

Sirius found their behaviour curious, but did not press the point. It was just another thing on the mental list he had labelled ‘Operation Not-Prongs.’ It had not yet been a full week since the start of term and already he was certain beyond the shadow of a doubt that there was something very strange about Harry James Granger and his sister.

“We’ve had quite a few Defence teachers,” Harry said, the tight smile on his face revealing nothing. “The best was our third year teacher. He made everything fun.”

“Speak for yourself!” Hermione cut in. “That final exam terrified me.” Harry shook his head and smiled openly.

“What did he do?” Remus asked.

Harry grinned and fought down a laugh, though no one could quite see what was so funny about the question. “It was an obstacle course, fighting all the creatures we had learned about that year – minus the werewolf, obviously – and ending with the Boggart.” The girl shivered at the creature’s name. “Hermione saw our Head of House telling her she failed all her classes, so she ran screaming. I think that’s the only time you didn’t get a perfect score.”

“It wasn’t funny,” Hermione insisted.

The girl was spared further embarrassment by the sharp slam of the classroom door. Everyone turned in their seats and looked at the door and then at Professor Morven. The middle-aged wizard looked like the sort of man Harry expected to see teaching at a Muggle university, all tweed jacket and dull olive jumper. He was a man one could set one’s watch by.

“I will accept no excuses for tardiness in my class,” Morven announced. “If you cannot arrive on
time, you will not arrive at all. No late work will be accepted, no extra credit will be given.” Hermione frowned at that. “We will begin with roll. Raise your hand when I call your name so that I can see your face. It may take some time for me to put the two together.”

“Adler.” “Here.”

“Batista.” “Here.”

“Black.” “Good morning,” Sirius replied, earning a scowl from the professor.

“Creighton.” “Here.”

The roll continued and for the first time in his life, a teacher did not hesitate, jump or squeak at Harry’s name. The three previous professors had not bothered to take proper roll; this was the first time Harry knew that the teacher was looking at him and checking off his name. Morven read the two Grangers off his list and continued as if Harry were nothing special. The boy had never felt so normal or accepted. He was Harry, just Harry, for the first time since he started Hogwarts. He looked at Hermione, who nodded and smiled. The delirious grin on his face was sure to draw attention, but he didn’t care.

Sirius added the boy’s strange smile to his Operation Not-Prongs list.

“This year,” said Morven, gripping his lectern and glaring hard at each student, “you begin working toward your NEWTs. The material from this day forward is going to be more difficult than anything you’ve ever encountered. The creatures you will study will be the darkest and most dangerous as will the spells you will be learning to defend yourself against.”

Harry waited for him to take exception to The Boy Who Lived, as most teachers did, saying something congratulatory or condescending about his past, but nothing came. Morven continued, his eyes glancing over Harry as they did over any other student.

“Today we will discuss the concept of nonverbal spells.” The professor flicked his wand and the chalk began to dance across the blackboard, drawing an intricate anatomical diagram of the human head and neck, with a second diagram that looked suspiciously like a Quidditch play.

Hermione raised her hand.

“Yes, Miss…”

“Granger, sir,” she replied and pointed at the board behind him. “I’ve read the chapter on nonverbal spells, and that looks nothing like the information provided in the book.”

Morven turned and looked at the chalk still dancing happily across the board. “It appears someone in this room is already rather adept at nonverbal spells,” he said dryly and flicked his wand to stop the chalk. “No more of that nonsense or I’ll take points from both houses and give everyone detention regardless of who is at fault. There will be no tomfoolery in my classroom.”

As the professor corrected the diagram on the board, Harry glanced down the row looking for signs of who might have cast the spell. He didn’t have to look far.

“I miss Hopstitch,” Sirius muttered. “She would’ve given me points for that.” He put his wand down in his lap. No sense getting detention if he wasn’t going to get proper credit for his efforts.

Harry felt a bit of lead fall into his stomach. He had known Sirius was clever, but he had never imagined he would be able to perform nonverbal spells without being taught.
Morven lectured at them for the next two hours about nonverbal spells. Hermione was taking notes furiously, while James and Sirius passed notes casually. Harry took down whatever sounded important, but couldn’t stay focused. He was too excited at being seen as normal but also disturbed by a growing uneasiness of what Sirius and James must think of him. They were clever, naturally talented and top in all their classes, while he was average at best.

He felt a poke in his arm and saw a small paper airplane jabbing at him. Grabbing it before Hermione could scowl at him, he opened it and read:

‘A Galleon says I can make Morven laugh before Halloween—Sirius.
Two says I can make him cry—James.
What’ve you got, Granger?’

He glanced over at them and saw the pair smirking at him, daring him. He just shook his head and tucked the creased wager under his notes and focused on Morven. The man was uptight. It didn’t seem that farfetched to want to make him crack. As he listened and took notes, Harry wondered what he would do to make the man laugh or cry or scream. He had no sway over the man; no Chosen One or Boy Who Lived status to fall back on. He had only his wits and talent here.

He could make a corporeal Patronus, which was more than most could do at his age, but what else? Compared to Sirius and James, he had very little to offer. His frown was still firmly in place as he walked to lunch.

“What’s the matter?” Hermione asked.

He glanced around and saw everyone was too far away or too engrossed in their own discussions to listen to anything he might say. “It’s just…without being the Chosen One or the Boy Who Lived… who am I?” he asked. He saw her frown and thought she was preparing to make fun of him. “I mean, what can I actually do? If I had to say ‘I’m Harry and this is what I’m capable of doing’…I don’t know what to say.”

“Harry,” she said slowly, her frown turning up into a kind, if somewhat condescending, smile. “You’re more than just some stupid prophecy. You fought a dragon and Dementors. You took on the entire Ministry. You can outfly anything regardless of how flash your broom is. You are brilliant, Harry, and I’ll smack you every time you say otherwise.”

A grin spread slowly over his face. He had done all that and most of it had nothing to do with what anyone thought of him. Dragons and Dementors don’t care what other people said about him. He defied the Ministry when everyone said he was just looking for attention. And he was good on a broom. Okay, so he did have something besides being Voldemort’s enemy going for him.

“Why are you asking, anyway?”

Harry’s grin dropped. “Well… Sirius and James… they…”

“Harry, are you trying to impress your d—” she stopped, remembering what happened in the greenhouse. “Are you trying to impress James?”

He shrugged and mumbled. “Maybe a bit. It’s just they’re so much better at being a wizard than me.”

“Don’t be a git, Harry,” a girl chimed in, smacking him on the head. Harry wanted to shout at her but couldn’t. Firstly, the girl was his mother, and, secondly, he was too worried about what she had overheard, which was apparently only his final comment, because she continued, “Potter and Black
are purebloods. They grew up around magic and can practice at home without being expelled. Of course they’re going to be better wizards than anyone else.”

She was right, of course. Harry had been playing catch up since day one at Hogwarts. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had made certain he was as clueless as a mushroom living in that cupboard, never knowing the truth about all the odd things he made happen. If he had known, been allowed to practice, then maybe he would be better.

All this flashed through his mind in an instant, but was quickly overtaken by a single, smug thought that he could not help but voice: “That was dangerously close to being a compliment,” Harry informed her with a smile. “Are you thinking of joining the Potter bandwagon?”

“Oh, shut up,” she waved his comment away.

Hermione fell back and let the pair bicker about James, his skills and what constituted a compliment, a pleased smile on her face that Harry and his mum were getting along.

“Should James be worried?” Sirius whispered in her ear, making her jump. She had not realised he was so close or that he had been paying them any attention. It was unnerving the way everyone kept sneaking up on their discussions.

“Should James be worried about what?” Hermione asked.

The boy lifted an eyebrow as he looked from her to Harry and Lily walking ahead of them as if his meaning ought to be obvious. “Harry James Granger…”

“What about him?” Hermione frowned. She didn’t like being confused or feeling stupid, but that was exactly how she felt with Sirius conducting the conversation.

“Are you seriously that thick?” he wondered aloud, earning him an insulted glare. Still, as he explained, he purposely spoke slowly so that she was sure to understand. “Harry is chatting with James’s girl. Should James be worried?”

Hermione managed to keep herself from slapping him, though it took considerable effort, and looked at the couple that had Sirius’s mind working; the pair–son and mother–were walking and talking as if they had known each other for years. Lily reached out and shoved Harry sideways, something Hermione often did to him and Ron. She realised that she and Harry were the only ones who knew what Lily was to him, that to everyone else their conversation looked like flirting instead of friendship and filial love on Harry’s part.

“Ew!” Hermione cringed, disgusted at the implication. “No! It’s not like that.”

“That’s what he said, too,” Sirius said. “That’s also the same shade of green he turned. Frankly, I think it’s an insult to Evans. Don’t tell James I said this, but I think she’s quite hot and wouldn’t go turning green if somebody suggested that I might like her.”

“Well that’s you, we’re talking about Harry,” she insisted.

“Still,” the boy pressed, “most blokes I know wouldn’t get so sick at the idea of being into a girl like that. Does he not like girls?”

Hermione glared at him again. “Just stop talking.”

He held his hands up defensively, “It doesn’t bother me if he swings the other way.”
“I mean it,” she said, her voice taking on a dangerous edge.

“I’ve known—“

“You really want to stop your mouth moving,” she informed him.

The boy smirked as if she had challenged him. She was a pushover; they had all seen how a laugh from her brother had softened her anger. “W—“ He frowned as the words died on his tongue. He tried again, but the words refused to come.

“I told you to stop,” Hermione reminded him.

Understanding came a half-second too late. ‘YOU!’ his mouth said, though no sound came out.

“I much prefer your company when you can’t speak,” she smiled and walked along happily, unperturbed by the fierce anger the silent boy was sending her way. His fingers flexed at his sides as he fought the urge to choke her. His attempt at a nonverbal reversal spell had no effect. He couldn’t undo it without knowing what spell she had hit him with. Remus or James might have been able to help him. If they didn’t wet themselves laughing first.

Hermione paused outside the Great Hall. “If you promise not to speak, I will remove the spell.” She waited patiently, a sweet smile on her face as she looked up at him.

He glared and hesitated and sneered but finally gave a brief nod.

“Good,” she said, and waved her wand. The spell was cast without words, so he still had no idea what incantation she had used to bind his tongue. A pleasant, if very smug, smile later and she was gone.

“Wench,” Sirius muttered. He stared hard at Hermione as he walked into the Great Hall, but the girl just ignored him. He grabbed Harry’s arm and pulled him away from his sister and Lily to sit further down the table with the Marauders.

He wanted to ask about the sister, but decided the slow, subtle approach might work best when discussing family. He couldn’t just ask outright what the hell he was doing with such a freakishly know-it-all, hard-nosed sister, now could he? That was not the Sirius Black way. Besides, she had cast a spell to keep him asking more questions about Harry and Lily, so how better to annoy her than by pursuing that line?

“So… chatting up Potter’s girl, are we?” Sirius asked.

“More like talking Potter up to the girl,” Harry said and took a tentative bite of sandwich. No one, not even Sirius, commented while he ate, fearful of putting him off. They might have been puerile pranksters, but they all knew that the boy needed to eat.

Waiting for him to chew and swallow, James grew positively explosive with delight. “What’d she say?”

“I think she’s coming around,” Harry commented.

“Yes, but what did she say?” James demanded, as if knowing the precise words the girl used might give him some edge in winning her over.

Harry just shook his head and pushed his plate away.
“Three bites? That’s all?” said Sirius, shaking his head in dismay. “That will never do.”

Moving with the reflexes only an athlete could possess, he reached out and grabbed hold of the boy, but Harry was no easy target; he managed to get loose with a triumphant laugh. The victory was short lived. Before Harry could escape the bench and run clear of his long reach, Sirius took hold again, pulling the boy against his chest and pinning his arms easily. Harry hadn’t the strength to fight Sirius off a second time and he could only curse at him.

“I do believe that puts the score at me one, you zero,” Sirius smirked, though he could feel the boy’s heart beating like a rabbit’s again and worried the strain of the struggle might have been too much for him.

“Moony,” Sirius said with a confidence he wasn’t feeling, “shove some food in this boy’s face before he dies, would you please?”

“I’m not hungry,” Harry protested.

“That’s because you never eat,” Remus said wisely. “Now shut up and open wide.” He pushed a slice of apple into Harry’s mouth when he opened it to complain again. With Sirius holding his arms down and Remus’s hand covering his mouth, he had no choice but to chew and swallow the sour wedge of fruit. Harry cursed them venomously in his thoughts even as his heart warmed with their concern.

“Better?” Sirius asked.

“No,” Harry grumbled.

“Well, we’ll just have to keep it up then,” he said far too brightly and hugged Harry closer until every bit of his back was pressed against him. “Moony…”

“I –“ Harry’s complaint was cut short by the apple slice entering his mouth.
Harry rubbed at the bruises on his arms, annoyed that he had not managed to escape Sirius’s grip. That boy was a lot stronger than he looked, and he looked pretty damn strong. He hoped Hermione knew the spell to heal them. As he waited for dawn and an hour that might have his fake sister rising from her own bed, he had time to think. Actually, he had more than enough time to think during the night while he avoided sleeping, but it was somehow easier to think in the early morning. The time limit placed on him as the others shifted in half-sleep and grew more restless as their dreams ended somehow made his mind work quicker.

The others had been behaving oddly. Admittedly, Harry had not known these younger versions of his friends and family long enough to pinpoint precisely what had changed, but he did know when. Over the weekend they had started watching him eat dinner. More than just watching to make sure he actually ate, which they had done since day one, they seemed to be watching what specific things he ate. What they planned to do with his preference for roast chicken and potatoes was rather worrying. Harry feared a prank was coming his way.

James, thankfully, was not eyeing him with angry suspicion any more, not now that Harry was providing him with details of his conversations with Lily and since he had turned so violently green when accused of liking her.

Still, he worried. Especially with the way Sirius was watching him. The boy’s eyes seemed to find Harry everywhere; even when he was clear across the raucous and crowded common room, Harry could feel the familiar grey eyes on him. He was quite adept at knowing when he was being watched after so many years of being on Voldemort’s hit list, and he was not at all sure what his young Godfather’s persistent stares might mean.

The Gryffindor in question grumbled and cursed. “What the hell time is it?”

“Time for you to quit your whinging!” James told him. “I’m trying to sleep.”

“Sirius Black does not whinge,” the boy insisted in a regal tone that had Harry burying his face in his pillow to keep from laughing. “Sirius Black makes plain his understandable vexation.” Returning his voice to normal, he added, “Besides, I’m told Evans has started heading to breakfast early this year.”

Harry peered out from behind his curtain, eager to watch the young man’s reaction to such information. He could hear the enthusiastic rustle of bed sheets being kicked away before James jumped off his bed, his hazel eyes shining despite still being slightly crusty from sleep.

“Hurry it up, Marauders! I’ve got a girl to win!” he ordered and raced from the dormitory to the washroom, leaving the others to rise at a slightly more subdued pace.
“So, exactly what time is it?” Sirius asked again.

“Time to get up, apparently.” Remus said and pushed himself from the warmth of his bed. “Damn, Harry, what happened to you?”

“Sirius,” he replied flatly.

“What’d I do now?” Sirius asked and stumbled out of bed, stopping abruptly at the sight of Harry without his shirt on. He was skinnier than Sirius had thought he would be, every rib and vertebrae jutted sharply, blue veins showed clearly through his white skin. His eyes raked over the boy, taking in the scars; it looked like someone had ripped into the boy’s arm and burned his side with a fiery torch. Harry was far from clumsy, so it was unlikely for him to have fallen into a sconce. He said he played Quidditch, but Sirius had never seen scars like that result from even the roughest game, unless South African rules were more lenient toward violence.

“Your fault,” Harry said and pointed to the bruises Sirius hadn’t even noticed. “I hope you’re thoroughly ashamed of yourself.”

Sirius nodded dumbly. If he had known what shape the boy was in, he would have handled him more gently.

James bustled back in. “What are we all standing around for? There’s a delightfully stubborn lass waiting for me downstairs,” he said and started throwing their robes at them. “Granger, put a shirt on before Padfoot wets himself.”

The others chuckled, but Sirius flushed and turned away. Their laughter was the motivation he needed to finally tear his eyes from the strange burn scars on Harry’s side. Magic should have healed those instantly. Very few things could scar like that in the magical world; Fiendfyre and dragon’s fire were the only things that came to mind. Another curiosity added to the Operation Not-Prongs list.

Remus, oblivious to Sirius’s growing list, looked at the scars and was more than willing to question the boy. “That’s a nasty one,” he pointed the scar on Harry’s arm. “What did that, then?”

Harry looked at the scar as if he had only just remembered it. The jagged wound that Wormtail had left when he took Harry’s blood to complete the ritual that resurrected Voldemort and made the evil wizard immune to the magic that had defended the boy for the thirteen years since his mother had died. The scar was neither large nor deep, but the man’s shaking hand had left a rough mark despite how sharp the knife had been.

“Difficult to explain,” he said slowly. “I kind of got cut.”

“Mighty ugly,” Remus commented, his eyebrow rising. “Looks rather like you had a pound of flesh removed. Make any deals with the devil lately?”

Harry chuckled darkly to himself. “No, but that’s never stopped him from trying.”

“This is fascinating, really,” James cut in, “but we’ve got places to be.”

“Don’t get your knickers in a bunch,” Sirius grumbled, still embarrassed at having James point out that he had been staring. He was usually so much more discreet when he was studying someone, unless he was being openly flirtatious and wanted the object of his scrutiny to know he was looking at them. Harry’s scars had simply caught him by surprise.

He threw his clothes on with far less care than he normally would, his mind too preoccupied trying
to figure out where on his list of Operation Not-Prongs the scars should be placed – before the intentionally vague and inexplicable knowledge of Peter’s nickname or after the rabbit heartbeat and nightmares.

“You’re looking rather dashing today,” Remus commented when Sirius turned around. He glanced down at himself. He had forgotten his jumper, and his shirt was mostly unbuttoned, his Gryffindor tie hung loosely from either side of his collar and his hair was messy from sleep. Overall he had the look of a young man who had not slept in his own bed the previous night. Sirius shrugged and decided to go with it.

“They’ll be all over you by lunch,” Remus warned.

“I can take it,” Sirius smirked. “I’m a big boy.”

“No you’re just bragging.”

Sirius patted his arm and winked. “I’ve seen you naked, Moony. You’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Whenever you’re done,” James sighed. He turned to Harry, who was trying not to laugh yet was also slightly disturbed at how flirtatious the exchange between his Godfather and favourite teacher had seemed. “Ignore them; they just like to freak people out.”

“You used to like to as well before you fell in love with Evans,” Sirius commented. He wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulder and started walking him out of the dorm to the Great Hall. “Back in third year, before Evans caught his eye, Prongs there used to love playing with people. He sent charmed Valentines to every single fourth year Ravenclaw telling them that he was madly in love with them. He actually got a few dates out of that one.”

“What was the point of that?” Harry wondered.

Sirius looked at him sideways. “You’re seriously asking the point of a prank? It’s a prank! There is no point aside from fun and fucking with people.”

“So…”

“So,” his grey eyes flashed with delight, “we waited to see which Ravenclaw blokes started freaking out when James came into the Great Hall, and those were the ones we went after. Wormy, Moony and I would steer each bloke one at a time to where Prongs was hiding, and he would try to make out with them. How many Ravenclaws did you make throw up?”

“Three,” James said with poorly disguised pride. “And one shat himself.”

“One actually kissed him back,” Remus added.

Harry stared in confusion and no small amount of shock that his father had done that. He knew his father was more than a little mean-spirited in his youth, but he had never imagined that any of his pranks might play on the sexuality of the other students. It would be hard enough to know you’re different at such a young age, but to have someone prank you because of it…

“I don’t think Mr Granger approves,” Peter said in a very good imitation of a prefect.

“Have we offended your delicate sensibilities, Mr Granger?” Sirius asked, an edge of worry tarnishing his humorous tone.
“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “I don’t see the harm in turning someone blue or sneaking a hair-
growth potion into their breakfast, but playing with someone like that… that’s not funny. That’s
just mean.”

There was a short minute of uncomfortable silence as the Marauders looked everywhere but at
Harry while they pulled at their collars and became fascinated with the texture of the stones on the
floor.

James cleared his throat. “You know, in my defence, I did let that one bloke down easy.”

“By telling him it was a joke?” Harry replied, his voice steely.

“No!” James said and glared at him. “I told him the Valentine hadn’t been from me; that I had sent
it to see if he’d go out with a friend.” Harry held his eye, waiting for more information. “Then
Sirius stepped in and saved me.”

“Huh?” Harry looked to Sirius, who still had an arm wrapped around his shoulder.

“I said the Valentine was from me,” he grinned. “We went out for about a month.”

“Oh… I hadn’t realised you were… you know,” Harry tried to force his voice flat and to keep his
eyes from growing too wide.

‘It isn’t weird; it’s only strange that he didn’t tell you before he died,’ he thought.

“I’m not,” Sirius said quickly. He dropped his arm and shoved his hands into his pockets, not
looking at Harry again until they were in the Great Hall and the topic had moved on to something
that didn’t have the new bloke making them feel like heartless and infantile jackasses.

Realising how awkward things had become between the five of them, Harry thought up a topic that
would have all of them talking normally again. “When are Quidditch trials?”

“Saturday,” James said, eyes bright and relief evident in his posture. “Pretty decent number of
people trying out. Though, Falligant is having another go,” he shook his head in dismay. He dared
to look at Harry’s face when he got no response from the boy. Seeing the boy’s lack of
understanding, he explained, “Tyler Falligant tries out every year. He’s never managed to catch or
block the Quaffle, not once. He’s afraid of Bludgers and has lost more Snitches than he’s found. I
wish he’d just give up.”

“Even Wormtail gave up,” Sirius commented. “No offense, Wormy, but your attempt at playing
Keeper did not go well.”

Peter shrugged indifferently but Harry noted the mild blush of embarrassment on his round cheeks.
If the boy had not betrayed his parents to their deaths, he might have felt sorry for him.

“At least Moony has the sense to stay on the side-lines,” James said and slapped his friend on the
back. Remus winced and shot his friend a flinty glare. “Uh… sorry… So, Harry,” he hurried to
change the subject. “You trying out?”

Harry shook his head. “I’d rather not.”

“Ah-ah,” Sirius leaned in and grinned. “I recall you agreeing to try out as Seeker if no one decent
could be found. You’ll be there, Harry James Granger, if I have to carry you to the pitch myself.”
He purposely poked at the bruise he had left on Harry’s arm. “And we both know I’m strong
enough to do it.”
“He’s right,” James said with a winning smile. “You did agree to that. And a gentleman always keeps to his agreements.”

Harry snorted. “I don’t know if that rule applies to you lot.”

“Oi! Cheeky bugger!” James threw half a slice of bacon across the table at him. “You wait till I’m your Captain, then you’ll have to show me some respect.”

“Respect is earned,” Remus muttered darkly. His hard eyes fixed onto his plate, still heaped with eggs and toast. The other three Marauders looked to one another sharply before their eyes turned worryingly to Harry.

“Remus, is it your stomach sickness?” Harry asked, remembering the rubbish lie he had been told. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Leave me alone!” Remus spat and pushed away from the table.

Sirius leapt up quickly. “I’ll take him to see Madam Pomfrey. You know that stomach sickness can be bad sometimes.” He climbed across the table and gripped Remus tightly by the arm, forcing him through the halls to the infirmary. James turned his enormous eyes to Harry, terrified the boy could see straight through the obvious lie.

“I had stomach sickness once,” Harry said quietly. “It was awful.”

Peter let out a hysterical giggle and James couldn’t hold back the relieved laugh. “Yeah, it’s pretty bad for Moony. He seems to catch it every month.”

Harry nodded sympathetically. All three ducked their heads to hide their knowing smiles and fought to keep from laughing.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve embellished just how dangerous the fight against the dragon was for Harry during the Triwizard Tournament. Clearly, he got burned in a very manly and impressive way. Ditto on the scar left by Wormtail in the graveyard. No point in this, really, aside from giving Sirius something to wonder about.
Pain & Discoveries

Carrying Sirius and Remus’s bags on their shoulders, Harry and James ran to the infirmary. Peter got to linger in the Great Hall since he didn’t have the grades necessary to take the Introductory Healing class. Harry couldn’t say it aloud to anyone except Hermione, but he was thankful Pettigrew had so few NEWT-level classes. He attended Herbology, Charms and Care of Magical Creatures with them and that was it. Hermione was stuck with him for Astronomy, too.

Harry had been surprised the boy was not in Potions with them given that he had been the one to brew the potion that brought Voldemort back to life. He supposed that without the threat of imminent death and promise of near-ultimate power, Peter just could not muster the interest or skill necessary to pass the Potions OWL.

“Good morning,” Madam Pomfrey greeted them as they rushed into the room with seconds to spare before the start of class.

Harry’s jaw dropped when he saw how few students there were. Five Gryffindors, three Hufflepuffs, six Ravenclaws and not a single Slytherin made up the class. There were more students in most of his other classes, and they were made up of only two houses. “Where are all the Slytherins?”

“Too good to take a class that includes Muggle methods of healing,” James muttered.

“Hurry along, Mr Potter, Mr Granger,” Madam Pomfrey ordered.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Harry said. “Um, I brought Remus’s bag…”

“Ah, thank you,” she said and collected it from him. “Mr Lupin is not feeling well at the moment. Would you be so kind as to provide him with notes? Thank you.” She didn’t wait for him to respond, hurrying on to the beginning of her lesson so quickly that most failed to register the fact that Remus, who wasn’t feeling well, was not actually in any of the beds.

“Welcome to Introductory Healing. This is the first year we are offering this class and with hard work on all our parts, it will become a regular fixture in the NEWT curriculum.”

Harry snorted, but managed to disguise it as a sniffle.

“Healing is a complicated field that demands a proficiency in many subjects,” she said with pride. “Healers like me and those at St Mungo’s undergo years of rigorous training in Charms, Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology and Anatomy. This course will provide an overview of some frequent areas of medical need – mending broken skin and bones, healing bumps and bruises and appropriate application of salves and potions. Anything more severe than that and you should contact a properly trained healer immediately. Trying to heal serious injuries with improper training could result in worsening the patient’s condition.”

Harry shared a quick glance with Hermione; the girl was biting her lip, no doubt remembering when Professor Lockhart had managed to remove all the bones from Harry’s broken arm. He had to presume that the fraudulent professor had not bothered attending this class while at Hogwarts.

“Who can tell me why it is important to learn Muggle methods of healing?” Madam Pomfrey asked. Lily raised a tentative hand and Hermione let her arm rise high as it always did. “Miss Evans?”
“Not all injuries happen in the wizarding world,” Lily said. “We might be in the Muggle world when someone gets hurt.”

“Correct,” Madam Pomfrey said with a smile. “Every year, you and your families travel through Muggle London to reach the Hogwarts Express. Accidents happen every day. Even something as simple as a stair could cause someone to trip, fall, break an arm or a leg. If you were in a crowd of Muggles, how would you help someone with a broken arm? We will be learning that this term.” She assured them. “But that is later. We will start with something much simpler but no less important: Memorisation of anatomy.”

Sirius groaned. “Anatomy? I know my arms from my legs, Poppy!”

“Really, Mr Black? So if Mr Potter had a spell go awry and dislocated his patella, you would be capable of locating it and setting it right?” Madam Pomfrey asked, her mouth in a tight frown.

“Well, if it was James, I’d just prod him until he yelled in pain…”

“Thanks,” James said. “Good friend you are.”

“Precisely my point, Mr Black. Without knowing what belongs where, how can you expect to return a bone or muscle to its proper place?” she waggled a finger at him. “There is more to healing than simply shoving a spoonful of potion into someone’s mouth.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Sirius said.

Madam Pomfrey herded her students around two beds, each with a skeleton lying on it. “These skeletons are complete and accurate, each bone labelled with their English and Latin names. The left is male, the right female,” she gestured to each. “For the most part, the differences between sexes at the skeletal level will have no bearing on what you will be learning in this class. Those differences in the muscles and tissues will, but that will come later.” She began lifting the bones one at a time, beginning with the skull and ending with the smallest bones of the toes, passing them around for students to study and note the names and their locations in the body.

By the end of class, each of them had a partial skeleton drawn and labelled on their parchment. Madam Pomfrey assigned them the task of completing their anatomical drawing and providing a twelve inch essay on the importance of knowing the underlying bone structure of the patient.

“Thank gods that’s over with,” Sirius announced and stretched his long arms out as they walked from the infirmary. “Now it’s relaxation for the rest of the day.”

“Speak for yourself,” Hermione snipped. “Some of us have other classes. I still have Astronomy tonight.”

He pulled her into a hug. “I’m so sorry for you.”

“Hermione,” Harry asked. “Why are you even taking Astronomy? It’s kind of useless.”

She managed to free herself of Sirius’s grip with a huff. “Knowledge is never useless!”

“So Divination…”

“Divination is just ridiculous,” she declared. “Nothing but death threats and pointless time wasting.”

“Yet staring up at the moon and stars isn’t?” Sirius smirked. “Unless it’s all about the romance…”
He dropped his smirk and closed his mouth when the girl stopped and glared at him. He knew what would come next if he continued talking when she levelled that glare at him. His charms had no effect on her and he couldn’t make her smile and laugh it off like Harry could, making the girl a far greater threat than either of the Gryffindor prefects.

“I think you should spend a little more time studying,” she narrowed her eyes to slits, “and less time acting the playboy.”

“Playboy?” he repeated, his sense of self-preservation faltering when his character and reputation were under attack. “I’ll have you know we’ve been in school a whole week and I haven’t had a single date yet.” She snorted, which only made him more indignant. “That is a record for me!”

“It’s true,” Lily said from Harry’s side. “Even I know that.”

“See? I’m making considerable progress toward improving my tarnished character, Miss Granger. Now, if I could just find a nice, steady girl—“

“Or boy,” Harry added.

“Yeah, or boy, that—“

“Wait, what?” Hermione glanced between them.

“I’m implying that with the affection of a good person I might improve myself beyond even your criticism,” he smiled.

“I gathered that,” she said slowly. “It was the ‘or boy’ part that startled me.”

He sighed and threw his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close as he started walking again. “Hermione, it’s the 1970s. Times, they are a-changing. Why limit yourself to just one gender, when there are so many possibilities. Hell, who’s to say that you couldn’t find your soul mate in the form of a giant…or a centaur?”

Harry smiled at the flush colouring his fake sister’s cheeks. He didn’t imagine he looked any more composed that morning when he learned that Sirius had dated a Ravenclaw boy some years back. Even if Sirius had been playing with the Ravenclaw then and with Hermione now, what he was saying did actually make some sense. Hagrid was half-giant. Granted that relationship had not turned out so well for Hagrid’s dad, but they had tried and ended up producing one of the kindest men Harry had ever known.

‘Why not?’ he thought.

“Leave the girl alone, Black,” Lily said. “You’ve made enough of a spectacle of yourself for one day.” She pinched at his arm until he let Hermione go. The flustered girl hurried to Harry’s side and tried to avoid looking at Sirius for the rest of their walk to Gryffindor Tower. When the boys ran up to deposit their bags, Hermione gripped his arm and held him back.

“What’s the matter?” Harry asked.

She looked around and spoke in a whisper so quiet that he could barely hear her, “Remus.”

“What?”

“Remus wasn’t in class. And it’s the full moon tonight. Is he alright?”
Harry sighed his relief. He thought for sure she would be questioning Sirius’s earlier comments. “Sirius took him to see Madam Pomfrey at breakfast,” he said. “I never knew his condition came with mood swings. He looked ready to hit someone this morning.”

“It’s a shame we can’t sneak him some Wolfsbane Potion,” Hermione said sadly.

“He’s got the others to keep him company,” he replied. Really, he wished the same thing. Even with the three Animagi keeping watch over him, Remus suffered more than he deserved when the full moon came. They had seen it for themselves third year.

The Marauders came crashing into the common room, singing an extremely rude song. Sirius saw their conference and stopped abruptly. “Oh! What’s this? Family meeting?”

“No,” Hermione said quickly and pushed past him to run up the stairs to the girls’ dormitories.

“Did I set her to thinking naughty thoughts about other girls?” he asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head. So much for the evolved sensibilities of his young Godfather. “No, she was wondering about Remus.”

The smile dropped off his face. “Oh, yeah, that stomach sickness is going around. Martin was saying he wasn’t feeling so good just a minute ago,” Sirius said and rubbed his stomach.

“Yeah,” Harry said slowly, unable to resist knocking the cocky boy down a peg after he made fun of Hermione. “Weird thing, though. I didn’t see Remus in the infirmary during class…”

Sirius’s eyes grew enormous and he turned to James for some help. “Maybe he was in the loo,” James suggested.

“For two hours?” Harry asked. “I hope I don’t catch that stomach sickness.” He quirked an eyebrow and strolled past them and up the stairs to drop off his bag.

“Shit!” Sirius kicked the table nearest. “He knows something.”

“If he does, it’s because you talk too much,” James hissed and slapped him on the head. “Keep your bloody mouth shut and stick to the plan. We eat whatever he doesn’t and run with the food poisoning idea Wormy thought up.” Peter beamed at getting credit.
Lunch was awkward. The three remaining Marauders were talking up a storm without actually saying anything. It was embarrassing for Harry to have to watch their painful attempts to keep him from noticing that something was wrong. All three boys just wanted to shut up and not talk at all, but that would have been even more obvious.

As soon as he could, Harry interrupted the long-winded debate over which sandwich was better to bring them to a topic that was safe and comfortable for everyone. “So, tell me about the Quidditch team.”

It was like a calming draught had been opened nearby; James, Sirius and Peter relaxed in their seats and sighed before James took up speaking again. “It’s a rebuilding year, but last year we were the best. Montague and Curtis were the single greatest Chasers you’ve ever seen. They were brilliant to Captain.”

“Brilliant to watch, too,” Peter added. “I’ve never seen such great broom handling. They could out manoeuvre anything in the air.”

“And Fenton was an amazing Keeper,” James continued. “It was like we’d bricked up the hoops. Nothing made it through unless he wanted it to. His brother is trying out Saturday. I hope he’s as good.” He paused and considered the roster of names, which he had apparently memorised. “I don’t see a good Seeker in the bunch this year.”

“They haven’t even tried out yet,” Harry said. “How can you know?”

James looked at him over the golden rim of his eyeglasses. If his eyesight was even half as bad as Harry’s he couldn’t see a thing, but the glare was effective in making Harry feel stupid. “I’ve been at school with them for years, seen them in the corridors, watched most of them in tryouts since I’ve been on the team… trust me, they couldn’t find their arses if their lives depended on it.”

“So, I guess you’ll be on the team after all,” Sirius grinned.

“What about Beaters?” Harry asked, ignoring the comment. “We had a pair of twins on our team until last year. They were brilliant, like human Bludgers our old Captain always said.”

“Well, you’re sitting next to one,” James commented.

Harry looked at the still-grinning Sirius Black. He wanted to smile, to ask when he joined the team or what broom he rode, but all he could think was that Sirius had never told him. Quidditch was Harry’s only escape, his greatest joy in life and it was something he could have shared with Sirius if he had known. He forced the pain from his face and asked, “You play?”

Sirius’s grin was fixed, but Harry couldn’t tell. Only James knew when the boy was forcing his face to remain in place like a mask. It was a skill he generally used for unpleasant family gatherings or when he was being told off by professors, not when he was discussing Quidditch. But something had passed over Harry’s face that made his own confidence waiver and he set his face to the mask to keep the boy talking.

There had been a moment of sadness and pain on Harry’s face when he learned that Sirius was on the team, followed by a question filled with disbelief. It didn’t fit; none of it. Something was definitely wrong with Harry James Granger, but Sirius could not sort out what.
“Yeah, I’ve been Beater for two years now,” Sirius answered confidently, even though his thoughts were miles away… or, more precisely, three inches away, where Harry sat on the bench beside him. “Starting to think I might give up the position to someone else, though.”

“Don’t you even think about it,” James said, his voice low and threatening in a way few ever thought he could sound. “It’s hard enough Captaining without losing the only hope we have of a good Defence.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Sirius saluted and turned back to Harry, whose mask was good but not nearly as good as his own. “How long’ve you been playing?” He watched the boy’s face as he spoke, looking for cracks in the mask where the truth could be seen. There weren’t many while Harry talked of Quidditch, he clearly loved it and the joy was real, but he paused occasionally as if editing while he shared his stories. Sirius found this particularly intriguing and wondered what he could possibly have to hide about Quidditch.

“We’ll have to pick this up later,” James grumbled. “I’ve been putting off that Transfiguration essay all week and I need to get it done in time to have that sister of yours look over it.” He grinned at the brainy gift the gods had bestowed upon him, standing and leaving the table without bothering to see if the others were following. He knew they were.

Harry watched him, wondering if there had ever been a time in his entire life when he had shown that much confidence. Probably not. Growing up a punching bag will do that for you, but there were times when he was pretty good. Leading Dumbledore’s Army, for one.

“Knut for your thoughts,” Sirius muttered very close to Harry’s ear.

“Stop sneaking up on me,” Harry grumbled.

The irritatingly grinning boy laughed, “I’ve been walking beside you for the past five minutes. It’s not my fault if you’re lost in your head.”

“Sorry, I do that.”

“A lot,” Sirius agreed. “I’ve noticed. Should I put a lead on you to keep you from walking into walls? Come to think of it, why don’t you get lost in the corridors while you’re lost in thought?”

“How could I with you always walking beside me?” Harry grinned cheekily. “Leave me alone for five minutes and then see what happens.”

Sirius was slightly annoyed at basically being told to piss off, but he didn’t let it show.

“No worries, mate. I’ll always be there to keep you on the proper path.”

It was just a playful comment, the sort he made to everyone, even teachers, yet it tore the happy mask from Harry’s face. Where a breath before he had been smiling, Harry now looked grim and haunted. The transformation was frightening. “You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Sirius didn’t know what to say. He didn’t dare call it a joke or insist that he was serious. Words came to his head and each one sounded more and more likely to anger the boy further. “Harry…”

“Forget it,” Harry said, adding steam to his movement and walking quickly ahead of Sirius. He disappeared around the corner and down a secret passage, leaving the corridor mysteriously empty when Sirius rounded the corner.

“Knowledge of secret passages,” Sirius noted with a quirked eyebrow and a leaden stomach.
“Think that’s right up there with worryingly large burn scars.”

His mental list of curiosities about the boy was growing by the day, but none of it made any sense. The last time he bothered with a list of unusual behaviours, everything pointed to Remus J. Lupin being a werewolf… and he had been right. With Harry, nothing pointed to any one definitive answer and it was going to drive him mad.

“Perhaps it’s time I spent some quality time with the sister,” he said to himself.

He ran the rest of the way to Gryffindor tower, barely slowing down as he gave the password to the Fat Lady. Most of the students were already clearing out on their way to classes; only a handful, mostly sixth years, had this period free, one of them was Hermione. She was sitting by the fire, reading her Astronomy text and jotting down notes that she deemed important or worthy of further research.

“Don’t you think you ought to rest if you’ve got a midnight class?” Sirius asked and dropped onto the couch next to her.

Impossibly, the girl ignored him. She turned the page in her book and continued to read, pausing only to add ink to the quill’s tip and write a note about the Andromeda galaxy. Sirius had the most disturbing sensation of what it must be like to be someone who wasn’t him, someone unpopular and unworthy of attention. It was not at all pleasant, and he would not allow himself to feel like that for a second longer.

“Have I offended you, Miss Granger?” he asked, his voice polite and charming and yet slightly sarcastic.

She sighed and dropped her book, glaring at him. “What do you want?”

Perhaps this was why James was so intent on chasing Evans. She didn’t want his attention, clearly, but it only made him more eager to give it. “To talk to you, obviously.”

“Well, I’m busy,” she huffed and lifted her book again.

“And I’m curious,” he smiled. “Were you this studious in South Africa or are you that far behind?”

“No, I was top in my class and we are in exactly the same place as you are here,” she snapped not bothering to look away from her book. Sirius let her read a few minutes more while he considered how to approach her. Charm clearly didn’t work. So school, then?

“Well, since you’re all caught up and the brightest witch at whatever school you went to –“

“Saint Brutus’s,” she informed him crisply.

“Right, St Brutus’s,” he grinned. “Would you mind talking me through Transfiguration?”

 Watching her eyes, he could see she wasn’t reading, but the book stayed up to block him from seeing the rest of her face. So she had something to hide, as well. It took a full minute for her to close the book and turn to look at him.

Being looked at by Hermione was unlike anything he had ever experienced. Her dark brown eyes, so warm when she was laughing with Harry or Tildy, studied him with the cold precision of a scholar; it felt like McGonagall was eyeing him. “I somehow doubt you need my help in any of your subjects, Sirius,” she said as her eyes finally settled on his. “So what is this really about?”
“Maybe I like you,” he offered. The girl snorted and cocked her head to the side, clearly waiting for a proper answer. “Fine, I’m curious about Harry. He’s odd.”

“Yes, he is,” she agreed. “But he’s the best friend you could ever hope for or the worst enemy you could ever make.” He wanted to laugh because it sounded as ridiculous as Harry’s claim about Hermione having the best command of hexes in the country. That had turned out to be quite accurate, however, so he doubted that her words were exaggeration. “You would be wise to give him space; he’s been through a lot.”

“What gave him those burns?”

Hermione’s glare faltered. “If he hasn’t seen fit to tell you, then I don’t think it would be right to say.”

“Bollocks,” Sirius said and stretched out on the couch. “He ‘hasn’t seen fit to tell’ because he’s had them so long he forgot they’re there. What happened?”

“If that’s what you think then ask him yourself,” she replied waspishly, quickly collecting her things and marching away from him.

“Protective sister,” Sirius remarked. She clearly knew all the boy’s secrets. Sirius understood the importance of keeping a painful past hidden, but he failed to see what could be so devastating that Harry and his sister couldn’t share even a little bit. “Granger! Wait up!”

“What now?” she snapped.

He pulled her back toward the fire and down on the couch where the rest of the common room couldn’t see them quite so readily. “Look,” he said, not bother to hide the irritation in his own voice, “I’m confused. He just changed, looked as if I’d hexed his puppy or something.”

“What did you do?” Hermione demanded, her voice hard.

Sirius felt more than ever that he was in the presence of a hard-nosed prefect. “All I said was that I’d always be there to keep him out of trouble. I say shit like that all the time,” he added defensively.

“Well, you shouldn’t with Harry,” she said, sadly. “Too many people have let him down. It’s best to just leave him be.”

“I’m not going to leave it,” Sirius spat, insulted that she would even suggest it. “How could I after that?”

“If you’re smart, and I know you are,” Hermione stared him down, “you will stop playing games with him.” His thoughts must have shown on his face because she nodded and left him alone on the couch to think over his own stupidity.

He didn’t know Harry. The boy had essentially told them nothing about himself, and he had been incredibly foolish to play his usual games with him. He looked like James, but clearly he wasn’t. The scars were proof enough of that; James had lived the life of privilege, getting away with murder because his elderly parents loved him to bits. Anyone who carried as many physical scars as Harry James Granger could not have parents who fretted and cooed over him. Sirius was starting to consider the very real probability of there being more mental scars to the boy than there were physical.

“What have you been up to?” he wondered as he stared intently at the fire and tried to arrange his
“Do that long enough, you’ll need glasses,” a boy commented to him. Sirius couldn’t tell if it was James or Harry.

“Know a couple of blokes that look dead sexy in glasses,” he grinned, keeping his eyes on the fire.

“Thank you,” the boy said as he sat on the chair. With the simple act of sitting, Sirius knew that the boy was Harry; James would have sat down beside him.

“I don’t know if you knew this,” Sirius said conversationally, “but I’m an idiot.”

“I had noticed,” Harry agreed, smile on his face.

That was all it took. Harry was not angry at him and Sirius didn’t actually have to apologise. He would have if it came to it, but only after another day or so of feeling like an arse. It was an unusual feeling, wanting to apologise; Remus often tried to shame him into feeling this way but rarely succeeded. Harry James Granger managed it inside a week of knowing him, making the boy even more special than Sirius already suspected.

“James sent me,” Harry said after a quiet minute passed. “Wondered why you weren’t upstairs getting ready for dinner.”

“Dinner?” Sirius checked the clock on the mantle. “How the hell long have I been sitting here?”

“Apparently a while,” the boy commented and let a satisfied smile take over his face. “Lost in thought?”

“Yeah, guess I was.”

“Welcome to my world,” Harry said. Sirius couldn’t help thinking that Harry’s world might be a very interesting place to be.
Even by Harry’s standards, dinner was odd. He sat with Sirius, James and Peter, as had become customary, but unlike usual the other boys did not attack the offered foods as soon as they appeared on the table. They all waited as if they weren’t sure what they wanted until Harry selected a bit of roast and potatoes and veg. Once the food was on his plate and well on its way to his mouth, the others started choosing their own meals. They ignored the roast and the potatoes and the veg in favour of chicken, rolls and salad. Even Peter, who enjoyed eating a bit of everything in increasingly disgusting combinations failed to select any of the foods Harry had chosen.

As much as he wanted to comment on their odd behaviour, he elected to ignore it.

“Has anyone been to check on Remus?” Harry asked and watched as the panic overtook their faces for a fraction of a second.

“Yeah,” James said. “I saw him after lunch. He wasn’t looking too well. Madam Pomfrey’s having him spend the night.”

Harry nodded and withheld his observation that James had, in fact, gone straight to their dormitory after lunch and remained there until they left for dinner together. This stomach sickness rubbish was clearly their plan to keep him from knowing about Remus’s condition, and he was not about to spoil it for them. So he just nodded a second time and tucked another bite of roast into his mouth. It was good, and if he could have stomached it he would have eaten every bit of roast and potatoes on the table since no one else wanted it.

“Eat a bit more,” Sirius elbowed him gently in his bony ribs. “Moony’s not here to help me force you, so you’ll have to manage it on your own.” He winked, reminding Harry of the boy’s cousin, the teasing Nymphadora Tonks. Perhaps it ran in their family, or maybe Tonks had picked it up from Sirius.

“Well, since it’s you…” Harry shrugged and took another bite of potatoes.

“Will that work regardless of what I tell you to do?” Sirius wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

A smirk pulled slowly at his mouth as if he were considering what Sirius might ask of him, “Probably.”

“I’m making a mental note,” the handsome Gryffindor said. “I may hold you to that later.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Harry said. The words were so like those he had used earlier, but his mood was light and teasing this time. Sirius could not stop his grin from growing even wider.

“You’re almost as bad as Moony,” James snorted. “And I didn’t think anyone could rival him when it came to fake flirting with Padfoot.”

Sirius sniffed in mock indignation. “Who says I’m fake flirting?”

Harry just shrugged and continued to chew his food. He appeared undisturbed by the comment, but his mind was in upheaval and threatened to take his delicate stomach along with it. He hadn’t actually realised that what he was doing was flirting; he thought he was just talking playfully in the same manner he did with Tonks. Was he really flirting? Did that mean that he had been flirting with
Tonks, too? Was that normal? Was this normal? Should he stop?

He liked talking with Tonks and Sirius that way. It was fun and slightly challenging in a way that nothing else was. His ears and tongue and brain had to stay focused on the whole person before him, taking in their words as well as their mannerisms to create the perfect comeback as quickly as possible. Say it even a second too late, and the moment was lost.

‘So what if I’m flirting?’ Harry thought. ‘What’s the harm?’

Sirius did not appear overly concerned, either, but they had already established that he did not particularly care what people thought of him or which sex he pursued. Although, that being said, did that mean that this teenage version of his Godfather was properly interested in him?

‘Surely not,’ Harry told himself. ‘He would have said something outright, wouldn’t he? Anyway, I look too like his best mate. Sirius would never go for someone who looks so much like James.’

After the brief moment of silence, Sirius deftly moved the conversation to Quidditch and the competition from the other house teams. Apparently, it was the easiest topic to ensure everyone was included and comfortable. Harry ate in silence, nodding his head in agreement, but offering no opinions of his own without prompting. He was so intent on keeping his mouth occupied with food to avoid having to talk that he ended up eating three times his usual portion, winning him a sharp stomach cramp before dessert appeared.

“I ate too much, I need to go lie down or something,” he apologised and pushed himself away from the table.

“Are you all right?” James asked. He was clearly worried, just not strictly about Harry; if the boy got too sick, he might end up going to the hospital wing in the night and discover they were not there. James did not imagine such an absence would go overlooked by their new friend. It was tempting to just tell him and be done with it, but it was Moony’s secret to share not his.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry shook off the hand Sirius offered. “Just need a bit of a lie down… or a throw up.” He laughed and left the Great Hall. Hermione was up and after him instantly.

“Is that level of sibling concern normal?” James wondered. He was an only child and truly didn’t know.

“I would tend to say ‘no’ but we know how rubbish my family is,” Sirius said lightly, glancing across the hall to the Slytherin table where his younger brother sat among his elitist friends. Regulus would never chase after him because he had a stomach cramp. Years ago, he might have, but not since they were in separate houses – both in and out of Hogwarts.

James’s frown stayed fixed to his face long after their voices dropped to low mutters and the conversation turned to Remus and his coming changes. Even as they planned their night’s excursion, his brain stayed focused on Harry. “Something’s off,” he said after their night was arranged. “With the Grangers, I mean… There’s something seriously weird there and I can’t sort out what it is.”

Peter nodded vigorously. He still didn’t believe a word of what Harry said about Evans reminding him of his mum. The boy was after James’s girl, he was sure of it.

Sirius shrugged, “Why do you think I’ve been working so hard to make nice with him?”

“I figured you wanted to snog him,” James said with a grin that fell as he continued, “Mind you, it is a bit creepy, you going after a bloke that looks so much like me… Is there something you
havent't been telling me?"

"Yeah," the boy whispered, low and seductive, as he leaned in so close he could have kissed his friend. "Your new jumper is ruddy marvellous. I'm planning on stealing it when your back is turned."

"Pads," his friend sighed, "I've already said what's mine is yours, so you can have it if you like... but it won't fit you."

Sirius sat back and hung his head. "I know," he said. "It's a damn shame you're so small. Your mum gives you the best jumpers. It's not fair!"

"Come on, Pads," James smiled. "You're practically a Potter now. Mum'll be buying you jumpers left and right. Come New Year, you'll be drowning in them."

"I'm holding you to that," the boy said. "I'm sick of you always looking better than me."

Peter snorted as their playful argument continued and all thoughts of Harry and Hermione fell away in favour of light hearts and loose tongues. They had a long night ahead of them, and a bit of fun was all they really wanted before it was time to fake illness and lie to their strange new friend.

It had been decided that Peter would initiate the lie. He was best when it came to skiving off, having successfully talked his way out of twenty-three classes by feigning illness. That might have had a good deal to do with his current number of NEWT-level classes, but at the moment that particular failing had little bearing on matters. As they sat in their dorm, James and Sirius lounging on Remus’s bed even though the boy wasn’t there and Peter sitting on the floor opposite, they watched Harry surreptitiously. The boy was sitting up in bed, reading, one hand pressed into his stomach in an effort to quell the pain.

"How's the stomach?" James asked.

"Still hurts," Harry said, slightly annoyed at being asked the same question again.

"You sure you don't need to head to hospital?" he asked, his voice betraying none of the desperate pleas of 'Say no, please, please say no' that were running through his brain.

"No, I'll be fine," Harry said and focused on his book as best as the pain in his gut would allow.

With his head down, Harry could not see the furious but silent conversations taking place across the room. James and Sirius gestured for Peter to hurry up and fake illness so they could get to the Shrieking Shack, but the boy refused to be rushed. He knew his phony illnesses better than anyone; real food poisoning would take another twenty minutes to set in. So despite James's insistent gestures and the pillow Sirius threw at him, he waited.

Fifteen minutes later, Peter groaned.

"What—?" Harry asked. He didn't have time to complete his question as Peter turned pale, covered his mouth and scrambled for the door. They could hear him retching in the washroom and his own pained stomach turned with the disgusting sound.

"Damn," James muttered, picking up on Peter's cue. "And I thought I was the only one feeling that horrible."

"Me, too," Sirius said. "I was hoping Harry'd want to go see Poppy so I'd have an excuse to go."

He made a face like he was going to throw up. "Let's go, before we put Harry off his food."
Harry nodded his understanding. “I just ate too much, I’m okay. The roast and all that was fine,” he said and finally grasped their strange behaviour about choosing what they ate at dinner. “Pity you didn’t eat that instead.” The pair of Marauders agreed and hurried from the room, clutching their mouths and stomachs. Harry heard their feet on the stairs and knew they were heading to the Shrieking Shack to help Remus survive another full moon.

He hated that they were lying to him.

But he was lying to them, too. Nearly everything he told them was untrue to a degree. His name, his school, his friends, his family, all of it was in some way altered to keep them in the dark. Harry James Potter was nothing anymore. He finally had the ability to speak to his family, make them proud and tell them all the things he had done… and he couldn’t. He couldn’t say a word to change anything or even let them know how important they would be.

He threw his book aside angrily.

“Dammit, Potter,” he swore at himself and was amazed that after only a week his real surname sounded slightly wrong, “calm down before you do something stupid.”

He took in a deep breath and let it out so slowly his head started to grow light from want of oxygen. Disconcerting as that ought to have been, he felt calmer for it and knew what he had to do.

It had been nearly a month since he had last focused his mind in meditation. Finding the time and space had been easy at his Aunt and Uncle’s house as he had nothing to do and no one ever came to his room, but at the Burrow there was always someone there. The lopsided house was filled with people and noise. Harry never had a moment except in the night, but after spending his days with Tonks and the Weasleys all he could do was sleep fitfully. He should have been more diligent. If he had been calmer or more aware, he and Hermione would never have gotten stuck in the mess they were in.

He had to gain more control, especially if he was going to maintain the illusion before James and Sirius and keep from attacking Peter. He dropped onto the floor and settled himself in for a long night of clearing his mind. None of the boys would be returning until morning. He had the room entirely to himself.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he closed his eyes and started counting his breaths.
Three of the four Marauders snuck back into the Gryffindor tower shortly after dawn. They had seen Moony through another full moon and managed to explore more of the castle grounds. As soon as they were caught up on sleep, they would ink it onto their ever-growing Marauder’s Map. It seemed that every time they explored during the full moon or under the invisibility cloak they discovered something new – a secret passage, hidden staircase, unused broom cupboard. James was sure he would feel desolate when they reached the final levels of the castle and their map was complete. What fun was there when all the mysteries were stripped away? Sometimes he wanted to call it quits on the map and leave the castle some of its secrets.

As he considered that option, which he knew Sirius would never go for, he fell into a less-than-comfortable chair by the fire and began to snore. Sirius claimed the couch and Peter the other chair. They wanted to return to their beds and sleep away what little night they had left, but Harry was there now. Even a new student would know that Madam Pomfrey would never release her patients after curfew, so they had to stay down in the common room, snoring and slightly uncomfortable until the earliest risers alerted them to the hour.

“Why are you boys sleeping down here?” Hermione asked in a voice that was far too loud for any of their liking. “Is there something wrong with your beds?”

None of them opened their eyes and their responses seemed to come from some cheeky semiconscious level of awareness.

“Mine’s a bit narrow,” Peter commented.

“Mine’s too soft,” James grumbled.

“Mine’s too cold,” Sirius sighed longingly. “If only there was someone willing to keep it warm with me.”

She huffed at their responses. “It’s nearly time for breakfast, and you’re sitting on my Transfiguration book, James,” she said and jabbed the boy pointedly in the arm until he was annoyed enough to move.

He cursed and pulled the book from under his thigh, “So that’s what was so uncomfortable.”

The girl reclaimed her book, shook her head and muttered to herself as she left. “Unbelievable. Cannot imagine what he would’ve been like if you raised him... lazy, arrogant...”

It took a bit of time for his sleepy brain to process her words, but eventually James lifted his head. “Did that make sense to anyone, because I didn’t quite get it?”

“Nope,” Sirius said, still lying on the couch. “Grangers are just an odd sort.” He stretched out his back and knew there would be a painful crick there well into the weekend. “Speaking of which, let’s go annoy Harry,” he said, failing to add, ‘since I can’t annoy his sister.’

“Good plan,” James said, but made no effort to move. Peter was already back to snoring.

“Just me, then,” Sirius sighed. He stood with a yawn and moved to the stairs, climbing slowly and wishing that they could tell Harry the truth just so he wouldn’t have to spend any more time sleeping on the couch than was necessary. It was a fine couch, worn and soft and thread-bare, perfect for long hours of studying and talking and snogging, but it was clearly not made for
sleeping. Pushing open the door to their bedroom, Sirius wondered how best to approach Moony about the idea.

Perhaps they could test Harry’s trustworthiness before the next full moon.

No, it was not his trustworthiness that needed testing, Sirius realised. He was already certain that Harry could keep a secret, as he was obviously hiding things from them. It was his opinion on werewolves that needed discovering. If he hated them or feared them or thought them dangerous, then Moony would be in a world of trouble.

‘So, how do we go about—’ his thoughts came to an abrupt and jarring halt at the sight of Harry’s empty bed. The covers were pulled up but rumpled as if he had been sitting on them, the book he had been reading the night before was lying open. His heart dropped into his stomach, fearing that Harry had gone to Madam Pomfrey after they had left. He raced to the bed, picking up the book. He had been too preoccupied to notice how far Harry had made it through the book before they had gone, so he could not even estimate when the boy had set it down.

Thinking about it, he didn’t even know what Harry had been reading. He scanned the open pages. It looked like a textbook, but not one he owned. Turning to the cover, he frowned again. “Occlumency?”

“Leave my stuff alone, Black,” a voice instructed, making him jump and drop the book instantly.

“Harry James Granger?” Sirius looked around. “Where are you?”

“On the floor, genius,” was the boy’s reply. Frowning once again, Sirius walked around the bed. Had it been anyone else’s, he would have simply laid himself down on it to peer over the other side, but Harry was still too unpredictable to be able to get away with such invasions of personal space and property.

Around the other side of the bed, sitting on the floor with his legs folded and his head leaning back on the small night table was Harry.

“How long have you been down there?”

“Since you lot left,” Harry said. “Fell asleep. Hadn’t meant to.”

“Why were down there at all?” Sirius questioned, trying to keep the curiosity out of his voice. He and the others sat on the floor all the time, but somehow Harry’s position looked too rigid to have been sitting there for comfort.

“I was meditating, if you must know,” he replied a bit stiffly as he unfolded his legs and got to his feet. Sirius knew about meditation; he had a Muggle book on the subject. He had a lot of Muggle books, most of which he had only picked up to annoy his mother, but several of them had become tattered after being read so frequently. The meditation book, while not a favourite, was now proving useful to him, helping him to understand the position in which Harry had been sitting and the changes in the boy. Harry was radiating calmness and energy. It made the hairs of his arms stand on end to be so close, to feel such concentrated magic. The meditation book he had read never mentioned that, but it was meant for Muggles not wizards. Who was to say what effect that level of mental focus would have on a wizard?

“Madam Pomfrey let you go?” Harry asked when Sirius just continued to stare at him.

“What?” Sirius blinked. “Oh, yeah. Just a bit of food poisoning, probably retaliation for a prank.” He waved it away and dropped onto his bed.
Harry nodded and didn’t question him further. It had been a lame excuse to leave for the night and he doubted they had thought to add many details to their fabrication. He was certain it wouldn’t hold up to any real scrutiny and did not want to press Sirius into revealing the truth.

“You’re staring again,” Harry said flatly.

“No, I’m looking intently,” Sirius replied reflexively, but after a second’s thought, added, “or I’m so tired, I can’t focus my own eyes properly. Do us a favour, would you, Harry? Take notes and let us skive off just this once?” He fell backwards on his mattress, sighing into it after the few hours of sleep he had stolen on the couch.

“Since it’s you asking,” Harry chuckled and left Sirius to sleep while he got ready for Transfiguration.

“Where are the others?” Hermione asked when he joined her at breakfast. She had been the first to sit down at the Gryffindor table that morning, arriving before a single diligent Hufflepuff or studious Ravenclaw. It was still early and the tables were sparsely populated, giving them the opportunity to talk privately for the first time in a week.

“Sleeping it off,” Harry muttered quietly. “I feel bad. It would make it so much easier on them if I told them I knew Remus’ secret.”

She nodded. “I know. I found them sleeping in the common room this morning. I can’t imagine it was particularly comfortable after a night out with a… you know what.” She finished hesitantly, reluctant to say the word even at the empty table.

Eager to take advantage of this rare moment of solitude, Harry asked, “Have you managed to remember any of those spells from the train?”

“Well, I know Ron threw a Bat Bogey Hex, but I doubt that had much to do with this,” she said dryly. “I really don’t think any spells our friends would have used could do this even if they had such poor aim that they hit you instead of him.” She shook her head. “Whatever did this had to have been Malfoy’s spell, but I don’t know of any hexes that cause this when combined with a portkey.”

“At least we’ve narrowed it down a bit,” Harry said with dim hope. Really, it had only been a week and he had no reason to believe they could have solved the problem in so short a time.

“It might be enough to get a lead if we tell Dumbledore,” she said. Unlike Harry, she had no trouble relying on the old wizard.

He kept his face impassive as he nodded, “Yeah, you should go tell him after class.”

“Harry,” she pleaded, “I have a lot more work than you do. I know you don’t like him very much right now, but would you please do it?”

He sighed, and nodded. She was taking more classes than he was, and the stress of lying was not something she was used to. He couldn’t afford to have his best friend and fake sister cracking under the strain of their situation.

With that settled and being unable to discuss anything of real importance with nosy Gryffindors filtering in and sitting too close, they turned to their breakfasts and ate silently. The pangs of eating too much had given way to an increased appetite, Harry found; he ate a complete if still rather small meal, his first in months. Filled with eggs, bacon and toast, they hurried to Transfiguration. Lily was waiting for Hermione at the door and paused before greeting Harry. “You’re not James?”
“No,” he laughed.

“Well, good morning, then,” she smiled warmly. “Where are your friends?”

“Rough night,” Harry commented vaguely. “Food poisoning, very nasty.”

He wondered how often they used that lame excuse on people outside their little group of Marauders. Knowing how clever three-quarters of them were, he assumed they would be smart enough to vary their excuses to keep people from getting suspicious. Maybe he could slip them something out of Fred and George’s Skiving Snack Boxes next time to help everyone believe their lie.

“I’m so sure,” Lily replied sceptically.

“No, really,” he insisted. “You should have seen Peter… it was disgusting. Nearly put me off my dinner.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad you didn’t catch it. Are you feeling alright?” she said and put her hand to his forehead.

“I don’t think that’s going to tell you the condition of my stomach,” he commented, torn between laughing at her mistake and hugging her for being so concerned about him.

“True, but it would look odd if I stuck my hand under your shirt to feel your abdomen.”

He shrugged. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

Her emerald eyes lit up with mischief, but it was Tildy who spoke excitedly. “Ooh, do tell, Harry! Who’s been fondling you?” The girl bounced on her toes just as Tonks always did when she was excited. Harry half expected her hair to flash pink, but it remained chestnut brown.

“No one you know,” he hedged.

“Still,” she insisted as eager and single-minded as the Metamorphmagus he had left behind. “I want details!”

“Just a friend,” he said lamely, trying to extricate his arm from her grasp.

He was wrong. Tildy wasn’t as bad as Tonks. She was worse. Every time he thought his arm was free, the girl seemed to grow another hand to grab hold of him again. He looked to Hermione and Lily for help, but they were too busy laughing at him to be of any assistance.

“I’m not letting go until I get details, real details,” she said. “Name, height, hair colour, favourite bands!”

“Dora, tall as me, depends on her mood and anything punk,” Harry cried. “Now let go!”

Even though he had given in, the girl hugged him closer, squeezing him so tightly he couldn’t breathe. “I approve! I hope you have lots of children.”

“Dammit, what part of ‘friend’ is such a foreign concept around here?” Harry demanded in a sharp wheeze that took what little breath he could manage inside Tildy’s impossibly strong grip.

“It’s because you’re such a handsome devil, Granger,” James commented as he strolled up, running a hand through his already chaotic hair in an attempt to make it as wild as Harry’s.
“I thought you were skiving off,” Harry said as he managed to shove the girl off.

“Tried, but Tildy was persistent,” he grumbled and glared his annoyance at her.

“Sirius?” Harry asked.

“There’s no waking him when he decides he’s sleeping in,” James shook his head sadly. “Would sleep through a war if you let him.” Harry nodded and fought to keep the pain off his face. Sirius would sleep through the war, and all because Harry was too stupid to know he was being manipulated.
Despite his bravado, James started slumping in his seat within minutes of class starting. He made up for lack of attention and focus with sheer talent, however, and successfully mastered the task assigned to them on his fourth try. His peacock feather was now a delicate glass vase in the same vibrant shades of teal and purple. A smug smile flit across his face before he dropped his head onto his desk.

“Wake me if she gets annoyed, will you?” he requested and fell asleep instantly.

Harry just nodded and tried very hard not to laugh. He reminded Harry so much of Ron at that particular moment, Transfiguration skills notwithstanding. The boy turned his focus back to his ostrich plume. The white hair-like barbs floated in the air, mocking his attempts to transfigure them into the sides of a vase. So he had not managed to inherit his father’s skill in this particular subject. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Lily glaring daggers at her feather. It was supposed to be either a pure white peahen tail feather or a vase, but the girl had somehow managed to turn it into a vibrant orange glass feather. It was quite pretty and Aunt Petunia would have stopped and admired it in a shop, but it was so far from the assignment that the girl looked like she was preparing to smash it.

“Why did it do that?” Lily whined quietly.

If James were awake, he would have been offering the flustered girl some assistance, though she likely would have turned him down. Harry would have welcomed his help, but the boy was snoring softly beside him. Waving his wand and attempting the spell a second time, Harry managed to make the hollow shaft and rachis harden and expand into white porcelain. It had the vague shape of a vase his aunt kept on the mantle beside the numerous pictures of Dudley, but it was still far too much like a feather.

“Try a sticking charm,” James muttered sleepily as he glanced up at Harry’s work. “It’ll look like you did it on purpose.”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

There was no way McGonagall would fall for that, but he could not get the last of the feather to transfigure regardless of how many times he waved his wand and repeated the spell. He heard the old woman’s approach and gave one final panicked attempt at doing things the right way. It failed. With McGonagall just two tables away, he tried it James’s way and grinned at the decorative pattern the barbs and after-feathers made on the smooth surface of the vase.

“Brilliant,” he said and elbowed James to wake him up both to see the results of his suggestion and to keep from getting detention. The boy sat up quickly and managed to look as if he had been working the entire time. How Harry wished that he had learned that skill.

The professor nodded in approval of their work, “Very nicely done, Mr Potter. Mr Granger, I think a bit more practice for homework would be useful.” She smiled down at them and moved on to the next pair.

“Wonderful work, Miss Granger,” she praised Hermione’s vase; the decorative pattern of a flock of
birds adorning the porcelain was well beyond what she had assigned and only threw into contrast the dismal mess Lily had made of her feather. “Miss Evans, try again for homework, and I want an additional foot on the importance of the wand work used in this particular spell.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Lily said, her face a deep and embarrassed red. She kept her head down for the final minutes of class, too ashamed to look at anyone.

“I’ll help you try again later,” Hermione offered as she guided Lily toward the exit. The girl refused to look up; even the threat of walking headfirst into a solid stone wall couldn’t entice her to tear her eyes from her shoes.

“How did I manage to make it into a NEWT-level Transfiguration class?” she moaned as she left the classroom. “I’m rubbish.”

“You just need a bit more practice,” Harry said.

“Yeah, twelve inches worth according to McGonagall. Why do I have to write an extra foot on my essay?” she griped, her embarrassment giving way to outrage the farther she got from the classroom. She protested and grumbled her way to the Great Hall. “Why didn’t you have to write anything extra? You barely made a vase.”

“Oi!” Harry nudged her shoulder. “I made a perfectly respectable vase.”

“Provided you don’t mind a vase that will tickle you,” she added.

“Now you’re just being picky. It was breakable and could hold flowers,” he retorted. “It passed the aunt test, so it was fine.”

“Aunt test?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “If my aunt would stop and look at it without being horrified, it passes the test. She would have loved my vase.” Lily looked at him oddly a moment before laughing. Hermione, by contrast, looked positively dismayed, as if Harry had just provided the name and address to his Aunt Petunia’s house instead of mentioning her only generally.

“Do you want to practice with me later?” Lily asked.

Harry was tempted to continue insisting he didn’t need extra practice, that he had done perfectly fine on his own, but he knew it would be stupid to say. He needed all the help and practice he could get, and if it meant spending more time with his mum then all the better. “Yeah, okay.”

“See you later then,” she smiled and sat down with her friends, pulling Hermione along with her.

After only a week, Hermione was still having a hard time keeping the amazement off her face whenever Lily or the other Gryffindor girls included her. She had grown accustomed to being ignored except when someone needed help with homework or information regarding whatever chaotic episode Harry had managed to get involved in. Ginny, wonderful a friend as she was, did not really count; she was a friend by default thanks to her spending so much time with the girl’s brother. So to be willingly included in every part of these other girls’ day was astonishing.

“Tell me more about this Dora person,” Tildy said, eyebrows dancing suggestively around her forehead. “Is she pretty? Are they serious? I’m guessing not since Harry hasn’t gotten any letters since he’s been here.”

“How do you know he’s not gotten letters?” Silvia asked. “Are you stalking him?”
“Well, he is adorable…”

A murmur of consent ran through the little pride of Gryffindors and all eyes turned expectantly to Hermione.

“Dora is just a friend,” Hermione said slowly, worried where her reply might lead.


Mary scoffed, “You mean she sounds like you. Punk, random changes of hair colour… yeah, that’s you.”

“What’s wrong with that? I wouldn’t say no to someone as cute as Harry,” the girl sniffed indignantly but stopped in the process of folding her arms. “Wait. That means he’s single. Dibs!”

The protest at her laying claim to the new boy was far louder and more adamant than when she had claimed Hermione as her study buddy. It would have been enough to set her laughing if she had not caught Lily taking part in the objection. She had to take Harry off the market and fast. “He’s not really single,” she interjected hastily. “There’s a girl he likes, I mean, really likes. He hasn’t even considered dating anybody but her; he’s that serious about her.”

“Aw, how sweet,” Mary cooed. “What’s her name?”

‘Damn! I should have thought of that!’ she cursed at herself. There was really only one girl Harry had ever liked – Cho Chang. Their only date had been abysmal from what Harry had told her, and he seemed to have given up on her after that. If it came to feigning love, she doubted he would be able to muster much believability if he was forced to talk about Cho. But who did that leave? What other girl did he know well enough to claim feelings for? Just one.

“Ginny,” Hermione said. “Ginny… Weasleby.”

Tildy frowned. “Sounds boring.”

“She isn’t!” she insisted. “She’s lovely and a good friend.”

“Well, damn,” the girl scowled.

Ignoring her friend’s childish sulking over the loss of a boy she never really had, Lily turned her attention to Hermione. “What about you? Is there anybody writing you love letters back in Johannesburg?”

“What? No…” Hermione said, dropping her head a second too late. Her blush was very noticeable.

“Who is he?” Tildy demanded. “I want to know all about this Johannesburg Johnny.”

“His name’s Ron, Ginny’s brother. I’ve liked him for ages,” she admitted unhappily, “but I don’t think he’s noticed.”

“Boys are dumb like that,” Silvia agreed. “No worries. We’ll find you a great bloke here.”

“No!” Hermione shouted with far too much vehemence and volume. Half the table, Harry included, looked her way. She shrank back into her seat, flushed a humiliated scarlet. “I don’t want to get involved with anyone. Really.”

Silvia and Mary shared a glance that clearly suggested the girl was mental. Tildy frowned her confusion and disapproval, but her eyes were glittering like she had already planned which boy to
set her study buddy up with. Only Lily looked at her with any real consideration, those familiar green eyes studying her. She said nothing, but Hermione could tell that she was working something out and that worried her.

“I just really like Ron,” Hermione insisted, hoping to distract Lily from whatever thoughts she had in her brain and perhaps put off Tildy’s match-making scheme. “I really like him and I don’t want to have to compare anybody to him. They would not look good by comparison, believe me.”

Mary was cooing again. “That is so sweet. I guess it runs in the family.”

“Yeah, it does,” Hermione agreed, too worried to bother reminding the girl that Harry was not actually related and therefore nothing they shared could ‘run in the family’.

“Well, you can tell me all about him on the way to the hospital wing,” Tildy insisted as she stood and took up Hermione’s bag, setting it on her shoulder and walking away before the girl could take it from her.

“Are you hurt?” she asked as she chased after the girl, or, more precisely, as she chased after her bag. Clearly, Tildy was one that she would have to watch out for.

“No, I need Remus to help me with my essay,” she said absently.

“Well, I could help you with that,” Hermione said, annoyed that she was being forced to follow the girl clear across the castle unnecessarily. “No need to disturb him. He’s not feeling well.”

The girl waved her hand dismissively, though it looked more like she was conducting an orchestra the way she moved her whole arm and snapped her wrist sharply. “He’s always ill with something, but he gets over it by the next day. I think the boys use him to test their pranks. You’d think he’d learn being as clever as he is, but no… every month, without fail, he’s holed up in the hospital wing.” She sighed and shook her head. “So, tell me about this Ron Weasleby.”

“He’s wonderful,” Hermione said.

“Details!” Tildy chirped.

“Like what?” she groaned.

“Is he smart?”

Hermione frowned. That was not among the list of details she had required from Harry earlier. “Smart enough,” she hedged. “He’s brilliant at wizard chess.”

“‘Smart enough’?!” she repeated, disapprovingly. “What exactly is smart enough? Like top ten in your year?”

“No. He’s far from that.”

“So he isn’t smart enough. Not like, oh, I don’t know,” she said with obviously bogus deliberation, “say, Remus, for instance. Remus is first in our year, you know. Very smart bloke.”

“I’m sure he is,” replied Hermione baldly. Suddenly, she was not particularly keen to be following the girl to the hospital wing.

“What’s he look like, this Ron of yours?”

Suspecting she knew where this was going, she answered with as much accuracy as she dared.
“Not bad, if you aren’t exaggerating,” the girl commented. “I like a bloke who’s tall, but I never cared much for broad shoulders. I always preferred something in the middle. You?”

“Middle is fine, I suppose,” Hermione agreed warily.

Before the words had finished leaving her mouth, Tildy was asking, “Pianist hands?”

“I guess, but wh—“

“Strong jaw?”

“Yes. Wh—“

“Blond hair?”


Tildy grinned and pointed at the girl. “I knew it! You like Remus better than you like Ron!”

She didn’t care that her cheeks and ears were burning with embarrassment. She didn’t care that Tildy was laughing at her. All Hermione care about was getting away from the hospital wing and Remus as quickly as she could. The irritatingly Tonks-like girl had tricked her, she knew, but she had meant it. The image that came into her brain when prompted what hair colour she liked on her preferred boy was sandy with subtle streaks of fawn brown – Remus’s hair. She had always appreciated his intelligence and his humour, but now she found herself admiring his appearance.

This was bad. Very, very bad. Dangerously bad. Disturbingly bad.

She tried to turn and run, but Tildy had her by the arms, preventing first her escape and then her attempt to reach for her wand as she marched Hermione the last few yards to the hospital wing. One surprisingly strong shove had Hermione stumbling into the hospital wing and onto the bed nearest the door.

“Most people just walk in,” an amused voice commented.

Hermione, impossibly, flushed even further. She had been pushed onto Remus’s bed… with Remus still in it. Righting herself with as much dignity as she could, she mumbled, “Tildy. She... um…”

“Say no more,” the boy smiled, a brilliant flash of teeth and confidence that left her slightly stunned. “I think we’ve already established that she’s about the oddest girl we both know. But I’m glad she brought you. I was getting bored.”

“She didn’t bring me. She pushed me!” Hermione scowled.

‘Tricked me, more like,’ she wanted to say, but was afraid to hurt the boy’s feelings. The smile he was sending her way was heart-warming, but also frightened her. She did not want to upset Remus by denying him friendship, but, if Tildy kept up her crazy comments that they were flirting and that Hermione liked him, he might get ideas. He was clever, yes, but he was still a boy.

“Regardless, I’m glad,” he said. “Poppy won’t let me go for at least another hour. You can keep me company.”

“Okay,” replied the girl nervously.

“What did I miss in class?”
She relaxed and smiled at the question. That was a subject that was in no way flirtatious or idea-making and one she happily talked about for the two hours before he was released.

Chapter End Notes

If memory serves, this is the chapter that I took up after writing Wedlocked, a story which is entirely from Hermione's POV, so from this point on I tried very hard to keep each chapter to a single perspective... not always successfully.
Try as he might, Harry could not keep the shadow of anger from around his eyes at the thought of going to see the Headmaster. He had not spoken to Dumbledore since they were re-sorted. That had only been eight days ago, too short a time to get over a year of pent-up resentment and a summer of anger. Even having Sirius alive and relatively carefree was not enough to keep Harry’s mood from slipping at the thought of looking into the face of the man whose secret-keeping had helped kill Sirius.

He stabbed a jacket potato as if it had personally wronged him, throwing it down onto his plate.

“Why is Mr Granger so vexed by his food this fine evening, I wonder,” James said in a loud and theatrical voice. Normally Harry would have been amused, but not today.

“Perhaps I should inquire for you, Mr Potter,” Sirius suggested in a tone of equal pomp and ridiculousness. Harry tensed, bracing his nerves to have that irritating tone thrown his way. Instead, Sirius turned and slapped him on the head. “Oi! Harry James Granger, what’s your problem?”

The snort of derisive laughter came unbidden from him. “You want an alphabetical list?”

“Maybe later,” Sirius said, a strange smirk taking over his mouth. “I’m more interested in why you’re suddenly so damn depressing.”

Harry sighed. “I have to go talk to Dumbledore.”

“Why? What did you do? Something worthy of our friendship, I hope.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Harry insisted a bit too quickly.

“Want me to go with you?” Sirius offered. “I can hold your hand and whisper encouragements in your ear.”

“Git.”

“Well, you can’t say I didn’t try,” he sniffed in mock indignation and turned back to his dinner, glancing over his shoulder at Harry periodically to ensure that the boy was still eating or to check his level of despondency. Whatever the reason, Harry was somehow both thrilled and annoyed by the attention.

“I’m going,” Harry declared and stood.

“Sure you don’t need company?” Sirius asked, all playfulness aside.

“No, I’m fine,” he assured the boy. He left the Great Hall, walking with absolutely no purpose through the corridors in the general direction of the Headmaster’s office but taking the longest route possible. If not for Hermione counting on him to get more information from the old wizard, he was sure that he would have turned around and gone back to the common room by now.

Turning the corner, he saw the gargoyle ahead. Between him and the stone guardian there were no more side corridors to wander down in avoidance of the Headmaster.

He walked up to it and stopped.

Harry stood at the end of the corridor staring at the ugly gargoyle. It stared right back. He had been
looking at it for fifteen minutes. It wasn’t that he had forgotten the password; he just really wanted to postpone the irritation and headache he knew were going to spring from this meeting. Dumbledore, even this twenty-years-younger version, was about as forthcoming as a brick.

“I’m getting sick of looking at you,” the gargoyle informed him.

The boy jumped at the voice. “Sorry,” he said. “Jelly Babies.”

“About time,” the statue grumbled and leapt aside.

Harry trudged the short distance to the rotating stairs, climbing a few steps before he stopped and let them take him upward. The door was open and Dumbledore’s voice greeted him before he had even reached the landing.

“Mr Granger,” the Headmaster called. “Do come in.”

“Sorry to come unannounced, Professor,” Harry said. “We were hoping for some help with our problem.”

“Ah, yes,” Dumbledore nodded and gestured for him to sit. “Have you had much luck in stimulating your memories?”

Harry shook his head. “We know that none of our friends know any spells that could have done this, not even if the spell hit a portkey.”

“So that leaves only the other gentleman,” Dumbledore said slowly.

“We think he purposely found a spell Hermione wouldn’t be able to counter, which means it would have to be a pretty rare or dark hex.”

“He is a young man well acquainted with the Dark Arts, I take it?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said, “very well acquainted.”

The man hummed his disapproval. “Finding the answer may prove difficult, then. If neither you nor Miss Granger can recall the precise spell used to bring you here, it will take considerable time to discover it. I can allow you both unlimited access to the Restricted Section of the library. There are numerous books on such matters that may prove useful. Our good Madam Pince knows every book by heart and can tell you which would contain spells that might react unusually when cast in proximity to a portkey. It’s unlikely you will find a book referencing your precise experience, but theory abounds in books.”

The disappointment must have been splattered across his face because Dumbledore sighed, “I am sorry, Harry. Without more information there is little I can do to remedy your situation.”

“I know, sir,” Harry replied. It was true, he did know, but that did not mean he liked it.

“We will talk again,” he assured the boy.

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said and left without another word. Walking down the steps, he grew angry again. That was supposed to be the greatest wizard alive in the world, the only man Voldemort ever feared, and he couldn’t solve a problem as simple as this? It was easy: Spell X + Portkey = Time Travel

How bloody hard was that?
Glaring his anger back over his shoulder, he ran the rest of the way back to the common room.

oOo

“What’s he doing now?” Peter whispered.

“Same thing he was doing five minutes ago,” James replied just as quietly. “Standing there. Staring.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know the password,” the boy said.

“Shhhh,” Sirius commanded. “There he goes, come on.”

All three Gryffindors moved in perfect unison under the invisibility cloak. After so many years sneaking around the corridors under James’s magical cloak, they barely had to give one another instructions anymore; they simply knew how to move, where and when. The only difficulty they really had was to fit three grown boys beneath it.

Silently, they walked past the gargoyle. Harry was moving so slowly they could walk at a snail’s pace and still get there faster than him. They had spent five minutes debating whether to follow him and fifteen minutes running to their dorm for the cloak, yet they managed to reach the gargoyle over thirty minutes before Harry did. They had grown understandably anxious as they waited, first for Harry to show up and then for him to speak the password. As the boy stepped past the gargoyle, they excitedly pushed at one another to get a move on and to join Harry on the stairs to the Headmaster’s office. Sirius signalled their direction, tapping James and Peter on the arm to go right and straight until they could see the exchange from the side and watch both Dumbledore and Harry’s expressions as they talked. They would never have dared get this close without the Animagus insistently tapping out directions.

“Better be worth it, Padfoot,” James muttered under his breath. “If I get detention for you…”

His threat fell on deaf ears. Sirius was too busy watching the exchange between their strange new friend and the Headmaster. It was amazing how even these two spoke with vagueness, referencing the Grangers’ situation, some other bloke, the Dark Arts and a portkey without ever actually saying anything specific. None of it told them anything. Sirius would have thought that if they were working together to solve some major problem, they would be speaking in some detail about it. Moreover, of all the rooms in the castle, surely the Headmaster’s office was one where they could speak whole truths.

Clearly, he thought wrong.

They followed him from the office and down the stairs, watching as the boy’s posture changed. The dejected and defeated slump of his shoulders squared as his spine straightened. All three froze as the boy looked back, the anger on his face making each fearful that he knew they were there.

“Oh shit,” James muttered. “On my signal…”

But no retaliatory spells were necessary. The boy turned and ran.

They were left alone in the corridor, more confused than ever. Harry James Granger was a very hard nut to crack. Worse still, they weren’t even sure precisely what sort of nut he was.

“Is it me,” Peter asked in a quiet squeak, “or is Harry a little scary?”

“I don’t know about scary, but he certainly is strange,” Sirius replied.
“Did you see the way he looked at Dumbledore?” James asked. “Like he hates him. I don’t know anybody who hates Old Dumbles. The bloke’s only known him a week; why would he be giving him a glare like that?”

“I think,” Sirius declared as he collected the invisibility cloak and gave it back to James, “that it’s high time we took a greater interest in our dear friend, Harry James Granger.”

“I thought you were already interested in him, Padfoot,” James smirked.

“Git, you know what I mean.”

The boy snorted but still nodded. “Agreed. Granger is way too weird. I can’t let something as mysterious as this alone.” His eyes lit up excitedly as he considered what they had witnessed. “You heard all that, right? Portkey and Dark Arts and the Grangers’ ‘situation’… something massive is happening, and I am not exaggerating.”

Peter scowled his disapproval. “No, let’s just leave it. I thought the goal this term was to get Lily to like you. And to get the new girl to like Remus. Who cares about Harry?”

“I do,” replied Sirius before he could stop himself. “Besides,” he added hastily, avoiding the smirking face of his black-haired friend, “Harry’s been doing a pretty good job talking Prongs up.”

“And Moony’s been doing just fine on his own,” James added. “No, this is going to be much more interesting, I can tell. That bloke had more secrets than the Department of Mysteries, and I can’t wait to find out what they are.” The Chaser rubbed his hands together, a sure sign that he was starting to formulate a plot.

Sirius grinned. “So, where shall we begin? How ever shall we get more information from our odd friend?”

His friend stopped and looked at him sideways. “Are you actually waiting for permission to go flirt?”

“Well, this is now officially Marauders business,” he explained, stopping to bat his eyes imploringly.

“Go on, you tosser,” James sighed. “If this turns weird it is not my fault.”

“What?” Sirius gaped. “I am using my sexual prowess and devastatingly good looks to lure friendship and information from the painfully secretive new bloke who looks freakishly like my best mate… what could possibly go wrong?”

“I’m thinking quite a lot, actually,” James commented in a very close imitation of Remus’s feared and often mocked Prefect Voice.

He laughed and slapped James on the back. “Relax, Prongs. I’m an expert.”

“You said that about Tori Hooper, too,” Peter grumbled, mimicking Sirius’s confident swagger. “Oh, don’t worry, Peter. I can talk that bird into anything. I’ll have her eating out of the palm of your hand before the week is out.”

Sirius just snorted. “Come off it, Wormtail. You thought it was great fun until she hexed you.”

“It hurt!”
“Yes, but you have a story to tell the grandkids and a very manly scar,” he countered. “But this is nothing like The Hooper Incident. This is me making friends—”

“Flirting shamelessly,” James corrected.

“Same thing with him,” Peter snorted.

“Whatever you call it,” Sirius bit out, annoyed at them for interrupting. “It’s me being nice to Harry James Granger.”

“Um… Padfoot,” James stopped and bit at his lip in contemplation. “Have you considered the possibility, my dear friend, that perhaps Harry James Granger might ‘be nice to you’ back?”

Sirius shrugged carelessly, “Added bonus of the mission.”

“I’m not joking,” the boy warned. “I feel kind of responsible for him what with him looking so much like me and being so keen to get me with Evans and all. What happens if he actually likes you?”

Sirius just shrugged again and continued to walk, but he kept that question at the forefront of his brain. What would he do if Harry flirted back? Not the fake, just for fun flirting they had done so far, but really flirted. What would he do if Harry actually liked him? Neither would be new or special. Loads of people had flirted with him and he flirted right back, not caring how real their interest was. Loads of people had liked him, really liked him, liked him enough to send spiked chocolates and cards every Valentine’s Day and buy him gifts on his birthday. He avoided the laced gifts, but, again, he flirted. It was fun and generally harmless.

It was easy to say he would do the same with Harry James Granger, flirt and smirk and play regardless of how the boy responded, but he remembered the dark turn Harry had taken when he had played with him, when he had promised to always be there. The change had been instant, quicker than thought. Harry did not mean to put that haunted look on his face; probably if the boy had any say in his reaction, that particular pain would have stayed hidden along with the rest of his secrets. Sirius had seen it and now it haunted him, too.

“I’ll stop before it goes that far,” Sirius promised. “Nobody gets a scar, however manly, on this mission.”
Flirting with Danger

Harry sat by the fire, his book propped on the arm of the couch so he would not have to hold it up. He did not remember his schoolbooks weighing so much. Either the NEWT-level books were that much heavier or he was far weaker than he thought after his summer barely eating. He focused on the book, trying to understand the complexities of Transfiguration, but it was hard. Transfiguration really was the most complicated subject at Hogwarts; McGonagall said as much first year and she had not been exaggerating. As he read, a warm weight fell on his lap. He ignored it, assuming it was Crookshanks, who had taken a liking to him near the end of the previous year. It took him half a chapter to remember that, if Hermione’s mangy cat was at Hogwarts, it was at Hogwarts in 1996 and not here in 1976.

He looked down expecting to see someone else’s pet cat curled up in his lap.

“Um… Sirius, why are you using me as a pillow?” Harry asked, certain his face was flushed to the colour of his tie.

“The good chair was taken,” he replied without taking his eyes off his book.

“There was more than enough room for you to sit on the couch,” Harry countered.

The boy sighed and dropped the book onto his chest. “I felt like lying down, you looked too focused to disturb… you also looked rather comfy.”

“It’s pointless arguing with him,” Remus said from his seat on the nearby chair. “He wins every time.”

“Yeah, but that still leaves him using me as a pillow,” Harry said and shifted awkwardly.

“Oi! Don’t you dare move,” Sirius warned. “I’m far too comfortable. I think I’ll be using you as a pillow from now on.”

“Git.”

“Says the bloke with a bogey the size of Ipswich,” Sirius smirked as Harry’s hand flew to his nose. “Just fucking with you, Harry James Granger.”

Harry waited for him to call it all a joke, get up and move to the other side of the couch, but Sirius picked up his book and started reading again, his head still unmistakably in Harry’s lap. “Are you seriously not going to move?”

“Nope, I’m comfy.”

“Annoying, isn’t it?” Remus muttered. “Used to do that to me. Why do you think I only sit on the chairs?”

Sirius offered his friend a pair of forked fingers but said nothing. Seeing that he really had no intention of moving, Harry tried again to shift out from under him. “I thought I told you not to move.”

Harry groaned. “What if I’m uncomfortable?”

“Are you?”
He paused. “No.”

“Well, then deal with it,” Sirius grinned smugly and kept reading.

It was weird on so many levels. Harry tried to picture any of his friends from his proper time lying down with their head in his lap. Not even Hermione would have done this. Yet, despite how unnatural it seemed, Harry was not uncomfortable. Physically, it was fine. Psychologically, it was somehow heartening. He wondered if adult Sirius would have done this, too. The man always wrapped Harry in long, tight embraces as if proving to himself that the boy was really there and really wanted to be in his care. Surely, if they lived together as Godfather and Godson, Sirius would have gotten over hugging Harry for five minutes at a time in favour of this more subtle contact.

Hours passed with Sirius moving little more than his hand to turn the page of his book. It got to the point that Harry actually forgot he was there except for when someone walked past and muttered a comment. He should have been embarrassed when they did, but he wasn’t.

“Well, I’m knackered!” Sirius declared loudly. “Off to bed with everyone.”

“We have to go up just because you’re tired?” Remus inquired, eyebrow raised in condescension.

“Quidditch tryouts tomorrow,” Sirius reminded him. “And I expect everyone to be there. That means you, Harry James Granger.”

“But I’m not trying out,” Harry protested.

“I think you’ll find that you are,” insisted Sirius rather smugly.

Harry grumbled and groaned, but could not find an excuse that would let him off the hook. He had agreed to try out, though he had not seriously meant it. Hermione would kill him if he managed to get himself onto the Quidditch team. Throwing himself down onto the bed, he punched his pillow and kicked at his blankets in annoyance. He should have said ‘no’ with as much conviction as he possessed. Why had he not done that? Why had he been so stupid?

“Because you miss it,” he said to himself. “You miss flying, competing in a game that actually has rules and a winner.”

That was it. He missed playing Quidditch more than he missed food or a decent night’s rest. He wanted to play, to fly, to win. He didn’t even have to be on the team with his father and Sirius; the teammates were irrelevant. All he wanted was the wind in his face and the broom under his command. He dropped off as he remembered the last game he had played.

He woke, dry, calm and free from his normally tangled sheets.

He had actually slept, properly slept, undisturbed by dreams of Sirius or the Veil. He rolled over and removed the silencing spell around his bed, listening for signs of life. They came quicker than he had anticipated.

“Move it, Granger!” James barked and threw the curtain aside. “Get your scrawny arse down to breakfast. I expect you on the pitch in thirty minutes.”

“Okay,” Harry mumbled.

“That’s ‘yes, captain’ to you!” he smirked.
“I’m not on the team!” Harry called after him.

“Not yet!” the boy shouted over his shoulder as he walked through the door.

“You get the impression,” Remus sighed, “that this is James Potter’s show and we’re all just supporting cast members, don’t you?”

Harry nodded dumbly, dressed and went down to breakfast. The Gryffindor table was buzzing with excitement over the Quidditch trials. More than classes or the chaotic common room, this energetic discussion made him feel like he was back in his own time. Listening to a small pride of second years, he felt the same thrill that he used to get before games, not quite queasiness, just a slight edge of uncertainty that made him work that much harder.

“Come on,” Remus grinned. “James will hex us if we’re late.”

“Why are you going if you aren’t trying out?” Harry asked.

He shrugged. “James and Sirius like an audience.” He paused and turned back to Harry. “Do you have a broom? The school has some, but they’re a bit shabby.”

“Uh… yeah,” Harry said uncertainly. He did have a broom, a great broom, the best broom money could buy. He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that it could outfly anything that existed in 1976, and that was bad. He could never hope to explain how his broom was so fast, not even if he claimed that it was custom made in South Africa.

“Go get it,” Remus said. “I’ll tell James you’re on your way.”

Harry nodded slowly, worried again that he had done something very stupid. “Hermione!” he shouted and ran after the girl. “Hermione! Help!”

“What is it?” she asked, her face stricken as if he were being chased by Voldemort himself.

“I need you to make my broom slower,” he said, gasping for breath yet still pulling her toward Gryffindor Tower.

“Why?”

He explained as best he could James’s insistence that he try out, and his fears of making himself stand out too much with his Firebolt. “Please, Hermione, just make it a bit slower.”

“Harry, this is a bad idea,” she argued. “You’re too good. There’s no question you’ll make the team. I’d love to see you play again, really, but you can’t.”

“Hermione, please,” he begged. “I can’t explain it, but I need this.”

She shook her head and sighed, but took out her wand as he pulled the broom from the trunk. “If you get your name on some trophy, don’t blame me,” she scolded. It was so odd a thing to say that he laughed.

“Thanks, Hermione,” he grinned and ran for the door.

He ran the whole way from Gryffindor Tower, through the castle and down the lawn to the Quidditch pitch. It was more exercise than he had gotten in months, and the stitch in his side was letting him know it. Still, he ran, not caring about the pain or that it signalled his weakness or that his guilt had been the thing that caused it all. He ran.
“You’re late,” James informed him. “Seekers have already tried out.”

“What?” Harry gasped, gripping his side and wincing.

“You’ll have to wait. Go sit over there,” he ordered.

Harry dropped onto the bench beside Remus, gasping for breath and fighting tears at having missed his opportunity. He watched, despondent, as the would-be-Beaters tried to knock each other off their brooms. Sirius and James hovered in mid-air watching the play and commenting to one another as, one by one, the number of serious contenders dwindled. When there were only three left, James called them back to Earth.

“Chasers!” he bellowed. Twelve hopefuls ran across the grass and waited for their orders. James threw a ball at them. “Up you get, let’s see who can actually manage the job.”

They kicked off and began circling the pitch, throwing the ball to one another. Three were dismissed instantly when they couldn’t manage to catch the Quaffle. Another two were gone when they threw so badly the ball was too easily intercepted. Finally there were five and James ordered them to the ground.

“Scrimmage time!” he shouted, arbitrarily dividing the hopefuls into two teams, sending the only two Gryffindors trying out for Keeper to either end of the pitch. “Ready, steady… GO!”

They launched into the air, playing the most furious game of Quidditch Harry had ever witnessed. It was brilliant. James was the best Chaser on the pitch by a mile, stealing the ball easily and flying low and fast through impossibly tight gaps to make more goals than anyone. His team was up by 300 points and kept gaining. It was obvious who would make the roster; James could have called the scrimmage to an end at any time, but the boy was treating it as if it were a real game, which meant they could only stop when the Snitch was caught. Both Seekers, as James had predicted, could not find the little golden ball to save their lives. They circled the pitch, dove low to the ground, flew through the melee, but even after almost two hours the Snitch remained uncaught.

“How did they make the scrimmage team if they can’t find the damn Snitch?” Harry muttered.

“James stunned it and hid it in the grass,” replied Remus. “After they lost three in last year’s try-outs, we knew there had to be a better way. Clearly, it was not that good a plan.”

“The worst,” Harry agreed and started griping. “I mean, what’s the problem? It’s right there!”

“You can actually see it?” Remus asked, astonished, squinting out at the pitch.

Harry nodded, his eyes fixed on the little golden ball that hovered just off the tail-end of the far Keeper’s broom.

“JAMES!” Remus shouted, standing and waving his arms to get the boy’s attention.

The boy flew over, sweaty and scowling. “What? I was about to score another goal!”

“I’d like the game to end soon. I’m getting hungry,” Remus said with a calm sarcasm that cut through the competitive fog that clouded the other boy’s vision. “Would you mind letting Harry catch the Snitch since none of your Seekers can manage it?”

His hazel eyes turned to Harry, sparkling with excitement. “You’re in,” he said and turned back to the pitch. “WILLIS! YOU’RE OUT!”
Harry threw his cloak onto the bench and kicked off the ground, flying as quickly as the broom would allow across the lawn, narrowly avoiding a Beater’s bat to catch the snitch within half a minute of James letting him play. He expected to see shock or awe or amazement cross James Potter’s face, for his jaw to drop and for him to be completely speechless, but James Potter, never one to aim for predictability, was staring at Harry with bright, hungry eyes.

His lips curled into a devilish smirk. “Let it go,” James commanded.

Harry felt a slight chill overtake him, but he did as the Captain ordered. He released the struggling golden ball, letting it fly away from him and into the bright morning sky. He looked over at his young father, seeing his brow furrow as he lost sight of the ball. Harry looked back and could still make out the miniscule glint where the sun lit the polished gold and the shimmer of air that indicated its fast wing-beats.

“You still see it,” James said, watching the boy’s green eyes fixed on the distant point; Harry nodded. “Go catch it.”

Pressing his body against the broom, Harry dove down. He hadn’t flown in so long, he had almost forgotten what it felt like. It was as if the wind was ripping the worries and weight from his shoulders as it whipped past him. As he dove toward the grass below, he had no thoughts of prophecies or the future, Voldemort or Death Eaters. He thought only of getting his hands on the Snitch. He saw the ball growing closer, and he eased his broom to follow its erratic path across the pitch. Barely three yards from the grass, his fingers wrapped around the ball and he yanked hard on the broom to pull up from the dive. It was more difficult than it should have been given the reduced speed of the Firebolt, but he managed to avoid crashing into the ground.

“Congratulations,” James said, slapping him on the back. “You made the team.”

Harry could barely think for the sound of his heart beating in his ears. James was shouting again, calling everyone down to the ground, giving out team placements and naming second-string players for emergencies. Harry knew it was happening, but he did not hear a word of it. He was too busy relishing in that long-forgotten feeling of freedom.
Quidditch Makes the Man

Harry stumbled from his bed, too groggy to notice what he put on his aching body or who he was talking to at breakfast. Quidditch try-outs had worn him out. Exhilarating as it was to fly again, to play again, he had never worked so hard doing so little in his entire life.

Once the positions were assigned, James had the chosen team practice together just to make sure their dynamic was workable – Sirius’s tendency to cast aside his partners after a few weeks made him a favourite target for ‘friendly fire’ from jilted Beaters; Lara Novotny, whom everyone had forgotten he had dated once fourth year, was rejected and replaced by Connor Marsh after Lara wacked Sirius in the shoulder with her club. Certain that Marsh was in no way connected to Sirius’s love life, practice began. Harry caught the snitch three minutes after the game had started, earning a brilliant smile from most of the team but a glare from James for stopping the game so quickly.

He was made to sit on the side-lines with Remus for the first ten minutes of the next practice game, and even then he flew straight across the pitch and nabbed the little, flying ball. “Just stop that!” James yelled at him. “Go practice flying over there and stop winning our games too quick. You’re taking the fun out of it!”

He laughed but did as he was told.

Getting shouted at for being too good: Oliver Wood would never have done that to him. Harry flew in circles, dove down at breakneck speed and lifted into nausea-inducing sprints to the highest observation towers, feeling the strain in muscles he had forgotten existed.

He felt it even more this morning. “Ow,” he groaned and eased himself down onto the bench.

“How did it?” Remus asked, smirk in his voice. “James will do that to you.”

“Everything hurts.”

“Even your pride?” Sirius smirked.

“No, that’s feeling pretty good right about now,” Harry smiled dopily. It certainly wasn’t every day that he had his father kicking him off the pitch because he was too good at his job. That alone was enough to induce a stupid grin. Being back on the team was reason for that stupid grin to split his face wide open.

“I can see that,” Sirius smirked. “No wonder you were going to be captain. You’re not bad, Harry James Granger.”

“Thanks,” Harry said and kept smiling.

He was too delirious to see the way James and Sirius kept elbowing one another and jerking their heads sideways periodically, as if signalling one another. The subtle gestures might have eluded his notice but the shout that rang through the Great Hall and silenced the chatter easily drew his attention. “What was that?” he asked.

“In honour of your addition to the team,” Sirius muttered and nodded for him to look. Harry turned in his seat to follow the boy’s gaze across the hall.

Racing clumsily down the aisle toward the exit was Snape. He was having a difficult time of it.
The poor boy kept tripping on his own hair, which had grown to inconvenient, though comical, lengths in just two minutes. It was still growing even as he ran.

“Wait for it…” Sirius said eagerly, grin widening and eyes narrowing to slits as he followed Snape’s progress.

Without warning, the boy’s hair, well past his ankles and growing ever longer, turned a vibrant, unnatural shade of blue. The azure locks did nothing for the boy, only making him flush red with embarrassment and scramble from the Great Hall even quicker. He glared hard over his shoulder through the long curtain of blue hair. His eyes focused intently on the Gryffindor table, concentrating his ire directly where the Marauders sat eating their breakfast calmly as if they had no idea what was happening. A chill ran through Harry as those hard black eyes met his and he had to look away.

“Pay him no mind,” James advised sagely. “He gives everybody that look.”

“Congratulations!” Sirius cried. “You’re one of us now!”

“That was for me?” Harry asked, amazed.

“For us, too, but mostly for you, yeah,” Sirius agreed. “Those were your precise words, as I recall; that you didn’t see the harm in sneaking hair-growth potion into someone’s breakfast or turning them blue. So there you have it, your own ideas made real. What did you think?”

“Very impressive,” he replied, still taken aback that they had pulled a prank just for him. “How did you even get that into his food?”

“We have our secrets just as you’ve yours,” James replied with a wink. “But in time all shall be revealed.”

Harry’s smile fell with his head, but not before the others noted his unease at the prospect of divulging his secrets. “You don’t have to tell me anything, really,” Harry insisted quietly.

“You just don’t want to share, you git,” he replied. “Don’t think I haven’t heard the way you sigh and groan when people call after you. I know what sort you are.”

“What sort might that be?” Harry wondered apprehensively.

James leaned in, dropping his voice, “A troublemaker, Mr Granger, same as us. And we’ll not have you hoarding your South African secrets when they could be put to valuable use here at Hogwarts. Is that understood, young man?”

Smiling, Harry agreed. That very evening, he dug into his trunk to find the bag Fred and George had pompously presented him as he left the Burrow. Their most popular products, they had said. Hidden behind the curtain of his bed, he cast a spell to bring the products back to their right size and looked through what he had been given. Two Skiving Snack Boxes, five boxes of Canary Creams, two pairs of Extendable Ears, a Punching Telescope and a box of U-No-Poo. Quite the haul.

He set the telescope aside, knowing that Hermione would break it if she saw it; an understandable reaction after she had been punched by one. The Extendable Ears might come in useful later, but he saw no value in them for pranking. He would keep the Skiving Snack boxes for the Marauders themselves. If they ever trusted him enough to share Remus’ secret, then he would help them fool the other students and keep Lupin’s lycanthropy quiet. It was the Canary Creams that he thought carried the most pranking potential. It was tempting to hand them over to James and let him run
wild, as he surely would, but the Lupin-like voice in his head chided him. ‘Playing with the past is dangerous. They didn’t have these. It might change history.’

Harry frowned. ‘How could someone turning into a canary have devastating consequences to the timeline?’

‘What if that someone would have been studying, but instead became a canary. That someone would then fail the test, never go on to invent, oh… Wolfsbane Potion, as an example,’ the Lupin voice said.

‘I doubt whoever invented that is at Hogwarts right now,’ he informed the voice flatly, not liking its scare tactics one bit.

‘You know what I meant.’

He ignored the voice as best he could and put the Weasley products away, not that he was giving the voices in his head much heed; he just wanted to consider the consequences of giving some of the brightest and most devious students in the history of the school such novel pranking products. There was a real possibility they might back-engineer the Canary Creams and start a side business of their own some twenty years before Fred and George thought the candy up. Hardly end of the world stuff, but it would impact the world he knew.

“Granger!” James shouted as he came up the stairs, making Harry scramble to finish hiding the Weasley products. The boy marched into the dormitory, looking in no way amused. “Why weren’t you at dinner?”

“I wasn’t hungry,” Harry said with a shrug. His appetite had grown, but some days, when his thoughts turned melancholy, his stomach revolted at the mention of food.

The boy stood over him, arms cross and face stony. “Not good enough.”

“Sorry?”

“You’ll never be able to compete against the other Seekers if you’re weak from not eating,” he said. “Starting tomorrow, you eat properly, every meal. I don’t care how hungry you are, you will eat what I put in front of you. Understood?”

Harry’s stomach protested at the idea. “I don’t think I can.”

“Too bad,” James said and dropped onto his own bed.

Harry watched him a moment before deciding not to offer any further objections. He wanted to smile, to let his heart soar with the knowledge that his father cared so much, but he couldn’t. James’s iron-fisted decree was hardly the stuff fatherly concern was made of. This was more something Oliver Wood might have thought up at his most manic moment. It was right up there with pre-dawn strategy meetings and hour-long pep talks.

With the dread of breakfast hanging over him, he slept fitfully until James threw a pillow at his head.

“Up!” the Chaser commanded.

“Wha’ time ‘s it?” Harry slurred and blinked at his clock. “Wha’the hell? Why you waking me up so early?” He rolled over and pressed the pillow to his head to block out the noise James was making trying to wake Sirius.
“Oh, no you don’t,” James growled when he saw Harry trying to fall back into sleep. The mad captain grabbed his arms and hauled him from bed. While he carried barely half the muscle of Sirius, James easily pulled the underweight Harry around. “You need to eat a proper breakfast, Granger. Get up!”

“Don’ need to be up so early to eat,” Harry moaned and tried to return to his bed.

“You’re going to need the extra time.”

Even half asleep, Harry found the statement suspicious. “Why?”

“Shut up and get dressed,” he ordered and turned to the other bed. “Sirius! Stop rolling over, you git!”

An elbow dangerously close to the groin and several curses later and all three were sitting in the Great Hall. It was eerie being in the hall without teachers at the high table or other students around them. Most of the candles were out save the ones nearest them, making Harry feel even more like they ought to be in bed. Still the food appeared before them.

James stole Harry’s plate and started piling it high with more food than the boy had managed to eat in the whole month of August. It really did turn his stomach. He ran for the washroom and heaved into the closest toilet. Nothing came up, but it somehow eased the sickness he felt. Shaking and still feeling queasy, he shuffled slowly back to the Great Hall.

“Told you you’d need the extra time,” James said, an inappropriately smug smile on his face. Merciless, he dropped the plate down in front of Harry. “Eat.”

“How much?” he gaped at the contents as his stomach took another turn.

“All of it,” James ordered. “Nothing left, not even a crumb. I don’t care if you have to skip Care of Magical Creatures afterward, but you will eat everything. If you throw up, you’ll start again.”

Harry stared at the eggs and sausage, the bacon and mushrooms, the tomatoes and toast. It was too much. Anyone who had seen him eating at any time since he had arrived only twelve days ago would know that he could not possibly fit that much in his shrunken stomach.

Master of the impossible, James pressed him on. Bite after bite, coaxing, shouting, insulting, he got the boy to eat every last crumb. He did the same at lunch and dinner, and at breakfast the next day. When Harry hid, the others found him and dragged him to the Great Hall. If he ran, they caught him. There was no escaping James’s fanaticism, and Harry was growing healthier for it. Quidditch practices exhausted him to the point where the dreams never came on the nights he had chased the Snitch on his broom. He was sleeping restfully five nights out of seven. It took weeks of flying and James shouting at him and forcing him to eat, but his body finally started to rebuild itself after the abuse he had visited on it over the summer.

All the loose and baggy clothes Tonks had bought him started to fit, properly as September drew to a close, snuggly by the last week of October. ‘Harry Potter you are one sexy beast,’ the woman’s voice repeated in his head as he looked at himself in the mirror. The concave chest and knobby ribs were long gone, replaces by muscles that filled and stretched the washed and worn fabric of his shirts. It was embarrassing wearing clothes so tight.

It only got worse as the thirty-first of October rolled around.

“Oi, Gorgeous Granger!” Tildy called to him across the common room.

He rushed over to keep her from shouting it again. “Could you not call me that?”

“It really does,” Sirius agreed. “I’m actually quite jealous.”

“Don’t be,” Harry grit and slumped into the chair opposite them. “What do you want?”

“Well…” Tildy smiled her familiar, toothy smile. “I know you’re still hung up on that Ginny girl, but I was wondering if you wanted to go out… with me.”

He tried to keep his face unreadable. Ginny was nice and kind of pretty, but he could never seriously fancy his best mate’s sister. That was beyond wrong. There had to be a rule against that sort of thing. Keeping to the story he and Hermione had fabricated, he hung his head and sighed. “I don’t think I can.”

“But it’s Hogsmeade weekend and I hate going alone,” she complained. “How about we make it a group? Sirius, bring someone.”

The boy glanced without much interest around the common room for someone he could invite. More than a few girls looked his way, but his eyes moved over them without even noticing. “Nobody worth asking,” Sirius said, a devious smile taking over his bored face. “Unless I can take Gorgeous Granger and you can find someone else to go with.”

“No fair!”

“Uh, tell you what… I’m going to sit this weekend out,” Harry decided hastily, not at all comfortable with people talking about him in front of his face like this. “I’m kind of bored with Zonko’s and I have research to do and… stuff…”

The corner of Sirius’s mouth rose with his eyebrow as he looked him over. “What’s the matter, Gorgeous Granger?”

“Nothing,” Harry insisted far too quickly for it to be true. “I have stuff to do. Hermione and I have to do some research for a personal project.”

Sirius nodded, but it was obvious that he didn’t believe a word of it.

“You want to go with me, then, Sirius?” asked the persistent Tildy Moorehead.

“Yeah, sure.”

Harry’s sigh of relief dried up in his throat as he saw the way Sirius kept his eyes on him as he replied to Tildy. If he really was going to Hogsmeade with the girl, Harry did not expect him to stay there for long.
It was too early for anyone to be in the library, especially on a Saturday, but Sirius still strolled there, hands in pockets and a smile on his face as he looked around the stacks. Every table he came across was empty. Normally, he would have turned around and returned to the Great Hall, but he already knew the person he sought wasn’t at breakfast. Around the final table and into the dark corner, straight to the discouraging bars of the Restricted Section, he swaggered confidently.

Even the Restricted Section looked empty, but after a moment he heard the noise of someone walking around among the sequestered books. Then the curses started, softly muttered and in a very familiar voice. Harry James Granger. Just where he thought the boy would be.

“Harry James Granger!” Sirius called loudly, completely unperturbed by the eagle-eyed librarian looking his way. “Oi! Gorgeous Granger!”

Blushing a deep and amusing red, Harry ran from the back to keep him from shouting that name again. Sirius couldn’t imagine why, it was a perfectly respectable nickname and one he would have been proud to wear, although, he answered to ‘Sexy Sirius’ quite often. “What do you want?”

Harry asked through the bars, his voice a low murmur.

“It’s Hogsmeade this weekend,” he replied, his tone implying that what he wanted was obvious.

“And I told you I have stuff to do,” the boy reminded him. “I have a lot more to look through than I thought. Without Hermione, this is going to take me all day. I think I’ll be here pretty late tonight. Don’t be surprised if I just camp out down here if Madam Pince will let me.”

Sirius frowned. “Right.”

“Maybe tomorrow, too,” he added causally as he shifted the heavy book in his arms.

“Do you need help? I’m quite smart, you know. Don’t let the pretty face fool you.” Sirius grinned.

Harry’s casualness faltered and he offered no smile in return. “No, that’s okay. You promised Tildy you’d go with her. ‘Sirius Black always keeps his word’ and all that.”

Sirius frowned deepened; he was being told to piss off again. He didn’t like that.

“I’ll be out for food and Quidditch if there’s practice,” the boy promised and disappeared back into the Restricted Section. Sirius stood staring through the bars for a long minute, thoroughly annoyed at having been turned down. So much for James’s concerns about Harry liking him; the boy barely recognised his existence, accepting his advances but providing no response to suggest he was either interested or disinterested in what he was offering. He could probably leap naked into his lap and Harry would just complain that he had been trying to read.

“Did you want something?” asked Madam Pince sharply.

“Yeah,” Sirius muttered with a bland shrug and wandered back to the Great Hall, dropping onto the bench without bothering to look at his companions.

“Where’s Granger?” James asked.

“Library, researching. Doesn’t expect to be back until late, maybe not at all,” he replied dully.
“Well, that’s handy. The full moon is tonight,” the boy grinned. “If he knew he was doing us a favour, I’d thank him for it.” He turned back to his plate, eating heartily in preparation of the long morning he intended to spend wooing Lily Evans.

Remus shifted closer to him on the bench; Sirius looked at him sideways, confused by the sudden pressing of the other boy’s thigh against his own. Surely, his flirtations had not been that far off the mark. Remus was not looking at him in the doe-eyed manner most of his targets wore but with narrowed eyes that glittered with his thoughts. They played at flirting just to gross Peter out, but everyone knew it was a joke… wasn’t it?

Remus leaned closer, Sirius wondered if he was aiming for a kiss. “Quite the coincidence, wouldn’t you agree?” Remus muttered conspiratorially.

“What is?” Sirius asked, hiding his uncertainty well enough.

“Harry,” he replied quietly. That single name set Sirius’s heart to beating properly in his chest and his lungs to working again as he let out the breath he had been holding.

“Isn’t it amazing that he would get so focused on research the day and night of the full moon?” Remus continued, oblivious to Sirius’s temporary crisis. “Like you said, he might not make it back to the dorm tonight.”

“Yeah…” Sirius said slowly and watched as his friend’s mouth pulled into a knowing smirk he knew well.

“Much like last month when he got so caught up with his homework, he fell asleep in the common room.” The boy levelled a look at Sirius that left no doubt of his suspicions.

“You think he’s up to something, too?” Sirius asked. “You think he knows?”

Remus shrugged, as if someone discovering his furry little problem was no worse than waking up and finding a spot on his chin. “Unlikely. But if he does, he’s not said anything and he’s being very considerate to give me space each full moon. Even if that’s not the case, there is something off about him. More off than we originally thought, I’m sure of it.” Remus dug into the pocket of his faded and worn jeans, pulling out a folded piece of parchment. “I even wrote out my list for you. I remember how fond you are of listing personal oddities… Operation What’s Weird About Remus, wasn’t it?”

The boy couldn’t help but smile. “This time it’s Operation Not-Prongs.”

“Well, at least the names are getting better,” Moony commented.

They put their heads together and discussed in low mutters the lists they had each compiled over the last two months. Burn scars, nightmares, mood swings and knowledge of secret passages, Sirius knew, but their lists had each grown. Two weeks after starting at Hogwarts, Harry helped a first year boy to his History of Magic lesson in a section of the castle he had never been. Having never attended that class, Harry should not have known where it was held, let alone that it was taught by a boring old ghost names Binns, but Remus had heard him talking about it with the first year as if he had been forced to sit through the class, too. On one late-night run to the kitchens, Harry, tired from practice and stupefied by too much food, commented that he was glad his house-elf was not in the kitchens because the elf hated him for a blood-traitor and might try to poison him. Remus had remarked that, being Muggle-raised, Harry could not possibly have a house-elf, but the boy insisted that Kreacher was horrid.
This naturally caught Sirius’s interest given that his family’s current house-elf was named Kreacher, an odd name among a species which favoured shorter, cuter names like Poddy and Gorny.

“And his scars,” Remus said, jotting it down on the list.

“We’ve already got them,” Sirius tried to bat his quill away.

“No, you’ve got the burn and that one on his arm,” he said. “He’s got ones on his head and hand, too.”

“Has he?”

“How can you not have noticed?” Remus raised that insufferable eyebrow. “You spend enough time staring at him.”

Sirius scowled at him, annoyed at having his obviousness and his obliviousness pointed out to him. “Tosser. What sort of scars?”

“A lightning bolt on his forehead. It’s small, but looks odd. I don’t think it was made by a cut or anything, but I can never get near enough to see without him knowing,” Remus said.

The Beater’s scowl pulled into a frown as he thought about Harry’s face. It was true, he did stare at Harry enough to have seen something as odd as a scar on his forehead, but the boy’s hair was so wild and fell into his face so often that he must have missed it… or been staring at his eyes or mouth as he often found himself doing. He cleared his throat, embarrassed, “What about his hand?”

“That’s the weirdest one,” Remus said, his voice heavy and the glimmer falling away from his eyes. “He keeps it hidden with magic. I’ve only seen it once before he put the concealment charm on it.”

“Why would he hide that one and not the others?”

He laughed darkly. “Probably wants to forget about how he got it. It’s not from a cut or burn, Sirius. It’s writing and looks like it the words were carved pretty deep.”

“Writing?” Sirius frowned.

“‘I must not tell lies.’” Remus quoted the scar verbatim. “I can’t imagine that’s the sort of thing he’d willing have permanently etched into his skin.”

Sitting back on the bench, Sirius thought again about the boy he’d taken to flirting with so shamelessly, the dark turn he took, his sister’s warning that too many had let him down, scars, secrets and now, apparently, lies he was never to tell. Who the hell was this Harry James Granger?

“Did I mention that neither one asked how I was after the September full moon?” questioned Remus. “They didn’t even bring it up. Like it was something they knew they weren’t supposed to talk about. Hermione came to visit me in hospital but only because Tildy made her, and she didn’t even ask what was wrong.”

“You said yourself that they probably don’t know about you,” Sirius said quietly. “We haven’t said a word; Dumbles and Minnie and Poppy wouldn’t tell. Only Snivellus knows – still sorry about that, by the way – but he hates Harry for looking like Prongs and Hermione for being Muggle-born. He wouldn’t talk to them even to rat you out.”
“You lot managed to figure it out on your own,” Remus reminded him.

“Yeah, after nearly a year. Clever they may be, but nobody can sort that out with only two full moons as evidence.”

“Maybe…”

“Focus on the issue at hand, Moony,” Sirius scolded and stabbed the list with his finger. “We’re talking about Harry’s secret, not yours. Oh, I got another one: He mentioned Zonko’s just the other day. He said he was tired of the place, as if he had been there before.”

Remus nodded and jotted it down onto their combined list of oddities. He frowned and looked at the list again, marking certain points with arrows and stars for emphasis. “Well, I can’t speak to the entire spectrum of peculiarities,” he said slowly, “but more than a few of these would suggest that Harry has spent more time in this castle than he claims.”

“He’s been here before?” Sirius frowned as Remus nodded. The words barely had time to sink in before they caught sight of Harry coming into the Great Hall for breakfast. The pair of conspirators scrambled to hide their list and look as if they had not been talking about him for the last thirty minutes. If they did a poor job, Harry didn’t notice. He was looking over his own notes, a list of spells if the butchered Latin was any indication.

“What’s that?” Remus asked.

“Just some spells Hermione and I need to test,” he replied casually, so casually they would have taken no interest in the list at all if they were not already focused on discovering his secret. If anything was going to help them learn the boy’s hidden truth, then the thing he spent hours researching privately would likely be it.

“Sounds fun,” the werewolf commented. “Mind if I help?”

“Better not,” said Harry with an edge of nervousness creeping into his voice as he hastily shoved the list into his pocket. “You going to Hogsmeade today?”

Sirius watched as Remus nodded and let the boy distract him with chatter; anyone who knew Moony could see the glint still shining impishly in his eyes. Despite outward appearances, he knew his friend was still thinking about the boy’s secrets. As the Great Hall began to clear and students started bundling up to walk to the village, Remus stood and grinned, a different sort of glint entering his baby blues.

“Better make sure no one steals your sister away,” he said and ran back down the aisle to find Hermione.

“Should I be worried?” Harry asked as he glanced over his shoulder, watching Remus smile winningly at the girl.

“Probably,” Sirius smirked, and considered needling the boy further when his focus fell to the wall ahead of them. Through the small crowd that had gathered, he could see the massive stones littered with foul words, dripping red and drawing no small amount of attention. “What the hell?”

Harry, walking beside him, stumbled and fell, crying out at the unexpected turn his world had taken.

“Got you!” the rasping voice of the caretaker called jubilantly. He ran forward on pained, flat feet and grabbed Harry by the wrist, pulling him up and examining the boy’s hands, red with ink.
“I didn’t do anything!” Harry protested despite the obvious evidence to the contrary. “I just got here!”

“Returning to the scene of the crime, eh?” The old man ignored his declarations of innocence, and hauled the boy away with surprising strength. “Detention!”

“What bollocks!” Sirius shouted, but Filch was too focused on Harry to be bothered with him. “He didn’t do it!”

“But who did?” James wondered, looking at the broken ink bottle where Harry had fallen. Someone had set the boy up. “Bet it was Snivellus. That git hates him almost as much as he hates me.”

Sirius glared at the wall like it was the one at fault. “Snivellus…”

Face flush with excitement and pride, Peter scurried up. “Great news!” he announced. “We don’t have to worry about Harry catching us tonight! I got him out of the way! Did you see?”

The boy shrunk as they turned on him, all the animosity they had been saving for the Slytherin now thrown at their friend. It was enough to make the boy shit himself, which he might just have done.

“You did that?” Sirius grit his teeth.

He could only squeak in reply.

“He was going to be in the library all night,” growled Sirius angrily. He was not sure which made him more livid, that their friend had been the one to do this or that it was Harry who had been caught. He suspected that if the same prank had been pulled on Snivellus he would have found it brilliant and patted Peter on the back for his ingenuity. Hell, if he had pulled it on James he would have laughed, but on Harry… He couldn’t even express how furious he was.

Peter turned his watery eyes to his other friend, “J-james?”

“What if he gets detention for the month?” the Quidditch captain glared. “We need him on the team.”

“B-but I thought you’d be impressed,” Peter managed. “He’s out of the way…”

“Go apologise,” Sirius ordered, his voice cold with hatred. “I don’t want to see your face again until you do.” He turned and strode away, James along with him.
Hermione tried to ignore the smile plastered over Remus’s face. It wasn’t easy. He looked positively elated, though so far as she could tell there was no reason for it. They were bundled against the freezing wind, walking together to Hogsmeade with Sirius and Tildy beside them; James had already run on ahead to find Lily.

She had been trying to keep things friendly with Remus, but that was about as easy as ignoring his grin. Tildy was continuously making remarks about them, about Hermione’s preference for sandy hair over red, about how few – make that no – letters Ron Weasleby sent her from Johannesburg. Sirius was no better, sending sly winks her way and pushing her toward Remus whenever she entered the common room. Then there was Remus himself. A gentleman in every sense of the word, he never made any advances or suggestions; he smiled and spoke politely, talked to her like a friend, and it was driving her mad.

No matter how much she told herself not to, she found herself thinking about him. She tried, really tried, to put Ron’s face into her brain instead, but Remus just walked up and pushed the boy out of the way like the proverbial ninety-eight-pound weakling.

“So, are you two going to wander off to Madam Puddifoots to start snogging?” Tildy asked with a wiggle of her eyebrows. Sirius snorted, the first indication that he was actually paying his companions any attention.

“No, thank you,” Hermione bristled. “Harry lent me money to visit the bookshop.”

“Why does he have all the coins?” Sirius inquired. “Seems odd.”

She muttered her standard reply about her things getting lost on their journey from South Africa. For how often she had said it, she ought to have been able to make it sound convincing, but she failed. The boys shared a meaningful glance as she ducked her head.

“Sirius,” Tildy said, grabbing his arm tightly, “I want to go over there!” She didn’t wait for his acceptance, just pulled him along behind her.

“I’ll catch you two later,” Sirius shrugged and let the girl decide their direction.

“Tildy is so odd,” Hermione frowned. “So like her…“

“Like who?” Remus questioned, his voice airy as if he was not particularly interested, but she could tell by the intensity of his glance that he was extremely keen to know.

“No one. Never mind,” replied the girl crisply. “I need to look at the bookshop.” She started marching off in the direction of Tomes and Scrolls, not realising that her knowledge of which direction to go added another item onto Remus’s list of curiosities about the Grangers. She just cared about reaching the store.
The selection at Tomes and Scrolls was not the best, certainly not as diverse as Flourish and Blotts, but it would have to do. She and Harry needed as many sources as they could get their hands on if they had any hope of finding the spell that had sent them here. Actually, given that it was Malfoy that had gotten them into this mess, she was starting to think the best source to search for his hex might be down Knockturn Alley. Getting Professor Dumbledore’s permission to go there was highly unlikely, however. It took her a month of careful argument – complete with a graph of their probability of success without more materials – to win permission to visit Hogsmeade, he was so against putting them in reach of Death Eaters.

She opened the shop door and sighed as the warmth washed over her. Remus was close behind her. “So what are you after?”

“A book,” she said hastily, too flustered by his proximity to be polite.

“I did gather that much on my own,” he commented with a raised eyebrow.

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves, “Remus, please stop following me.” His smile showed that he knew she didn’t mean it. Why couldn’t she mean it? It would make things so much easier if she did.


“Which one?” she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I’ll know it when I see it,” he replied lightly and walked past her, brushing his hand against hers as he did. Her heart beat faster at that brief contact, her skin tingled, and he smirked. He knew what he did to her. He knew and he did it on purpose.

‘It’s the full moon,’ she reminded herself, trying to keep a cool head. ‘It’s the full moon. He’s not himself. It’s the werewolf. Remus would never play with you.’

“I’m going over here,” she said, her voice shaky. She walked quickly toward the back where the most advanced level spell books were kept.

“So what are you looking for?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet,” she replied, head tilted sideways to read the titles. Nothing looked particularly helpful. “They might not even have anything… Can you get me that book off the high shelf?”

He retrieved it easily. “Aren’t you glad I came? How else would you have gotten it?”

“No,” she giggled, “but I’m sure you have other uses.”

“Oh, I do.”

It wasn’t the depth or huskiness his voice had suddenly taken on but the promise held in it that made her turn and look at him. His eyes had darkened and his mouth was turned up in a smile that was different, predatory, wolfish. Standing at a respectful distance, fully clothes in at least four
layers of wool and cotton, he put ideas into her head, all of which involved the pair of them naked, sweating and screaming each other’s name.

“I need some air,” she squeaked and ran past him out into the freezing wind.

If cold showers worked anything like cold air, they did not work at all. The frigid wind only made her realise just how hot her skin was. Thinking of her hot skin made her think of his. Thinking of his skin made her think of his body… pressed against hers… naked.

“Oh, bad,” she moaned.

“What’s so bad about it?”

She didn’t have to turn to know it was Remus, that his face was back to normal, his eyes their normal innocent blue, untainted by thoughts. He was himself again.

“I’ve told you,” she said, desperate for him to finally listen and believe her. “I like someone else.”

“You like me, too,” he replied quietly. “What’s wrong with liking two people?”

‘Quite a lot when one of them is you,’ she thought and nearly said it, but knew that would have hurt him immeasurably.

“I can’t like two people,” she insisted. “I can only like one. And the one I like is Ron.”

“Liar,” he said, smirking. “You like me far more than you like him. You never write to him.”

“I do, too,” she lied. “You just haven’t seen me do it.”

“You never talk about him,” he countered.

“Because nobody wants to hear it,” she scowled. “I think about him all the time.”

He just kept smirking.

“You are impossible,” she glared at him. “Just stop it. Stop your smirking and your suggestions and your brushing up against me. I don’t care what you think or what Tildy says.”

The smirk didn’t move.

“Stop that!” she stamped her foot.

Still he smirked.

She huffed and spun around, marching away from him toward nothing in particular. She grew tired and cold from plodding across the village. For all the distance her efforts managed to put between them, she might as well have stayed with Remus in the warm bookshop. He walked beside her, easily keeping up with her great, stomping strides, smirking firmly on his face and for good reason; he knew, as any casual observer would, that he had quite the effect on her. Her feet took her past the pub and down a narrow, curving side street that ended abruptly with a crumbling wall. Just past it, after a thicket of snow-heavy trees, was a derelict little cottage known to be the most haunted in Britain. The Shrieking Shack.

The boy’s smirk finally fell as he looked at that house. His jaw clenched as if he were in physical pain. His hands fisted as his sides. His eyes glazed over, as he thought of the coming transformation or memories of all those that had already passed. It hurt to watch him fighting his
other half even before the moon came out.

Unsure if it was the right thing to do, but knowing she needed to pull him out of his mind, Hermione reached out and touched his face. Her hands were cold as she gently turned his head. He should have jumped at the contact, at the shock of her freezing skin on his flushed cheek, but he turned his eyes with her movement and looked down into hers.

‘Perhaps not the best plan,’ she thought as the ripple of fear and desire ran through her.

His eyes were hard again, shaded by his drawn brow. The boy looked so much more like the man she knew, though Lupin would never have looked at her that way, the way that made her knees buckle and heart beat erratically; the way that made her spine tingle and her stomach tighten, that made her blood flow everywhere but to her brain.

That’s where she was now – flushed, stuttering, tingling and weak-kneed – standing alone with him in a clearing with nothing to distract her from him, or him from her.

She wanted to run. She wanted to turn, to flee, to hide. She wanted to kiss him.

Remus wanted to kiss her, and he did. He leaned in and captured her mouth as she stood there staring at him, opening and closing her lips as if she were desperately trying to force words to come out. So far as kisses went, it was practically nothing. No tongues or teeth or anything that made kisses so fantastic, but it was still a kiss. It was contact of a decidedly more-than-friends nature. It was the first step on a pleasurable road that would end somewhere very, very wrong.

Realising too late what she had let him do, Hermione tensed.

Lupin came into her brain, grown and stern and highly disappointed. He shook his head sadly, slowly as he folded his arms across his chest, looking down at her as he leaned on his desk in the Defence Against the Dark Arts room. He frowned, ‘You’re the cleverest witch of your age, Hermione, and you couldn’t see that coming? I was chasing after you for months. What did you think would happen if you were alone with me?’ A spike of fear impaled itself in her chest at the thought of all the things that she had changed. Would Lupin still be her teacher? Would he hate her? Would he fail her on purpose for being so weak-willed? Would he never join the Order? Would Sirius never find his friend? So many things that she might have damaged with this one moment.

Remus, the boy, broke away from her. Considering what he had just done, he ought to have been smirking again, but his face was slack with shock. She should have slapped him at that precise moment. Slapped him hard across the face, kicked him or assaulted him as any girl who had been kissed unwillingly would do, but she couldn’t. For one thing, she had wanted him to kiss her. For another, he already looked as if she had wounded him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, the words dragged from his throat sounding like a razor across his skin. “I shouldn’t have.”

“No,” she agreed, though it was a lie, “you shouldn’t have.”

Focusing every ounce of resolve she possessed, she walked away and left him standing in the clearing. The second she was out of sight, she slumped against the nearest wall for support. Her heart was still racing despite her efforts to slow it down.

“Bad,” she groaned. “Why did I let that happen?”

This wasn’t some test grade that would be forgotten after a few years. Nor was it a silly ball game
that students would crow about until the next great player came along. This was important. She was playing not with a Quaffle but with a real, human heart. Remus liked her, and she could not like him back however much she wanted to. She knew him, spent time with him, lived with him. There was no way that she could escape the effects of her foolishness if she let things go any further.

There had to be a way around this… if only she could see it.
Remus was sighing into his cereal. Again.

It was more a hard, angry exhalation of breath, but calling it a sigh made it seem like something that might be easily dealt with. His friends looked at him sideways, elbowing one another, nudging and shoving until one was elected by silent agreement to ask. Sirius cleared his throat to draw the boy’s attention, but he only ‘sighed’ in response.

“Moony,” Sirius said slowly, carefully. “You all right, mate?”

Remus shook his head and sighed, but offered no other reply. They started nudging one another again, furiously signalling for him to keep going, to demand answers. One of their members was put out and they needed to know why. After he had spent time alone with Hermione, they expected him to be as gushing and jubilant as James was whenever Evans gave him even a half-way civil glance, but Remus had trudged back to the castle, eaten and vanished to the Shrieking Shack without a word. His transformation had been a nightmare, his uglier half tearing at the furniture with more fervour than was normal, even for a werewolf.

That was two days ago.

Hermione came into the Great Hall and sat with the other girls, glancing down at them and looking away quickly before she could catch any of the Marauders’ eyes.

“What the hell did she do to you, Moony?” Sirius muttered.

The boy’s response was immediate and so fierce a nearby first year nearly wet himself. “She didn’t do anything!” Remus shouted, slamming his palm down onto the table.

“Well, she obviously did something to you,” Sirius replied calmly, never one to show just how shocked, startled or worried he was in the face of a ranting lunatic.

“It was me,” the boy groaned, his spine growing slack and his shoulders dropping. “I kissed her.”

James cheered. “I knew you had it in you! What—Wait, if you kissed her, shouldn’t you be happy?” He looked over at Hermione; the girl’s stiff spine and strained smile were unmistakable. One look at her and he knew the reason for Moony’s mood. “She turned you down?”

Remus shook his head and sighed, properly sighed. “No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

He checked to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, leaned in and replied, “She knows.”

“You mean she knows?” James asked. “You told her?”
He shook his head. “I didn’t have to. I kissed her and she freaked out. Got stiff as a statue and just reeked of fear. No, Sirius,” he cut the boy off before he could launch an argument, “I’m not talking slightly nervous. I know what slightly nervous smells like and this was way past that. She was terrified of me… She knows.”

Silence fell among them until one by one they let out an angry exhalation.

“Well, I guess that leaves off telling Harry James Granger your secret, too,” Sirius bit out the words as if he had been personally slighted.

“I think we need to show that girl what she’s missing,” James frowned.

“Or prank her,” Peter suggested, glaring down the table at her. “Nobody messes with a Marauder.”

Temporarily ignoring the fact that they were still angry with Peter for the prank he pulled on Harry, they let his proposal carry them into a second silence, this one electric with possibility. Prank the new girl? That was something they would have done weeks ago had she not been so sought after by one of their own. Nothing too embarrassing, just enough to draw a laugh. That was before. Now that she had shown her true colours, the kid gloves were coming off.

Remus should have been trying to stop them by now, but he offered no protest; he didn’t offer any suggestions, either, but they took his silence as agreement and the escalation began.

“Dungbomb in her trunk,” Peter said simply.

“She hasn’t got a trunk,” Sirius shook his head. “And that would be unfair to the others. They didn’t do anything. Has to be localised to just her.”

“All she has is that bag of hers,” James said, narrowing his eyes at the girl, studying her. “She’s always got it on her…”

“Replace it with a copy?” suggested Sirius.

He nodded. “Maybe a miniature Devil’s Snare as a starter – something to scare her. If she thought she had something to be sacred of before… just you wait…” He breathed out a dark laugh.

“And extra added bonus: We’ll get to rifflle through her stuff for information,” Peter grinned.

“Hadn’t even thought of that,” Sirius grinned. “Well spotted, Wormtail.”

“What about the brother?” the boy asked, looking to his larger, stronger friends. “If he realises it’s us…” His words died as he imagined what Harry might do. The boy was generally nothing to worry about, but they all remembered the hard anger on his face that first morning when he gripped the knife and looked murderously across the table at Peter. Harry had grown stronger since then. If he wanted to, he could easily beat James or Peter in a fair fight, maybe even Remus.

“Oh, he’ll know it’s us,” Sirius smiled darkly. “I’ll make sure he knows who’s doing it and why.”

“No, dammit,” James scowled and smacked him on the head. “We need him. We don’t stand a chance for the Quidditch Cup without him.”

“That must have hurt to admit,” Remus smirked, a touch of his humour returning.

“Shut it. This is all your fault, Moony,” the Chaser said. “Couldn’t go falling for Mary. Her brother’s useless at Quidditch.”
“Mary is vapid and talks too much,” he sniffed. “Hermione is perfect.”

“Was perfect,” Sirius corrected.

“No,” Remus sighed rather wistfully as he looked down the table, “she still is perfect.”

“Oh, Merlin,” groaned Sirius. “I hope I never fall in love and sound as daft as you.”

James smirked.

“What’s that look for?” he demanded. “I’m not in love with anybody. I’m not. Stop looking at me like that. You can smirk all you like, Prongs, I’ve got nothing to admit. I’m not in love. I don’t even like him.”

“Him?” Remus pounced on the word and Sirius’s confession. “Who might this ‘him’ be?”

“Nobody!” Sirius shouted. “Shove off, the lot of you.” He stood, fuming, and strode from the Great Hall with considerably less swagger than he had when he entered.

Class was awkward. Sirius, who normally got to sit off the side during Ancient Runes and goof off, was forced to play buffer between Hermione and Remus. The girl looked guilty. Remus alternated between love-sick and seething. It would have been highly entertaining were he not stuck in the middle.

“Check this,” Remus demanded sharply, handing over his translation.

Sirius frowned down at the parchment. Remus’s usually tidy hand had become nearly as illegible as James’s as he worked feverishly to ignore the girl so near to him. Sighing, Sirius admitted, “I can’t read your writing.”

“I can,” Hermione replied quietly and held her hand out for the parchment.

Sirius was passing it to her when Remus reached out and snatched the translation back. “Never mind,” the furious boy said curtly. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

The girl sniffed as if she were about to cry, though he couldn’t tell with her head down. “Did you remember to allow for modern changes to the meaning of the verb?”

In reply to the girl’s polite reminder, Remus said, “Mind your own fucking business.”

That was when Sirius realised just how much his friend liked her. Remus would never get so wound up over someone he had a little crush on. If he was so angry he was cursing at her, willingly letting his friends prank her, then he was lost. The girl beside him, the one crying silently into her dictionary, had stolen his friend’s heart.

Hermione ran from the room as soon as they were dismissed. No one saw her in the Great Hall at lunch.

As soon as her brother walked through the door, brushing from his shoulders the last of the dust he had picked up in the Restricted Section, Sirius waved him over insistently. “Harry James Granger, where’s that sister of yours?”

“I dunno,” the boy shrugged. “Probably reading. She gets lost in books sometimes.”

His eyebrow rose of its own accord. What sort of brother let his sister’s heart get broken and literally shrugged it off? “Uh… Harry…”
“Oh, crap, I know it’s bad when you only use my first name,” the boy replied cheekily. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Sirius said. “Moony did. He kissed your sister.”

“What?” Harry’s eyes grew huge as he looked to Remus for confirmation; Moony’s clenched jaw and averted eyes told him everything he needed to know. “Oh hell! Why would you do that?” He jumped up and ran from the Great Hall.

“Why the hell did you tell him?” James demanded, but paused midway to smacking his friend on the head. “Wait. Why did he run away? Shouldn’t he be threatening to break Moony’s legs or something?”

Even Remus nodded his agreement. Concerned as he was for his legs, he knew how most brothers should act and running away was not it. They raced after him, James digging into his bag for the invisibility cloak he carried with him in case an opportunity for a prank presented itself. He threw it over all three of them as they hit the entrance to the common room, though it took quite a lot of stooping for none of their feet to show.

“Hermione!”

They froze at Harry’s deep bellow up the stairs.

“Hermione! I know what happened! Come down!” he called again. He leaned as far as he could into the stairwell, shouting after his sister again. “If you don’t come down, I’ll just fly to your window!”

“Stupid bloody Lupin,” Harry groaned and kicked a table. “Couldn’t keep his bloody lips to himself. Going to kill him when I get home… might kill him now, save myself the wait.”

“You can’t kill Lupin,” his sister chided, her voice nasal and wet from crying. “You like him too much.”

“Not right now, I don’t,” he insisted. “What’s the big idea kissing him? You know better!”

“I know!” she hiccupped, tears brimming in her blood-shot eyes.

“Then why did you let him do it?” he demanded.

“Because I wanted him to!” she cried and fell onto the steps, burying her face in her knees.

Harry stood in complete shock for what felt like five minutes, though it was probably closer to five seconds. He stared down at the girl as if she were someone he had never seen before, a stranger who had taken on the general shape and appearance of the girl he knew so well. “You like him?”

“Yes.”

“But he’s…” the boy struggled to find the appropriate word as the three under the invisibility cloak held their breath and glanced at one another in sympathy for having been so mistaken in the boy’s kindness and acceptance. “He’s… Lupin…”

“I know he is, but I still like him,” she insisted.

Silence fell as Harry did, sitting himself down beside her and wrapping an arm around his sister as she cried. They watched, unsure what sort of insult ‘Lupin’ was when applied to their friend. They
had expected something along the lines of unstable or dangerous, maybe feral or half-breed, even the taboo words themselves lycanthrope or werewolf. But Lupin? That was simply his name.

“He’ll never let you live this down, you know,” Harry commented quietly. “I can just see his face when we get home. He’ll be smirking at you for weeks.”

She breathed a watery laugh. “Don’t think I haven’t thought about that. I was hoping a carefully placed memory charm would work in my favour.”

“Well, it’ll have to,” Harry smiled. “Otherwise he’ll be in love with you for years, pining away until third year when you shop up all bossy and know-it-all.”

“I was a bossy know-it-all well before third year, thank you,” she sniffed and gave a wobbly smile. “My Kindergarten teacher sent me up to the next grade just so I’d stop correcting her.”

Harry grinned. “I don’t doubt that for a minute. My Kindergarten teacher loved me, but then I was just happy to be out of my cupboard and away from my aunt.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, tears of a different sort threatening. “I wish we could do something. Make it better somehow.”

The boy frowned. “You know the rules better than I do.”

A disgruntled sigh escaped her, one of unwilling resignation and frustration, “I know, but that doesn’t stop me wanting to help.”

“Thanks.”

They sat together, her head on his shoulder as the Marauders grew pained at having to crouch so long and confused about exactly what the pair had just been discussing. Finally, after ten minutes, with the sounds of Gryffindors returning from lunch coming through the portrait, Harry stood.

“What are you going to do about Remus?” he asked. “You can’t leave him like that. He looked about as good as you do. He likes you, Hermione.”

“I know,” she groaned and hung her head. “But we can’t.”

His brow creased in thought. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure! Things could go horribly wrong! Think of the consequences!”

“I am,” he said. “We’ve been here too long, they’re going to remember. So I figure Dumbledore will take care of it when we leave. He didn’t risk my knowing about the prophecy, he certainly won’t risk this.”

“I don’t know…”

The boy grinned, all cheeks and wicked glint, looking more like James Potter than ever before. “Go on. We know he’s a good guy. I mean, it’s not normal, but if you like him…”

The portrait flew open, letting in the flood of happy Gryffindors. James tore off the cloak, eager to ease the pressure on his spine and thighs after crouching so long, and they blended with the incoming rush of student. The Marauders claimed the most comfortable chairs, sighing in pleasure as they stretched out their limbs.

“She likes you,” Sirius smirked.
“Shut up,” Remus mumbled.

“Made her forget all about that Ron bloke,” James said.

“Who she’s apparently been in love with since third year,” Sirius added, his smirk falling slightly. “Seems odd talking about memory charms, though. People have their hearts broken and fall out of love all the time. Why would she need to modify the bloke’s memory just because she likes someone else now?”

James just shrugged. “Maybe he’s the jealous type.”

“What’s he going to do all the way from South Africa? Send Moony a strongly-worded letter?” he snorted.

Remus glanced back at the Grangers, who were finishing their debate. He snapped his head back to the fire as Hermione turned to look at him, something of a smile on her face. “Shut up,” he ordered.

“Remus?” Hermione said meekly, tapping his arm. “Can I talk to you …privately?”

Sirius grinned and pushed him out of the chair. “Go on.”

“Aw, so sweet,” James cooed.

“Don’t be a git,” Harry warned and dropped down on the couch.

“Oi! Why are you being rude to me?” James sniffed indignantly. “You’re meant to be warning Moony off your sister.”

He waved a hand in the air indifferently. “Nah. I know he’s a good bloke.”

Sirius lay down on the couch, taking up his favourite position with Harry as his pillow. “I have decided that you are quite possibly the greatest brother ever. If only all the birds I’ve dated had brothers as brilliant, I’d still be dating some of them.”

“Wouldn’t that be awkward,” James questioned under his breath, wicked glint lighting up his hazel eyes, “when you’d rather be dating the brother instead?”

“I’m going to ignore you now, Prongs,” Sirius sniffed, daring a look at Harry’s face and was relieved beyond measure when he saw him fighting laughter.
Hermione was quite certain that she was doing something that was very wrong.

So far as rule-breaking went, messing with the timeline was far worse than anything she had ever done, far worse than anything James and his friends had ever conceived of doing. The Prefect in her was screaming for her to turn back now and leave the timeline and Remus Lupin alone. Still, her feet kept walking farther from the fire with Remus following behind her.

It was wrong, but she didn’t care.

She liked him.

“What?” he demanded, arms folded and face impassive.

She flinched at his tone. “I wanted to apologise,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry I behaved the way I did.”

“You’re sorry you were scared of me?” he asked, eyebrow raised in what felt like a very condescending manner.

“I was not!” she insisted, too annoyed by his stubborn refusal to accept her to bother wondering where he got the idea from. “You surprised me, that’s all.”

He scoffed derisively. “I know the difference between shock and fear. You froze, Hermione. You were terrified.”

“Not of you!” she stamped her foot. “Why would I be scared of you? I was terrified of what it meant that I like you so much, of what it would mean when it was time for me to go home.”

His scowl curled upward as he stepped closer to her. “I knew you liked me.”

Her brow knit together as she watched his transformation, watched his anger vanish instantly as if it had never really been there at all. No one got over being rejected that quickly. Catching sight of the glimmer in his eye, she understood his game too late. “You tricked me! You just wanted me to admit I liked you,” she glared up at him. “That was a dirty trick, Remus Lupin!”
He smirked. “I know. But how else was I supposed to get the truth out of you? You’re much too good at sidestepping my questions. If I asked you for the truth, I would have gotten the same old rubbish about liking Ron and not getting attached. When you’re angry, you tend to say things without thinking. Quite handy for me, really.”

“That’s completely unfair,” she grumbled.

“Let me make it up to you,” the boy said, pulling her close.

The fear of consequences reared up again making her heart race. “I—”

“Don’t start that again,” he warned, diving down to kiss her before she could launch her protest.

It was a far better kiss than their first. As he tasted her lips with his tongue, the worries and terrors of what she was doing faded into an irritating buzz, like a mosquito that was easily ignored. Knowing her true feelings gave him more courage and he took every inch she would allow him.

Pulling away, he held her eye, that spark of delight still bright. “Now, what were you about to say?”

“That you’re a cheater,” she pouted.

“I can’t have you thinking ill of me,” he insisted gently. “I’ll make that up to you as well, shall I?” Smirking, he took hold of her pouting lips with his own. He gained a bit more ground, slipping between her barely parted lips, teasing her sweet pink tongue until she mewed.

“Still think me an arse?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Good,” he grinned. “Because I don’t think I can stop.” He stole into her mouth again, taking all that she would give him, knowing that she would give it all. What little fear he had sensed in her was gone now, lost to the intoxicating aroma of her pleasure and the heady tang of something he never imagined he could cause in a girl: desire.

Her fingers gripped painfully in his hair and she moaned into his mouth. “Hermione, slow down.”

She blushed, though it was virtually impossible to tell when she was already flushed with want. Knowing he had done that to her, he smirked. At that tiny, confident gesture, the girl launched herself at him again, taking his mouth with far more vigour than he had hers.

“Damn, Moony,” Sirius called. “What the hell did you do to that girl?”

Squeaking in embarrassment, Hermione pushed him away. The whole common room was looking at them, had been for the past five minutes. She covered her face with her hands and ran for the girls’ dormitories, spurred on by the cheers and wolf-whistles that followed her.

“You are a right bastard,” Remus informed his friend.

“I know,” Sirius grinned and dropped back onto the couch and Harry’s lap.

Remus raised his eyebrow at the scene, devious smirk pulling at his swollen lips as he considered spoiling Sirius’s fun the way that Sirius had ruined his. Harry, great bloke that he was, clearly was oblivious to the fact that Sirius was properly flirting with him. Knowing Sirius as long as he had and having the extra-added werewolf senses to aid his awareness, he knew beyond doubt that
Sirius wasn’t flirting for information anymore; he really, properly liked Harry.

“They tell me I’m supposed to threaten you,” Harry said blandly.

“No need,” Remus insisted.

“I know,” he replied.

“That’s just boring,” Sirius whined. “Where is your sense of brotherly obligation? You should at least hex him a little bit.”

“He just wants to see you all hot and bothered,” Remus warned the boy, letting his eyes drift down to meet Sirius’s as he spoke. The grey eyes were wide in silent supplication for him to stop talking, to not give him away. Remus just smiled, “I wouldn’t encourage him if I were you.”

Harry snorted, ignorant to the silent conversation that had passed between his friends. “Like he needs any encouragement from anyone.”

Poor idiot really didn’t have any idea what he was getting himself into. Everyone knew Sirius was not the sort to fall for anyone. He wasn’t intentionally malicious; he never set out to break people’s hearts. He dated and went through the motions, but after a while it was obvious that he was bored with whatever girl or boy he was seeing regularly. There was always something missing, so he gave up on them. This level of potentially-romantic attachment was unnatural for Sirius. He had already spent more time with Harry than he had any two of his previous partners combined.

Remus shrugged and turned. Far be it for him to lay the truth down before the oblivious Harry James Granger.

Glancing over at the doorway that lead up to the girls’ dorms, he sighed and trudged through the other opening. He had never before cared about the chastity spell on the stairs up to the girls’ rooms, but he suddenly found it highly inconvenient. He wanted to go kiss Hermione some more.

oOo

Fresh from a freezing cold shower, Hermione found herself still flushed from the kisses she had given and received.

“Ooh,” Tildy grinned. “Looks like someone’s been naughty!”

“Leave her alone,” Lily scolded, though her eyes were as bright as her friend’s. “I guess you two made up.”

“Made out, you mean,” the excitable girl interjected. “What happened to your Weasley in Johannesburg, eh? I thought nobody could hold up to comparison with him.”

“Oh shut up,” Hermione scowled. “This is all your fault. You put ideas in his head… and mine.”

“Trust me, Remus needed no help from me,” she smiled toothily. “Was he good?”

Blushing, Hermione nodded. “Yes,” she sighed and dropped onto her bed. Without him there to keep her going, the worries started to pull at her again. “I hope things work out when we have to leave.”

“Leave?” Tildy frowned.

“Harry and I aren’t staying,” she said. “We’re going home… eventually.”
Lily sat down beside her. “When was this decided? I thought you were here for good.”

“It was decided as soon as we got here,” she replied.

“No wonder you didn’t want to get involved,” Tildy said. “If I weren’t staying long, I wouldn’t want to get attached either.”

Hermione threw her hands up. “Now she listens! You are insufferable sometimes, you know that?”

“Yeah,” the girl nodded. “I get that a lot.”

“Then try learning!”

Lily laughed, a light tinkling laugh like the sound of a bell that made everyone in the room smile and laugh along with her. This would be hard to give up. Hermione liked it here. These girls were so different than the girls she knew in her own time.

“I’m going to miss this,” Hermione admitted.

“Well, you could always stay,” Lily offered.

“Not possible.”

“You don’t get letters,” the girl said matter-of-factly. “I know that mean there’s no one back home, Hermione. Not even parents. If it’s just you and Harry, there’s no reason for you to leave. You can decide where you want to be.”

Hermione stared at the girl, horrified that she had noticed no one wrote to them, amazed that she cared enough to pay attention, touched that she wanted them to stay and completely desolate that she had to say ‘no’. Steeling her nerves for the marathon of lies that she would undoubtedly be drawn into, she shook her head. “Just because there aren’t any letters doesn’t mean there’s no one to go home to. Harry and I already know we’re going. We just don’t know when.”

“Why are you so determined to leave?” Lily demanded.

“Because… there are people waiting for us,” she insisted.

The sides of her mouth pulled down into a disapproving frown. “I hoped you would have trusted us by now.”

Fear, sharp and painful, stabbed hard at her chest and temple at the girl’s words. She knew that tone and the look that was passing over Lily’s face. “What?”

“Hermione, I don’t know what your secret is, but I know you aren’t from South Africa,” she said flatly. “If I had to take a guess based on what I’ve seen, I would say you used to study here. You know the castle too well.”

“I voted for time travel,” Tildy said eagerly, “but they shot that idea down. Said it wasn’t possible even with magic.”

“That’s not true,” Hermione said, her voice hollow and distant as if it belonged to someone else. “It is possible if you have a Time-Turner, but they will only take you about five years in either direction.”

“Ha!” Tildy crowed. “I knew it. Are you from five years in the future?”
She couldn’t withhold the laugh that bubbled out of her at the girl’s childlike glee. “No, I’m not from five years in the future.”

“Well, damn,” she dropped onto the floor, chin in her hands, glowering at the carpet.

“That was very specific, Hermione,” Lily commented, eyes narrowing. “If she had asked me, I would have simply said ‘no’ or ‘no, I’m not from the future’. I wouldn’t have repeated the number of years…”

“I just answered the question,” Hermione insisted, growing breathless as the noose tightened around her.

“Yes, the exact question,” Lily smirked with an understanding that made Hermione squirm. “I’ve been dealing with that prat Potter long enough to recognise that as a form of lying. So are you from more than five years in the future? It would explain how you know the castle so well. And why you were so determined not to get involved with anyone. And why you’re so set on ‘going home’. And why you and Harry don’t have South African accents despite claiming to have lived there for several years.”

“And why Harry looks so much like James,” Tildy added eagerly. “If you’re time travellers, then Harry is totally James’ son.”

The horror must have been clear on her face and in her posture and in the fact that she couldn’t breathe for the panic. Lily gripped the sides of her face, forcing her eyes level with those vibrant green eyes that were exactly like Harry’s. “It’s true? Are you really?”

Hermione refused to reply, but she didn’t have to. The truth was obvious in her every anxiety-laden breath.

“This is brilliant!” Tildy declared. “One: they totally owe me an apology. And two: we have our very own time travelling friend! Can you take me back a few years? I had the most unfortunate haircut second year and I would love to talk myself out of getting it.”

“Even if I could, that’s against the rules,” Hermione replied in a miniscule voice. “You can’t contact your past or future self.”

“Rules?” the girl scoffed. “There are bound to be rules against snogging someone from another time, too, but that didn’t stop you.”

“I tried to stop it,” she insisted, hysteria mounting. “I did! I turned him down and kept insisting I liked Ron, which I really did until he came along. You think I wanted to fall for my teacher? You think I want to destroy the timeline and spend the rest of my time here worrying about what’s going to happen when I walk into his classroom third year? I tried!”

“Hermione!” Lily cried and pulled the girl into a hug. “Calm down. We know you tried. Tildy is just impossible to put off.”

Tildy edged slowly closer, quietly asking, “So, Remus is going to be a teacher?”

“Go away, Tildy,” Lily said sharply.

“I—“

“Away. Now.”
The girl grumbled and complained but stomped away and down the stairs.

“She won’t say anything,” Lily promised, though how she could make such assurances was beyond
Hermione. Still she trusted her because she was desperate to believe that it would be fine, that she
had not just blown the future to smithereens with her manic confession.

Lily held her tightly and let her slowly regain control of her breathing and sanity. “One thing
confuses me,” the girl admitted after a long silence. “If you’re so worried about keeping things as
they should be… why are you still here?”

“We’re stuck,” Hermione muttered. “That’s what we’ve been researching. We need to find the
spell that sent us here.” She explained, as vaguely as she could, about the train ride, Malfoy and the
portkey. “Until we find the spell, we can’t go home.”

Lily nodded as she listened, her brow creased in thought. “Well, I’ll help. Tildy, too, though you
might not want her around too much. She’s very excitable and might start asking some very
personal questions.”

Hermione laughed despite the dire situation. “The more eyes we have, the quicker we can go
home.”

oOo

Down in the common room, Tildy was still grumbling about being left out. She helped solve the
riddle; she deserved to have some of her questions answered. Looking toward the fire, she saw
Harry sitting on the worn couch and grinned. She ran across the room, leapt over the back of the
couch and landed beside the boy.

“Fuck!” Sirius gasped.

“Oh, didn’t see you there,” she said, hopping off him. “Sorry.”

“Dammit that hurt!” he wheezed and rubbed his stomach where she had landed on him. Glaring at
the girl with all the anger he possessed, he left quickly with what little pride he still had.

“Sorry!” she called after him, turning to Harry with a pained grimace, “I hope I didn’t break him.”

“He’ll be fine,” Harry said. “James does that to him every other day.”

Tildy turned her gleaming eyes onto the boy. “You’re awfully close with him, aren’t you?”

Harry frowned. “Who?”

“James,” she said. “I mean, isn’t it a little weird hanging out with your own dad like that?”

If she did not already believe it to be true, Harry’s reaction would have convinced her one hundred
per cent. His eyes grew enormous, larger even than Hermione’s had when they had started to
figure it out. The blood fell away from his face and his spine went as straight as a broom handle.

“W-what are you talking about?” he asked with obviously feigned indifference.

“Oh, please,” she snorted. “We sorted it out. You are so totally Potter’s future son. So what, did
you come back in time to see what the old man was like at your age?”

“Did Hermione tell you this? Because she was just pulling your leg,” he insisted.
“No, she started freaking out about the timeline and snogging her teacher,” she said, mouth turning down in a slight frown at the thought of kissing a teacher before she brightened once again. “Is Remus really going to be a teacher? I can totally see that.”

Harry scowled as he realised she was not just making things up to fool with him. “What the hell is she playing at telling you all that stuff?”

“We sort of tricked it out of her,” Tildy said. “Sorry. We didn’t think the future was in danger or anything. We just wanted to know why Hermione was so secretive. We won’t say anything. But are you really James’s son? I mean you look just like him. It’s pretty obvious once you’ve got the time travel stuff in your head.”

“Could you keep it down?”

She dropped her voice to a whisper. “This is so exciting! Are you going to tell James? He would freak if he knew!”

“No,” he said, standing and glaring at the girl. “No one else finds out. Too many people know already. The more people know, the harder it is to keep things from changing… no matter how much we want them to.” He looked down at her with eyes too like Lily’s to be believed, the pain on his face clear for anyone to see, and he strode away, disappearing up the stairs to the boys’ dorms.
Endymion

Chapter Summary

In which a promise is made.

He couldn’t sleep. It was not for lack of trying. Rolling over, Sirius punched his pillow into a different shape and tried once again to find a position that would let him drift off. He was not successful. It was Harry James Granger; the boy was haunting him, looking back at him whenever he closed his eyes.

It wasn’t the first night this had happened. Harry was spending an unprecedented amount of time circling around Sirius’s brain, popping into his thoughts at all hours. The worst part, the truly, mind-bendingly, gut-twistingly worst part, was that Harry wasn’t even doing anything to cause it. The boy wasn’t flirting with him, not flirting for real; Sirius knew the difference. He wasn’t avoiding him, either. At least if he was playing hard-to-get, that would give Sirius an excuse, but he was doing nothing except just being there. He sat beside him in class, taking notes and shooing away Sirius’s attempts at conversation, too intent on actually paying attention to the professors. He walked with him in the hallways and talked with him in the common room, strategized with the team and plotted with the Marauders. He was doing nothing more than James, Remus or Peter did, which was hardly enough to make Sirius lose sleep at night.

Harry had gotten stronger, so Sirius felt no need to look after the formerly fragile boy. His face never again fell into that haunted, hollow look he had seen only once. He came close occasionally; the smile would fall away, but he recovered it quickly. By all accounts, Harry was just another bloke. There were still oddities about him, but nothing so fascinating he should be spending so much time in Sirius’s head.

“I don’t get it,” he muttered and punched his pillow again.

Lying in the darkness, he tried very hard to empty his brain. That was when he heard it: the soft rustle of fabric and near-silent footsteps across the solid floor. It came from near the window, where Harry or James’s beds were. The two were nearly identical in height and now in weight, too, so the sound could not help him distinguish which boy it was.

He waited, listening.

The feet stopped too soon to be someone stumbling to the washroom in the night, which would have been perfectly normal. He listened hard, but no more noise came from the other side of the curtain. Well, that just made no sense. Had one of his mates gotten up and walked to another’s bed? Was there something going on right under his nose? It was Harry and Remus. Had to be. They were always talking and studying together. Although, that did make Remus’s interest in Hermione slightly suspect. Perhaps that was just to throw them off.

Completely convinced of his friend’s duplicitous actions, Sirius pulled back the curtain and slid from his mattress, sneaking around his bed on muted feet in an attempt to ambush his friends in the act. He reached Moony’s bed and paused, listening.

“Milk please,” Remus muttered in his sleep. “Only if there’s no more Cadbury.”
Moony was asleep and dreaming of chocolate. Then who was left? Harry, James and Peter. Call him superficial, but the thought of either Harry or James with Peter made Sirius’s stomach turn. The idea of two blokes so alike as James and Harry, though, was just wrong. They looked like brothers.

‘Only one way to find out…’ he thought, tip-toeing toward James. His progress halted abruptly as he snuck around the corner of Remus’s bed and found his answer. Harry James Granger was awake. He sat at the open widow, his eyes focused on some distant point that Sirius could probably search a lifetime for and never find.

He opened his mouth to call the boy’s attention, but, as Remus so often said, the moon got in his way; it broke through the clouds and lit the grounds, the castle and Harry. His skin shined with sweat. He must have been dreaming and woke to cool himself off. It made sense based on what he knew of the boy’s sleeping patterns, but it made for a picture that was – and there was no other word for it, Sirius realised, except – perfect. The moonlight lit up the boy’s pale skin, making it look as if he were the source of the light. He glowed. His body so much healthier than it had been in September, he looked like an alabaster statue of some long-forgotten Greek hero. That shepherd that the moon goddess had fallen in love with, for the moonlight was certainly caressing him, falling in such a way to make him look so beautiful. Shadows dappled his side where the burn made his skin rough, but even that added favourably to his appearance.

Beautiful as he was to look at, the thing that drew Sirius in and held him was the boy’s face. If he had anticipated finding Harry awake and staring into the night, he would have expected to see that wan, haunted look. He would have been wrong. Harry’s face was set, like he had a purpose, resolute and decided, like a man facing a firing squad. Of all the expressions he had observed, this was certainly the one that fit the boy best.

Without meaning to, he gasped. He didn’t even know why. Harry turned at the noise, not startled, just curious. Seeing Sirius awake and watching him, he turned back to the window and continued to think.

Not sure if he ought to let it go and return to bed to spend the rest of the night thinking about this moment or continue to stand there, Sirius walked the rest of the way to the window and looked out, knowing he was seeing something far different than Harry.

“It’s barely thirty degrees out,” Sirius commented quietly. “You’ll catch exposure or something.”

“You can’t catch exposure,” the boy replied, his voice oddly calm and sure, he sounded little like his normal self. “You catch pneumonia.”

“Whatever. Why are you up?”

Harry kept his eyes on that only-he-knew-where spot in the distance as he spoke, “Same reason as you, I suspect.”

“To catch two of your friends in a secret love affair?” he questioned, immediately kicking himself for ruining the mood yet also hoping he might shock Harry from this eerie purposefulness he had developed.

The boy looked up, his eyes shining with something that might have been amusement or possibly tears. “You keep surprising me.”

“Is that a good thing?”
“I had a friend,” Harry said slowly, making Sirius hold his breath in anticipation; in the ten weeks they had known him, Harry had never willingly spoken of anyone he knew. “My friend was a lot like you. I keep thinking you’ll be exactly like him, but you say things he would never have said.”

“Well, since I’m not this unnamed, mysterious friend of yours, I suppose that’s a good thing,” Sirius commented, not bothering to hide the implied annoyance at Harry’s secret-keeping. Harry just smiled and turned his gaze back to the world outside, making it clear that his eyes had not been shining with laughter.

“Shit, Harry—”

“You should go back to bed before I say something I’ll regret,” the boy said. “Hermione would kill me if she knew I was even considering saying it.”

Sirius’s mouth opened as if to say something, but he couldn’t find any words that might fit the situation. Anything that came to mind reminded him too much of his usual bullshit, which he already knew would reflect poorly on him and send Harry from whatever strange place he was to somewhere far darker. So he did as his odd friend said and returned to his bed. He spent too much time looking through the curtains at Harry and wondering just what the boy had been thinking of saying.

Eventually he fell asleep.

oOo

He woke with a jerk, jumping out of bed and standing, lost for a moment as to what it was he was meant to do. Looking around the room, Sirius saw Harry’s bed was empty and he remembered. He was supposed to apologise. He wasn’t sure why. He might even have dreamt the whole thing, but he needed to apologise.

Throwing on his clothes in a manner befitting an eight-year-old, he ran from the room, taking the stairs two at a time, three on the moving staircases, to reach the Great Hall. Harry was there, awake and laughing at something James was saying, likely telling the boy about a prank he had planned. Walking with as much swagger as he could muster given that half his brain was focused on Harry and the other half was trying to figure out why he wanted to apologise, he moved down the aisle and sat down beside him. When the boy’s eyes turned to him, glittering with delight, Sirius lost his nerve.

“Mornin’,” he said and grabbed a glass of juice.

“You look like hell, Pads,” James said, narrowing his eyes at him threateningly. “If I catch you spending the night before the game with some random bird instead of sleeping, I’ll have your arse. It’s the first game of the season tomorrow and I’ll not have a Beater sleep-deprived from shagging.”

His eyes darted to Harry. “I did not spend the night shagging,” he said, bristling in defence and indignation.

What the hell was happening to him? If James had said that last year he would have grinned and proudly proclaimed that he could win the game regardless of how much shagging he had done. Hell, if James had said that a month ago, his reply would have been just that. When the hell had he gotten so concerned about what Harry thought?

“Oh?” James said. “The state of your clothes and the circles under your eyes would suggest
otherwise. So if you weren’t shagging, what were you doing?”

Sirius fought every instinct in his body that had him wanting to look at Harry. He remembered his old habits, forced his face into careful boredom and shrugged as if he couldn’t be bothered. James just smirked, the bastard. He always knew better. He could always see through his meticulous façade.

“We’ll talk about it later,” James said and turned away.

Later. Sirius spent the rest of the day dreading later. He sat nervously through Potions beside Harry James Granger, certain he would bring up their evening together. Harry, however, made no mention of it. Not in Potions or Herbology or at lunch or dinner. Not while they walked to the pitch or changed for practice. By the time the scrimmage game began, Sirius was fairly well convinced that he had not actually seen Harry on the window ledge in the moonlight, that he had dreamt the whole thing.

That was somehow worse.

Practice ended. His thoughts didn’t. They kept him awake all night, picking away at his carefully crafted image of a boy too cool to care. Morning couldn’t come quickly enough. He couldn’t stand being alone with his thoughts; the noise of the Great Hall and the Quidditch stadium was what he needed. He changed into his Quidditch robes, grabbed his broom and strode onto the pitch. He expected the world to snap into focus as soon as the whistle was blown. It didn’t.

As the game began, his brain was as scattered as it was during practice the night before. Gnawing at his lip, wondering what the hell it all meant, he didn’t see the bludger a Ravenclaw Beater had wacked with all his might across the pitch. He didn’t see the weighty ball arc mid-field before beginning its fast and dangerous descent. He didn’t see the single-minded Seeker diving for the Snitch. He didn’t see anything until the shouting started. Then he saw Harry falling to the grass, glasses broken and blood oozing from his left ear.

He dove, flattening himself against the handle to reach the boy before the ground did. He caught Harry, so much heavier than he had been but still a rag-doll in unconsciousness.

“Dammit,” he cursed and hugged the boy so he wouldn’t fall. That was the reason. Not because he was terrified, just so he wouldn’t fall.

James landed, followed by half the team. “What the fuck were you doing up there?” James demanded and punched him. “You were meant to be watching him!”

“Don’t just stand there looking stupid,” shouted his friend. “His sister will hex our bollocks off if we let him die. Fly him to Poppy!”

Whether it was James shouting at him or the threat to his wedding vegetables, Sirius managed to gather his wits. Gripping the fallen Seeker for dear life, he kicked off and flew as fast as his broom and their combined weight would allow. It was too slow for his liking.

“Poppy! POPPY!” Sirius called, panic starting to take hold as he carried Harry through the doors to the hospital wing. There was too much blood. He didn’t know how much a person could lose, but he was certain Harry had lost ten times that amount already. “POPPY!”

“Stop your shouting at once, Mr Black!” the woman ordered him. “Lay the boy down.”
He did as she said, standing back and watching her work, trying to remember all the things she had said in class about anatomy and muscles and injuries to the brain. A bludger to the head… that was bad. He should have been watching. James arrived and shouted at him. Lily and Remus and Hermione all came, glaring and threatening. Hermione looked like her whole world had ended before she turned on him with more malice than he had ever seen. She didn’t say a word, but the message was clear: If Harry died, losing his bollocks would be the least of Sirius’s worries.

Spells and potions and salves and wraps were applied. James and Lily and Remus left. Hermione stayed. Sirius did, too.

“There’s nothing for you to do,” the woman informed them, not unkindly but with enough crispness to stir Hermione to move. “You can see him tomorrow.”

Sirius left, too, though unwillingly. He returned to Gryffindor Tower with every intention of staying there. His feet brought him to his bed, but his eyes were focused on Harry’s. Seeing the cold, empty bed changed his mind.

“What are you doing now?” James demanded, angry about more than the fact that Sirius was tearing into his bag without asking.

Sirius pulled the invisibility cloak free, wrapped it around himself and ran back the way he had just trudged, through the corridors and down the stairs to the hospital wing without a word to his friends.

The torches had been extinguished save a single ghost light just outside Madam Pomfrey’s quarters. Only four beds were occupied with their curtains closed for privacy and warmth, the rest were naked mattresses. Sirius always hated seeing the empty beds, thin mattresses and a ghastly white pillow; they looked oddly like skeletons to him. Shivering, he walked to the bed he wanted, stepping behind the curtain and dropping the cloak as he fell into the chair beside Harry.

It was dark but he could still see him. The moon was caressing him through the gap in the curtain. He was Endymion, the shepherd the moon goddess had begged her father to keep unconscious and dreaming for all eternity so that he would never age or die.

“Oh Merlin, I am as daft and sappy as Moony,” Sirius groaned and scoffed at himself. “Greek goddesses.”

He took a deep breath. “Well, it’s now or never.” Dropping his voice even lower than it already was, he said, “Harry, I know you probably can’t hear me, which is the only reason I’m going to say anything right now. I’m not going to apologise; I’ll do that properly when you’re conscious.”

He paused, realising that he hadn’t actually considered what he would say if given the chance. “I… I don’t know… I guess I like you. More than I like anyone else, and not the same way. I… fancy you. I probably shouldn’t since you look so much like James, but you’re different.”

“Sorry.”

Sirius looked up at the word, fearful that Harry was aware of what he was saying. “Fuck, Harry—“

“So sorry. Not my fault.”

“What isn’t? Harry, can you hear me?” Sirius asked.

“I tried… not my fault.”
Relief that Harry could not actually hear his confession was short-lived as he watched the transformation of his friend. His face creased and contorted as he dreamed. Gone was the smooth-skinned Endymion. Instead, there was the rabbit-hearted boy whose hand he had gripped that first night in September. Sirius had seen this boy only twice, but he had heard the silencing charm being cast every night and often wondered what it was Harry was hiding. Now he would know.

“I tried to save you,” Harry said, his voice tiny. “I tried…” His fingers tangled in the duvet, knuckles turning white. Sirius did not have to see into the boy’s head to know that he was desperately clinging to a person in his dreams.

“Please,” Harry begged, breath coming in sharp gasps as he started to cry. “Please, don’t leave me. Don’t die. Please don’t die.”

“Fuck,” Sirius groaned. “Harry, I’m right here.” He wanted his words to be calming and reassuring, to make the dreams stop. Considering that Harry showed no signs that he actually heard anything Sirius had said so far, it was a fairly foolish thing to think, but it was all he could do.

“Sirius,” Harry gasped as he hyperventilated, “please don’t go.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promised and gripped Harry’s hand.

Whether it was his words or the physical contact that did it, Sirius couldn’t tell. All he knew was the calming effect one or the other or both had on him. Harry seemed to melt, all the tension released instantly and he was still and smooth again, no creases in his forehead or white knuckles grasping at unseen ghosts.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said and meant it.
Death did not come to Harry, and Sirius got to keep his bollocks. This made them each extremely happy for their own respective reasons. They sat together in the infirmary playing cards or wizard chess until Madam Pomfrey agreed to release the Seeker shortly after lunch on the following Sunday.

“I think she only let me out to get rid of you,” Harry commented wryly as he strolled from the hospital wing, Sirius still firmly at his side.

“Oi! I resent that,” the boy scowled, though inside he was leaping for joy at the return to life and cheek of the boy he quite fancied. “Poppy loves me.”

“Like a dog loves fleas,” the boy muttered with a poorly hidden smirk.

“Do you want me to put you back in hospital? Because I will if you keep it up.”

Harry held up his hands in defeat. “All right, all right. You win. You are perfectly charming in every way. No one can dare compete with your good looks. All the girls swoon at the mere mention of your name. Et cetera, et cetera.”

“Cheeky,” Sirius glared at him. “And I don’t care what the girls do at the mention of my name.”

“Oh, that’s right, you like the boys as well,” Harry nodded. “Well, I’m sure some of them swoon, too. You’re just so very worthy of swooning.”

“Git,” he frowned and grumbled. “Don’t care what the boys do.”

Harry stopped halfway up the marble staircase, eyebrow raised in a way very reminiscent of Remus Lupin. “Oh? This is new. Since when do you not care what anybody thinks?”

“I didn’t say I don’t care. I very much care, just not about the opinions of the general population. I only care about what one person thinks,” Sirius replied with a huff of annoyance, though he immediately flinched with the realisation of what he had said.

Harry grasped the meaning of his words, too. “One person, eh? You like someone? Who?”

“Don’t want to tell you.”

“Aw, come on,” he plied, bouncing on his toes like Tildy. “Boy or girl?”

Sirius scowled. “Boy.”

Wide-eyed but clearly not put-off, Harry grinned. “Which house?”

“Our. You’ve been hanging round Tildy too much.”

The boy waved the comment away. “Do I know him?”

“Yes.”

His excitement died so quickly Sirius thought for one heart-stopping moment that he knew the truth with just those few questions. His wrinkled nose clearly indicated displeasure, as did the way he looked ready to vomit. “It’s not James, is it?”
“No! I couldn’t fancy James. He’s my best mate,” Sirius turned an off colour himself despite the relief he felt. “I do have rules, you know.”

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“Privileged and perfect,” Snape spat. “Living in your golden tower with your golden morals. The rest of us have to take what we can get any way we can.”

This was starting to get uncomfortable, and not just the pain of Snape’s fingers around his neck or the bite of the dragon tooth, which he suspected was cutting into his skin; Harry was not at all keen to get to know the inner workings of Severus Snape. He just wanted to make him go away and forget this whole encounter had ever happened.

‘Just go away!’ Harry cried in his mind as he tried to pry Snape’s fingers off him. ‘This never happened!’

Snape’s face, inches from Harry’s, went slack. His cold, black eyes glazed over as if he had been stupefied and he stepped back, dropping his hands from the boy’s throat.

“How do you want, Granger?”

“Uh… nothing,” he replied slowly. “Nothing at all.”

“Then why bother interrupting me?” he sneered and left him standing alone in the corridor.

Harry watched the boy leave, grateful to whatever magic had interfered with Snape’s attempt to kill him. He always knew Snape properly hated him. This younger version was a lot more forthcoming in that respect. He rubbed at his pained throat; his hand came away red with his own blood, and he frowned. “What the hell was all that?” Harry asked no one in particular.

“Were I to hazard a guess,” a portrait of a wise-looking man in a smart blue doublet and an embarrassingly large cod piece replied, “Methinks you used a memory charm. Very nicely done.”

“Thanks,” he said, no less confused than he was before. “How could I have done that without my wand?”

The Elizabethan man stroked his beard and considered it. “Well, some witches and wizards can channel the magic from their wands without having to touch it. It takes considerable power and skill to learn such magic, not to mention time – decades for some – and still it does not work for all. I myself tried and only ever managed to set my hat afire.”

“Well, that’s impressive,” Harry said.

“I had been attempting to turn it red,” he sighed. “Ah well. You are clearly more powerful than your opponent realised. Lucky for you and your young lover.”

“Young lover?” repeated Harry with a frown. He hadn’t been walking with anybody like that, just Sirius. “Sirius!” He turned and sprinted down the hall to find where the boy had landed.

“Ah, young love,” the portrait smiled wistfully.

Harry was too preoccupied to hear the comment, not that he would have given it much consideration if he had. Sirius was unconscious. There were no obvious injuries or blood, though Harry feared there might be something broken. He had hit the wall hard, hard enough to at least have cracked some ribs.

“Mobilicorpus,” Harry said, pointing his wand at his friend and rushing him back the way they had come and into the care of the exasperated Madam Pomfrey.
"Again?" she sighed. "Come along. I suppose you'll be staying with him until he’s released."

"Well, he stayed with me…"

She shook her head and mumbled something Harry couldn’t quite make out, but set a chair beside the bed and let Harry sit while she worked. She summoned a house-elf to bring him something to eat and left him alone with Sirius.

“I don’t remember her ever being so accommodating,” Harry commented. He had spent rather a lot of time in the hospital wing, either as a patient or visitor. More often than not visitors were shooed out for disturbing her patients, for talking too much or breathing too loud. She even kicked Dumbledore out! But she was letting him stay. Why? Before he would consider a reason, James arrived.

"Dammit, Padfoot!" James groaned and slapped the boy’s head even though he was unconscious and couldn’t retaliate. Harry opened his mouth to protest but got his own smack to the head. "I blame you for this, Granger."

Harry’s mouth fell open. What had he done? He wanted to claim innocence and insist that it was all Snape’s doing, but he held back. He knew that James and his friends hated Snape, pranked and tortured him every chance they got for no reason other than him being himself. The last thing he wanted to do was give James a real reason to hunt Snape down and hex him.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “All my fault.”

“I knew it,” the boy declared triumphantly. “Now piss off. That sister of yours was looking for you, and I’ll not have my bollocks hexed off if she finds you’re still in the hospital wing.”

Harry nodded and left him to sit watch over Sirius.

oOo

The world came into focus far too slowly, like there was a heavy fog in the room. He would have thought that was really the case except for knowing that fog rarely affects the brain, too; he was having a hell of a time remembering where he was. Last he remembered he had been getting ready to hex Snivellus when Harry stopped him.

“Harry!” Sirius shot up in bed.

“What?” the boy beside him jerked awake, his glasses askew on his face.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said, his brain still clouded by magic or concussion or potion. “I landed you in hospital again.”

“Wha—"

“Not the way it was meant to go,” Sirius moaned. “I was supposed to be all cool and impressive, not leaving you unconscious because I’m too fucking stupid to pay attention. I was thinking about you when that bludger came. I should have been watching…”

“No, P—"

“I just can’t stop thinking about you,” he sighed.

The boy moved from the chair to sit beside him, putting his arm around his friend, a smile on his
face. “Sirius…”

He had confessed, and Harry had smiled, put his arm around him, his face too close to turn down. The opportunity presented itself and Sirius took it, willingly. He closed that gap and kissed him eagerly, probably too eagerly, but he had already admitted everything; what was a bit of forwardness in kissing after that?

Apparently, quite a lot.

The boy shoved him off and clocked him hard on the nose. “Dammit, Padfoot, that is not right!”

“James?” Sirius stared, horrified. The last of the fog lifted with the pain of a broken nose; he could see clearly and understand what he was seeing. There was not much difference, true, but the hazel eyes were a dead giveaway. Hazel eyes meant James Charlus Potter, not Harry James Granger. He had just kissed his best mate. “Oh, fuck.”

“And that was why I sent Harry away,” James said, wiping his mouth and tongue off vigorously on his shirtsleeve. “Knew you’d do something stupid when you woke up.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry!”

“I should have asked Remus to keep watch…” James muttered and continued to rub his lips raw on his jumper, paying no mind to Sirius’s apology. “That would have been hilarious if you tried to snog him, too,” the boy grinned. “You play at it often enough. I wonder what he’d do if you ever jumped him like that.”

“Sorry!” Sirius hid his face in his hands, unable to take James’s jokes anymore. “I thought you were Harry.”

“So I gathered,” the boy said. “You can thank me later, after I have brushed my teeth.”

“Shit,” Sirius groaned.

Smirking at his friend’s discomfort, James slapped him on the head. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Casanova, I’d rather like to ask Poppy if she has any disinfectant I could gargle with.”
In which an offer is made.

Embarrassment dogged his every move. Whenever Sirius looked up at dinner, James was smirking at him; Remus was batting his eyelids and puckering his lips; Peter just looked ill. What Harry James Granger made of all this, Sirius had no idea; he was too humiliated to look at him, knowing that if he dared to glance at the boy James would start laughing loudly, so he stared at his plate.

He changed and dove behind his curtains, sticking them closed and placing a silencing charm around the bed. Even then, he swore he heard them laughing.

Sleep was impossible. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw Harry, felt the lips and tasted the mouth that should have been his. They were so alike in appearance – James and Harry – it was easy to imagine they would feel the same, taste the same, but James was his best mate, a boy he looked to as practically a brother. It was indescribably wrong to put his mouth where he wanted Harry’s to be.

“I am so fucked up,” Sirius groaned and punched his headboard, revelling in the pain that shot through his hand. It gave him something to focus on other than Harry or James.

“You look like hell,” James commented with no small amount of amusement the next morning. “Trouble sleeping?”

“Git,” snarled Sirius.

“That’s not what you said yesterday,” he sniggered.

“Shut up before I punch you.”

“He’s very fickle, isn’t he, Prongs?” Remus sighed and patted his friend consolingly on the back. “One minute he’s confessing his undying love, the next he’s threatening you with bodily harm!”

James nodded sadly. “I’m just—“ His words died abruptly in his mouth as Harry groaned and pulled his curtain aside. Even if Sirius were not sending them the most pleading look he had ever worn in his entire life, they would have kept silent for him… for the most part.

“Morning,” Harry mumbled and disappeared into the washroom.

“If you say anything to him, I will hex you permanently bald,” Sirius hissed and slapped them each on the head. “Not. One. Word.”

“No worries, Padfoot,” James assured him. “My lips are sealed. If only to keep you sticking your tongue in my mouth again.”

“James!”

“What are you shouting about this early in the morning?” Harry complained. “It’s too early. Shut
“Didn’t sleep well?” asked James, grinning as Sirius still scowled at him.

“No, weird dreams about that man in the painting lighting his hat on fire. Strange, that one. Called Sirius my ‘young lover’,” he snorted and shook his head, turning away to find his robes for class.

Peter gave a high, hysterical giggle, which Sirius silenced with a glare.

Remus, however, was not so easily quieted, “Wherever did he get that idea? Could it be because our good friend never leaves you alone?”

“Or perhaps that he uses you as a pillow at every available opportunity?” James pondered, stroking his chin in mock deliberation.

“Or because he calls you ‘Gorgeous Granger’?” Remus speculated.

“And ‘Hot Harry’,” James agreed.

“And he will hex you both sterile if you keep making fun of him,” Sirius bit out, his fury obvious.

“Best move on!” Harry cried far too loudly, grabbing Sirius by the arm and pulling him all the way to the Great Hall. The boy’s grip was so painful and insistent that Sirius fully expected Harry to turn on him, showering him with blows because he had finally figured out what all his attentions meant. That did not happen. Harry released him in the Great Hall and sat down opposite him as unperturbed as he ever was, leaving Sirius to relax slowly. They ate with their usual easy conversation and walked together to Defence Against the Dark Arts.

He knew it was Harry’s favourite subject, but when Professor Morven took to his lectern and started speaking about Dementors the boy slouched in his seat and stopped listening. Sirius thought the lecture was no less interesting than any of Morven’s other lessons, so he could not understand why Harry was doodling on his parchment instead of taking notes like he usually did.

It took thirty minutes, but Morven finally noticed how disinterested the boy was, too.

“Who can tell us about the effects of Dementors?” Morven asked. Some hands rose, Hermione and Remus’s among them, but the professor paid them no attention. “Mr Granger.”

The boy didn’t stir even when his name was called. Sirius jabbed him in the ribs.

Clearly the sort to rarely zone out in lessons, Harry sent Sirius a withering look for the painful wakeup call before he understood why it had happened. With Sirius’ sharp nod toward the lectern, Harry paled, “Yes, sir?”

“Since you seem to know enough to not bother paying attention, perhaps you can share with us what effect a Dementor has on its victims,” Morven said. Considering that he was calling Harry out in front of the entire class, the man’s face and voice held no smugness.

“They, uh, make you feel cold. Freezing cold,” Harry replied, his voice changing slightly as he spoke; it grew distant like he was thinking of a long-forgotten memory instead of a recently-learned fact. “It’s like the whole world goes silent around you. You get this sort of fog in your brain that keeps you from thinking about anything cheerful, like you’re drowning in sadness and all you can hear are your worst memories… They play in your ears, the cries and screaming… They don’t have eyes, Dementors,” he said quietly, more to himself than anything, though the room had gone silent and everyone could hear his slightest breath. “There’s this scabby, rotten skin where
they ought to be. They can sense you, follow your happiness and steal it away. And their mouths…
gaping holes in their faces. They take these huge, rattling breaths that suck more than just air out of
a room…”

Morven cleared his throat and Harry blinked back from whatever horrific nightmare he had been
in.

“Thank you, Mr Granger. That was very enlightening. Can you tell us the one way to defend
yourself against a Dementor?” There was something of a glint in the man’s eye, like he already
knew Harry would say the right thing.

“There’s a spell: Expecto Patronum,” Harry said. “It makes this animal of light that keeps the
Dementor away. You have to think of something happy, the happiest thing you’ve ever
experienced.”

The professor nodded. “Correct.” He started lecturing again, his words were a lot more interesting
after hearing from Harry what sounded like a personal account of meeting a Dementor. Sirius
glanced over at him, expecting him to be paying close attention to the professor after being singled
out, but he was back to drawing idly on his parchment.

“Mr Granger, come here,” Morven said.

“Sir?” Harry said, after a poke in the ribs.

“Come here,” the man repeated. Harry did as he was told.

“I need an assistant for the next portion of the lesson,” he informed the boy. “Would you be so
kind as to retrieve the brown trunk from the corner?” Sirius saw the glint back in the old man’s eye,
knew that he meant for Harry to do more than move a trunk, a task which could have easily been
completed with magic.

“Now,” the professor said loudly to the rest of the class, “while Mr Granger gets us ready for the
final portion of our lesson, let us discuss the spell to defend ourselves. The Patronus Charm is one
that you would be wise to practice. If mastered, it will bring into being a Patronus, an animal
representing the single most powerful happiness from inside yourself. It can defend against
Dementors and aid in emergency communications. The animal which is created by the charm can
carry your words and messages for up to one mile, farther if you are a truly exceptional or powerful
witch or wizard.” He paused. “Are you ready, Mr Granger?”

Harry dusted his hands off on his robes and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he said, waved his wand and the trunk flew open.

The lid hit the floor with a hard ‘crack’, startling the students. A shocked gasp was pulled from the
room at the unexpected noise. The gasp turned to screams as a figure rose from the trunk. The
ragged black robes billowed out from its body exactly as the etchings in their books showed. The
head, though, was far different. It was a face like nothing they had ever seen, a skull barely
wrapped in desiccated skin. Its eyes were gone; its mouth a hole, which pulled all air, light, warmth
and happiness from the room.

A Dementor.

Before anyone had thought enough in their head to name the creature, Harry was moving, pulling
out his wand, shouting the charm that Morven had only just advised them to practice. At his
command, light burst from his wand, blinding them all as it took shape and galloped across the
floor. It was beautiful. It was familiar. It was…

“Prongs,” Sirius whispered.

“I see it,” James replied, thinking his friend was trying to get his attention. But Sirius had not been talking to James. He had been naming the stag that was pinning the Dementor against the far wall. That stag was unmistakably Prongs.

“Very nicely done, Mr Granger,” Morven applauded. “As you can see, the corporeal patronus is a force to be reckoned with. That will be all, Mr Granger.” He flicked his wand, and sent he Dementor back into the trunk.

“A Boggart?” Harry stared hard at the old man, anger written across his face even as he panted from the exertion of the spell.

“I always keep one handy,” he smiled, the first smile they had ever seen him wear. “They’re quite useful for demonstrations. You may return to your seat now.”

Harry stomped back to his desk, dropping down and grumbling while the crafty old man finished the lesson and set their essay. “Using me, the bastard.”

“But what a way to be used,” James said, grinning and apparently in no way put off at the boy making a Patronus that looked exactly like his Animagus form.

“Mr Granger, a word,” Professor Morven said. “The rest of you may go.”

The bustle and noise was markedly louder than normal as everyone started talking about Harry’s performance. Unanimous consent rang out that it was the most amazing thing they had seen since McGonagall transfigured herself into a cat the first day of Transfiguration first year. Sirius agreed, though he wished more than anything he could stay behind and listen in on the conversation happening down by the lectern, but he was pushed up the stairs by the crush of students.

oOo

“Sir?” Harry said, not even attempting to hide his irritation.

“I thought you’d like to give them a head start,” the man smiled, leaning back on his desk in a pose so far removed from his usual business-like air that the boy was temporarily speechless. “You seem to enjoy being one of the crowd,” the man commented. “I don’t imagine this sudden popularity will sit well with you.”

Harry couldn’t help his frown, “If you knew that, why make me into a trained monkey for your lesson?”

He laughed quietly. “I had a hunch and ran with it, Mr Granger. You’ve met Dementors before,” he said, not a question but a statement. “More than one if my guess is right, and at a greater proximity than anyone but a convict of Azkaban would know. Since I doubt you’ve done any hard time, I’m understandably perplexed and curious. When was this?”

“Third year,” Harry replied after a pause.

“And the Patronus Charm? Who taught you that?”

“Defence teacher, third year,” he said, quite sharply.
Morven nodded. “I don’t suppose some details might be worth mentioning?”

Harry released something of a sigh, though it might have been a groan. “Professor, what do the details matter?”

“They matter a great deal to me. I’m extremely curious by nature, and once set on a path of questions I cannot rest until all is revealed,” he said in a tone verging on amusement. “It annoyed the hell out of my bosses when I was an Auror.”

Harry dropped into a seat without realising, intent on the man in front of him. Up close, Morven was hardly as boring as he seemed from the distant lectern. Yes, he was still wearing a dull olive jumper and tweed jacket, but Harry could see a long scar on the man’s neck; it cut across his ear and jaw before dropping down below his collar. On his left hand was a burn scar so severe it looked as if the skin was still bubbling. “You were an Auror?”

“For a time,” he said. “Before my questions took me somewhere my superiors disapproved of – to them.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. “What did you do?”

“I found out one of my superiors was on the take,” the man said. “He went to Azkaban, and I was given an extremely early retirement. My new boss didn’t like the idea of my keeping as close a watch on him as I did the criminals.”

“That’s not fair,” Harry balked.

“Tell me about it, I was damn good at my job,” he agreed with a proudly puffed chest. “Highest arrest record in the department. I should have been moved over to Internal Affairs to keep everyone honest. Instead, I moved to Italy.”

“Italy?”

“Got a job as a curse breaker,” he said, waving his scarred hand in the air like true-born Italian. “You wouldn’t believe how many catacombs below Rome are guarded by curses. Half the skeletons down there are a lot younger than the Roman Empire or Renaissance, let me tell you.”

“What else have you done?” Harry asked.

The man smiled like a cat, one that had eaten canary and then proceeded to wash it down with the last of the cream. “You first,” he said. “Tell me about your third year. It was clearly a very interesting one, even by my standards.”

Harry folded his arms over his chest, annoyed at having been so easily caught. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Most things are when you’re trying to keep secrets,” Morven agreed with a congenial smile that belied his ruthless interrogation skills.

“My parents were betrayed by a friend,” Harry said slowly, trying to find words that would explain everything to the man’s satisfaction but not leave him with another person aware of his secret. “They died because of it. The one everybody thought was to blame went to jail. My third year he escaped. The Ministry sent Dementors to hunt him down. They were on the train to school, so was our Defence professor. He fought them off. He taught me how to make a Patronus.”

“Seems a bit of overkill,” he commented. “It’s not as if the Dementors were on school grounds.”
“They were,” Harry said. “They came onto the Quidditch pitch during a game. Professor Lu—Uh, our professor said they were drawn by the excitement and happiness everyone was feeling. They were in the sky with me. I passed out.”

“Cries and screaming’ you said,” Morven repeated in a low growl. “Your parents died… you were there.”

He nodded. “It’s all I can hear when the Dementors get close.”

“I can understand why you would want to keep that quiet. Hard stuff to have to relive,” he agreed, nodding his head slowly, mournfully. Harry got the distinct impression that he was not the only one to hear the death of loved ones whenever a Dementor came too near. He was ready to offer some condolences when Morven spoke again. “Doesn’t explain how you know what their faces look like.”

“Uh… that’s a bit… complicated.”

Morven smiled. He had already commented about what made explanations complex and clearly didn’t think he needed to say it a second time. “I’ll take a stab at it,” he said. “It’s something to do with the fact that you referred to the man who escaped prison as the one everyone thought had betrayed your parents.”

Harry flinched at having offered too much information. “Yes.”

“So, he was an innocent man tracked to your school by Dementors. Your professor trained you to combat them,” he said, folding his arms and considering the clues he had been given, like a connoisseur savouring a fine wine, mulling over every nuance. “In the end, you learned the truth, saved him from death by soul-sucking and lived happily ever after?”

“Not quite,” Harry snorted. “We couldn’t clear his name. He went stir crazy because everyone was hunting for him. He ran to my rescue and died because of me.”

A look flashed across his face and not one that Harry had expected. Sympathy was what he would anticipate in the face of such a confession, but it looked like Morven was preparing to argue with him. Whatever he thought, he kept it in his head and didn’t offer sympathy or argument to the boy. What he did offer was as unexpected as it was tempting.

“My door is open should you ever need someone to talk to about your situation, however complicated it might be.”
“Is everything all right?” Hermione asked, cutting through Harry’s thoughts and forcing him to focus on the common room and his present company. “What did Morven want?”

He blinked several times before he found his words. “To talk,” Harry said slowly. “He’s not at all like I thought he’d be. Did you know he was an Auror and a curse breaker?”

Hermione’s frown turned up at the ends as she studied him. “You do have a strange attachment to your Defence teachers,” she commented with a slight laugh.

“Not as strange as you,” Tildy cooed, making Hermione blush a furious red. The girl, enthusiastic in everything she did, it seemed, had taken a keen interest in Harry and Hermione’s future world and what sort of damages they might be doing by staying so long. Perhaps it was guilt for having pushed Hermione into dating Remus or perhaps she was just unnaturally inquisitive. Either way, she took great joy in poking fun at Hermione since learning about Professor Lupin.

“That is completely inappropriate, especially in the common room,” she hissed. “Anybody could hear you!”

Eager to keep Hermione from hexing the girl, Harry talked over Lily and Tildy’s laughter and his sister’s threats. “He offered help.”

“Help with what?” asked Lily.

He shrugged. “Everything, I guess. I didn’t tell him about us, but I think he might suspect something.” He hesitated, not sure if he wanted to continue. “He was a curse breaker, Hermione. He might be able to sort out what happened to us faster than we can. Do you think we should maybe tell him?”

Hermione’s brows knit tightly together, and she frowned, not the annoyed frown of a girl being made fun of but a frown of deep thought on very important matters. Her flush of embarrassment faded as she considered Morven and his offer to assist them. “It might help us get home a lot quicker,” she agreed slowly, still debating the idea. “I don’t remember reading his name in any books or in the Daily Prophet, so he either died well before our time or went about living a quiet life. But I don’t know if it’s wise to involved him.”

“He might be already,” Harry said apologetically.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

He flinched, “Well, he said that once he gets started asking questions, he can’t stop until he knows the answer. I might have given him enough to get him curious.”

“Harry,” she groaned. “Of all the foolish things you could have done!”

“Oh! I’m not the one telling people everything in fits of hysterics!” He gestured to the two girls sitting with them. “If anybody here deserves to be yelled at it’s you not me.”

“They forced it out of me!” Hermione snapped.

“We did no such thing,” Lily protested innocently. “We just asked a few simple questions.”
Tildy agreed. “If you weren’t all flustered from snogging your professor, you could have easily fooled us. I mean, look how well Harry’s doing lying to the boys and they’re way cleverer than us.”

Hermione, tired of having her relationship the fodder for such contention and jokes, took up her bag and marched from the common room, stomping away to the library without so much as a backwards glance.

Tildy giggled until she saw how angry Harry was at her. “What?” she asked.

“That’s not funny,” he said. “She’s gutted thinking that she might have destroyed the future. You need to stop.”

She shifted uncomfortably under his intense gaze, looking to Lily for some support only to see the girl’s green eyes boring into her with equal intensity. The twin pairs of emerald eyes were too much even for her and she ran after Hermione.

“You’re really good at that,” Lily smiled.

“Well, she’s my sister,” Harry shrugged. “Being an overprotective prat is my job.”

“Is she really, though?”

The boy shook his head. “No, but she might as well be.”

Lily smiled and slid closer to him on the couch so they might talk privately while in the most public room of the tower.

Across the common room, James grit his teeth as Lily took up Hermione’s vacant seat directly beside Harry. He narrowed his eyes as she leaned in and spoke quietly to him, her lips so near his face that she might as well have been kissing him, her hair brushing his arm. What little cool he had left flew away when the girl put her hand on Harry’s knee; he stood abruptly, nearly toppling the table. “All this time, he said he was talking me up,” James glared hard at the messy black hair of his rival as his hands balled into fists so tightly it felt like the knuckles might spring apart. “Bet he’s telling her all sorts of rubbish about me just to make himself look the hero, the twat.”

“He doesn’t have to talk rubbish, Prongs,” Sirius said, calmly setting the chess pieces back where they had been before his friend nudged the table. “She already knows what sort of a git you are.”

“Oi!” he shouted and swatted the boy none too gently. “You’re meant to be helping me!”

“Fine,” Sirius sighed, annoyed that he was being forced to choose between his best mate and the boy he fancied. “If you’re so worried, why not go talk to her.”

“She hates me,” James grumbled, falling back into his chair as he ripped the glasses off his face and began polishing the lenses on his robes. “Whenever I try, she walks away or hexes me. I don’t get it! There’s like no difference between us, but she chooses him?”

“I hate to break it to you, Prongs, but there’s a lot of difference between you.”

The jealous Chaser snapped his head to stare at his friend. “Like what?” he demanded.

Sirius shrugged. “I don’t fancy you, for one thing. He’s got more secrets than the Department of Mysteries. You strut around like you own the place while he grins like a fool when people pay absolutely no attention to him. You score all the goals during the game, but he’s the hero for
keeping hold of the Snitch while losing a vampire’s feast of blood. He isn’t trying to hit on Evans. You—“

“Yes, I get it, thanks,” James interrupted. “So we’re different people, but we look almost the same. That ought to count for something. I mean, half the time she needs someone to point out… which is which…” he finished slowly as he stared down at the eyeglasses he still held in his hands, an idea taking shape in his mind.

“Have you a thought, Mr Prongs?”

“I have indeed, Mr Padfoot,” James grinned wickedly. “We look alike. Change of eye colour, swap out our glasses and she’d never be able to tell us apart…” He turned to his friend again, still smiling. “Padfoot, would you lend me your talents for a few moments?”

“I am your to command, my friend,” Sirius smirked. Despite Moony having the highest grade, everyone knew Sirius was the most talented of them all at Transfiguration. They ran up to their dorm and practiced turning James’s eyes green while Harry sat down in the common room, unaware that he would be the unfortunate victim of a prank very soon.

oOo

They leaned closer, eyeing the opaque liquid in the vial, studying its colour, smell and viscosity. James passed the delicate glass container to Sirius, who considered the contents for some time before he handed it over to Harry. As their fingers brushed against one another’s, Sirius jerked back, releasing the vial before Harry had a proper grip on it. The glass tumbled down toward the ground.

His Seeker reflexes kicked in, and Harry made a grab for the container just as it hit the stones, shattering and sending globs of liquid all over him.

“Oh! EW!” Harry cried, wiping the foul-smelling slime off his robes.

“Sorry, mate,” Sirius said.

“Really, Mr Granger,” Madam Pomfrey chided. “It’s only liquefied fat.” Her reassurances did nothing to ease the boy’s discomfort, especially since the adipose clung to his hands and arms and found its way through the weave of his robes onto the jumper beneath. As the woman continued her lesson on treating severe burns, Harry started shimmying from his robes, jumper and shirt, running to the washroom to try to remove the fat from his hands and arms and face. It didn’t work. No amount of soap and lukewarm water could remove the adipose, for that was just the way James had arranged it when he charmed the liquid.

Class ended and Harry ran straight to the showers in Gryffindor Tower, throwing off the rest of his clothes and scrubbing himself raw under the scorching hot water. Still the fat adhered to his skin.

Silently, James snuck into the washroom and stole the trail of things Harry had left in his haste to reach the showers. He charmed the door shut with the most powerful sticking spell he knew, not that Harry would be leaving the shower stall anytime soon.

“Success!” he crowed as he dropped the pile of clothes on the floor in their bedroom.

Peter wrinkled up his nose, “That stuff is minging, isn’t it?”

“He deserves it, stealing my girl,” James defended his actions adamantly. One wave of his wand had the clinging fat falling away and solidifying into a lump that he sent flying into the dustbin.
“Let’s get me all Grangered up.”

Sirius transfigured his friend’s eyes to a vibrant, emerald green and attacked the boy’s hair to make it even wilder than normal. “Voila!”

“Git,” James snorted and dug into the pile of clothes. “It’s got to be in here… Got it!” He extracted the leather cuff that Harry only took off for Quidditch and showers, buckling it onto his own wrist. He frowned at how strange it felt and wondered why the boy would wear it constantly when it was so uncomfortable. Still, sacrifices had to be made if he wanted to talk to Evans. “She’ll never see the difference.”

“I suspect she will,” Remus disagreed. “And when she does, you will owe Harry one hell of an apology.”

James only snorted again and sent a confident, never-in-a-million-years smirk his way.

“See, Harry never grins like that,” the boy pointed out. “You are going to fall flat on your face.”

Shaking his head at how wrong his friend was, James turned and ran down the stairs to find Evans. She was not hard to spot, her red hair a beacon to him. She was with Tildy beneath the tapestry of a majestic lion, talking and making notes on a bit of parchment. Remembering that the last time he strolled up to her she threw a stinging hex at him, he hesitated before approaching. It took him a few passes of the common room to remind himself that he was Harry; Evans never hexed Harry. Keeping that thought firmly in his mind, he walked up to the girl.

For one heart-stopping moment, she studied him. “Sit down,” she said and moved her bag off the couch so he could sit beside her. “Tildy was just saying that she read about one of those spells on your list. Which one was it?”

“Vecturo. It’s not the thing,” the other girl said. “Apparently, someone tried to use it on a portkey once and it didn’t do anything cool. Not what’s happened to you, not by a country mile.”

“Yeah,” James agreed, not having the faintest idea what they were on about. Had he been properly listening he would have been rather irritated by how little they were actually saying, but he was too pleased with his current location to much care.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Tildy asked.

He realised too late that she was right. He was smiling – broadly, stupidly – because Lily Evans had let him sit down beside her. That smile fell as he remembered who he was pretending to be; she let Harry sit down beside her all the time. To him it was nothing all that special, so he shrugged, “Just happy, I guess.”

“Can’t imagine why after that show in Healing,” Evans laughed. “I’m sorry, but that was funny the way you started jumping around.” She laughed harder as she began a ridiculous pantomime of Harry’s action in class. The other girl took up her laughter, and James was soon blushing as if he were the one who had stripped half-naked in front of the entire class to escape the sticky mess of fat.

“Oh, shut up!” he frowned.

“Did we hurt your feelings?” Tildy cooed and sat on his lap to kiss his cheek. “I’m sowwy, Widdle Hawwy.”

“Shove off,” he pouted. Being Harry was suddenly not so much fun when the girls were laughing
at him.

“Oh, go on, Tildy,” Evans said between giggles. “You have to show Hermione that book anyway. She won’t be satisfied unless she reads it for herself.”

Sighing, Tildy gave him one last peck on the cheek before she hopped off his lap and raced from the common room to find Hermione. James scowled at her as she left, feeling a complete arse for having put a friend, even a duplicitous friend like Harry, through such humiliations. He continued to scowl as the girl’s laughter petered out. With the silence hanging around them, he grew nervous that perhaps Remus had been right, that she could tell that he was not really Harry. His heart stopped when she huffed angrily. His transfigured eyes darted to look at the pretty redhead, expecting to see a wand pointed at him. Instead, he found her looking at a letter.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“My sister, Petunia,” she grumbled.

He knew Lily had a sister; that the girl was as Muggle as her parents, but that was all he knew. He never saw the girl at King’s Cross but had never questioned her absence. “Is she alright?”

“That’s debatable,” she replied bitterly. “She took a pair of scissors to my favourite dress. Mum found it in the bin after I’d left for school.” She shook her head, sighing sadly and looking as if she was ready to cry. “I don’t understand. We used to be best friends.”

“She’s jealous,” he said without pause. “Who wouldn’t be?”

She smiled. It was a kind smile, not at all flirtatious, but it was enough to make his heart swell. He shifted a bit closer, feeling her silky hair on his arm and smelling her subtle perfume. It didn’t matter that she thought he was Harry, he would enjoy every second of her company and maybe arrange for a little more.

“So,” he said, trying to sound casual, no mean feat when he was so intoxicated by her presence, “what are you doing this weekend?”

The girl shrugged. “Nothing much. Why?”

“I thought you might like to go out with me.”

Her eyes narrowed a bit and she pulled back to get a better look at him. “What?”

“Would you like to go out with me?” he repeated.

“Harry,” she said, dropping her voice and leaning in, “are you feeling alright?”

He grinned. “Yes.”

“What about, you know, the consequences?”

James knew that ‘consequences’ was some type of code word, but he wasn’t sure what it meant. He could only assume she was referring to the fall-out that would inevitably occur with the Marauders if Harry had ever dared to ask Evans out. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Come on, Evans—”

The girl groaned.

‘Bugger,’ he thought, ‘She knows. I pushed too far. It was too fast. What did I do?’
“Don’t you start calling me that, too,” she warned. “I have a hard enough time with you looking like that prat Potter. I don’t need you sounding like him, too.” Her voice trailed off slowly, her eyes narrowing again as she considered him.

Somehow James knew she was thinking back over their very brief conversation. He bit back the curse words that threatened to spoil his façade and stretched a cheeky grin across his face. Harry was always grinning cheekily at people, or maybe just at the Marauders. Whenever Evans was around, James had a hard time focusing on anyone else; Harry could strip naked and do the Hustle and still James would only know what Evans was doing as it happened.

“What’s the matter with ‘Evans’? It’s a fine nickname,” he said, keeping the grin on his face.

“Only Potter calls me that,” she wrinkled her nose up as if his name offended her.

“And you just called m—him ‘Potter’, so I think he’s justified,” James commented with a smirk.

“Fine, but that doesn’t mean you have to start, too.”

He sighed. “That just means I have to invent a new nickname for you. Let’s see… Lily is a flower, so… Petal?”

She snorted. “No way.”

“Blossom.”

She shook her head emphatically.

“Flower. Blossom. Hmm… Lily,” he said again. “Lily…flower—” The girl vanished from sight as did the couch supporting him. He released a shout of surprise as he fell backwards, landing hard on the solid stone floor of the entrance hall. “What the hell?”

He frowned his confusion at the hall and stones and students passing around him. That was unexpected, and also unexplained. Standing and brushing his trousers off with as much cool indifference as he could, he started back toward Gryffindor Tower, contemplating how he had gone from grinning and happy in the presence of Lily Evans to lost and bruised in the entrance hall.

“Portkey,” he decided, recognising the feeling of the hook yanking him around the middle from the one time he had travelled via Wellington boot years ago. “But I haven’t got a portkey. Or have I?”

He studied his clothes and searched his pockets, assuming his friends had slipped one onto him as a joke. He found nothing. His pockets were empty except for the items he had placed there himself. The only things he couldn’t be sure of were the things that were Harry’s – the glasses and leather cuff. Considering that they were both things that Harry wore daily, he doubted it could have been either one.

“So it was a spell, then,” James decided. “Gits ruining my only opportunity with Evans.” As he marched closer to Gryffindor Tower, he considered the nickname he had always used for her. He had never realised she didn’t like him calling her by her surname all the time. Maybe if he stopped, she would have one less thing to hate him for. It was a start.

“Lily,” he said to himself, considering what he could call her. “Lily. Flower—“

The hook took hold behind his navel again and tore him from the marble stairs just as he was within sight of the portrait of the Fat Lady. He stumbled and fell to the stone floor of the entrance hall once again.
“What the hell is this?”
James was red-faced and cursing by the time he made it back to Gryffindor Tower. He was so angry, he didn’t bother trying to find Lily and instead marched straight up to the boys’ dorms so he could hex his friend to within an inch of his life. The next full moon would feel like heaven compared to the pain James Charlus Potter was about to bring upon Remus Lupin.

Somewhere on his second attempt to return from the entrance hall, he determined that it was Moony who had put the spell on him. Peter might be pretty good with defensive charms, but he likely could not have managed whatever sort of spell this was. Plus he was in Divination right now. Sirius had transfigured his eyes and made sure to drop the adipose vial in just the right way to have it shatter only in front of Harry, so James reasoned he would not be the one to thwart his plans. Remus’s maddeningly calm response to his arrival only added to his suspicion.

The Prefect looked up from his chess game, a slightly amused smile on his face. “Things not go well?” Remus inquired politely.

“No thanks to you,” the boy scowled deeply. “Before your bloody prank, it was going great.”

“What prank?”

“Don’t you even try to play innocent with me,” he warned dangerously as his hand tightened around his wand. “I know it was you, Moony.”

“All right,” he replied doubtfully. “What exactly is it I’m supposed to have done?”

“You spell,” the irate boy reminded Remus. “The one that sent me to the entrance hall. The one that felt like a portkey…” Remus’s face and eyes gave nothing away. After five and a half years of pranks, he knew that the boy’s blue eyes glittered subtly with delight when a plan came to fruition; this time his eyes were filled with nothing but concern for his friend. “You didn’t do anything, did you?” James asked.

Remus shook his head. “No need. I knew you would bollocks it up on your own.”

“Oh!” James cried and slapped him. “I was doing brilliantly!”

“Until…” prompted the Prefect.

“We were talking and I was making up a new nickname for her – apparently she doesn’t like me calling her ‘Evans’ all the time – then I was pulled away. If it wasn’t a spell you gits cast, then it really was a portkey.” He tore the glasses from his face and the cuff from his wrist, knowing those to be the only items on his body that he could not vouch for. Remus and Sirius took the potentially offending items and studied them, prodding the leather and metal and glass for signs of hidden
magic. Even a rather tricky spell from Remus’s wand didn’t reveal anything. The items were exactly as they seemed, innocuous and boring.

“So what happened?” Remus asked, his voice brimming with excitement as it always did when there was a problem to be solved.

“Like I said, I was just talking to her, trying out new nicknames,” James paused. “Wait, both times it happened when I said ‘flower’ right after her name.”

“Worth a try,” Sirius said, cleared his throat and spoke in a clear, loud voice, like a student trying out a new spell. “Lily flower!”

They watched expectantly, but nothing happened.

“Lily flower!” Remus repeated.

“Looks like you were wrong, Prongs,” Sirius shrugged and threw himself down on Harry’s bed.

“I’m not,” the boy insisted stubbornly. “It happened twice. I said Lily-flower and— Ha! See!” He pointed to the empty spot where Remus had just been yanked from the room by magic.

“Where’d he go?” Sirius demanded.

“To the entrance hall; same as me,” James informed him smugly, more pleased at having been proven right than concerned for his friend.

“Why in the hell would Harry James Granger carry a portkey that takes him there?”

“Why would he carry a portkey at all?” James countered.

They lapsed into silence as they considered the possible reasons their strange new friend might have for keeping a portkey on his wrist. Very few came to mind, but they were still sitting in contemplation when Remus returned to the dorm.

“Why the hell would he have a portkey that activates at the word ‘lily-flower’?” he asked, still breathless from his run through the corridors.

“Hadn’t even thought of that,” Sirius admitted. “Password-locked portkeys are hard to make, especially ones that only work for a single voice.”

“Who could have made it, then?” Remus wondered. “They had to have been very powerful to create it, and to hide it from probes.” He dropped onto his bed, still studying the bracelet as if there might be some miniscule visual clue he had missed earlier.

A thought came to the confused Chaser suddenly. “Tildy mentioned a portkey,” he said. “I didn’t bother paying much attention because, you know, Evans was right there, but…”

“But what?” Remus asked, looking up from his search.

“But they were talking about his list of spells, you know that one he keeps hiding from us,” James said quietly, frowning deeply as he scoured his memory. “Something about a spell being cast on a portkey; said she had read in a book that one of Harry’s spells had been cast on a portkey and it hadn’t done the same thing that had happened to me—I mean, to him.”

“What thing?” Remus asked.
“I don’t know,” he growled, his lack of understanding severely shortening his temper. “They were being all vague like Dumbles and Granger were that time we followed him.”

“Harry mentioned a portkey that day, too, remember?” Sirius said. “He said that none of his friends knew a spell that could do something when it hit a portkey. What the hell are they all on about?”

All three scowled, annoyed that the boy was still keeping so many secrets from them after knowing them for a third of the year. It was near enough to December that he ought to have trusted them with at least a little information by now, yet three months had passed without Harry James Granger offering even a sliver about himself; all they knew was that he got his middle name from his father, he had been Seeker since first year and that he had a friend rather like Sirius. That was it. Nothing else.

Harry was privy to nearly all but their darkest and most guarded secrets, yet he had somehow managed to avoid telling them anything. Even Remus was ignorant, and he could ply the sister for information between kisses. The Grangers were hiding something massive, of that the Marauders were absolutely certain.

“We need to get into his trunk,” Sirius decided.

“It’ll have to wait until after the holidays,” James said. “Slytherin’s put together too strong a team this year. We can’t afford to lose him until after the match against them.”

Sirius groaned, thoroughly irritated by his best mate’s fanaticism. “This is more important than the bloody Cup, Prongs!”

The boy turned his disbelieving eyes on his friend. “Nothing is more important than the Quidditch Cup,” he said, his voice steely and dangerous.

That hard tone came again, identical in every way, save that it originated from a different throat, “You absolute prat.”

The Marauders spun around, staring wide-eyed at Harry, his damp skin red and raw from his countless attempts to remove the charmed adipose. His glare fell to James. “You,” he said again; it seemed the worst word imaginable coming from him.

“I can explain!” James insisted quickly.

“No need,” he ground out his reply, keeping his eyes locked onto James. Even without his glasses he was surely able to tell the difference between hazel and green. He had to know what it was about. “Try anything so stupid again and I will hex you.”

James nodded his consent without pause; at that moment, Harry James Granger was the most frightening thing he had ever encountered. Despite being wandless, soaking wet and wearing only a towel, Harry’s lingering scars, granite tone and stony face easily filled James’s brain with every disfiguring and excruciating hex he had ever heard about in whispers. Apparently, he was not alone in that; Remus handed over the boy’s glasses and cuff silently as if he were making an offering at an altar before fleeing the room.

“Get this crap off me,” the boy demanded.

“James did it,” Sirius hastily replied.

“Don’t care,” he replied flatly, sounding rather more disappointed than angry. “Get it off.”
James half expected his hands to shake as he pulled out his wand to cast the spell. He removed the fat that he had charmed to cling to the boy, his friend. “Look, I’m-“

“Don’t care,” Harry repeated coldly and turned away. He threw on his clothes and left the room while James searched for a way to explain himself.

“Weird, isn’t it?” Sirius commented with an odd smile.

“What is?”

“How he makes you want to apologise.”

He nodded slowly, thoughts creasing his brow. “We’ve got to get into his trunk... after the holidays.”

oOo

“There you are!” Lily cried as she grabbed Harry’s arm, pulling him into a quiet corner of the common room. “You just disappeared before. Was it one of their idiot pranks?”

Harry frowned, unsure exactly what his young mother was talking about. He had been locked in the washroom since class let out, cursing his clumsiness until he sorted out what had really happened. He thought it had been nothing more than a long-overdue prank. With Lily now talking as if he had only just left her side and the Marauder’s reaction toward him, this was beginning to appear a little more complicated than just a disgusting joke.

“Yeah, prank,” he said slowly.

“Prats,” she replied with a click of her tongue. She paused, her brow knitting together for a moment before she took a long, steadying breath. “I’d love to.”

“Uh, what?” Harry asked a little stupidly.

“I’d love to go out with you this weekend,” she said with a smile. “If you aren’t worried about the consequences to the timeline, then neither am I.”

Harry was certain he had never felt so ill, not when he had basilisk venom coursing through his body, not when Sirius died or when he faced the Wizengamot or even Voldemort. His mother wanted to go on a date with him. If her flushed cheeks were any indication, she was rather excited about the idea of spending time with him in a romantic way. The disturbed boy looked away, eager to find something to focus on that might help him out of this situation. His gaze landed on James.

The boy’s eyes were enormous, pleading, and, Harry finally noticed, the same vibrant green as his own.

So it had been more than just a prank.

“Sounds... good,” he managed to say, though the idea of what he had just agreed to made bile rise up in his throat. “Let me go break the news to James.”

The girl laughed, “Watch out for hexes.”

“I think he’s the one who out to be worried,” Harry muttered darkly as he glared across the common room.

The unnaturally confident and boastful Chaser actually appeared to shrink as Harry approached; he
flinched when Harry opened his mouth, no doubt anticipating being shouted at or told that his plan had backfired. “You’ve got a date this weekend. If you embarrass me, I will hex you. If you hurt her, I will hex you,” Harry informed him.

“What?” James gaped, his transfigured eyes wide and his chin hanging somewhere around his knees.

“I told you, I don’t like her like that,” he reminded him. “And this might be the only chance you have to convince her you aren’t an absolute prat.”

The boy launched himself at Harry, wrapping him in a rib-breaking hug and lifting him off the floor. “You are the best!”

“Geroff!”

“Whatever you want,” James replied eagerly, though it took him another minute to actually release him.

“One more thing,” Harry said, making his young father’s smile fall. “No matter what happens, at the end of your date you will tell her the truth. I will not have her thinking I fancy her.”

The boy nodded his agreement readily even as his brow furrowed in thought. Precisely what was concerning him, he refused to say, terrified he might anger Harry enough for him to withdraw his permission.

“Piss off before she notices your eyes are the wrong colour,” Harry ordered, shoving him away and walking back to sit with Lily, all the while fighting the sick that was trying to crawl up from his churning stomach. If this worked, it would be worth the psychological damage.

‘Dear, sweet Merlin and all his wacky nephews, please let this work,’ he pleaded.

Chapter End Notes

This smacks of something familiar... what can it be...? :)
First Date

The Great Hall was alive with noise as the final Hogsmeade weekend of the year arrived. Despite the bitter cold and clouds threatening to coat them in a foot of heavy snow, every student eligible to go to the village was bundled and ready to make the trek, even Harry James Granger, who had yet to take Tildy or Sirius up on their repeated invitations to come. The boy was bouncing in his seat, waiting for breakfast to end, smiling at the girl beside him.

“Where’s Potter?” Lily asked, glancing nervously down the table. The hazel-eyed Chaser was nowhere in sight.

“Miss him?” Harry asked, his voice oddly hopeful and slightly smug.

She snorted. “Hardly. I don’t trust him not to hex you while your back is turned. At least if I could see him, I’d know where to point my wand.”

Harry’s smile fell. “He likes you,” he said quietly. “I can understand why he’d be so…”


“Eager. I was going to say eager.”

Lily blushed slightly. “Still, I’d like to have one Hogsmeade weekend that didn’t end with me being told off by a professor because I hexed him. Although last time Sprout gave me five points after I’d made a gillyweed grow from his nostril.” She laughed.

Harry’s hand flew to his nose. “That’s not funny.”

“You should have been there! You’d have been laughing, too,” she assured him.

“I doubt that,” he mumbled and dropped his eyes to look at his plate. “He’s my friend.”

“Okay, no more talk of hexing that prat today. I promise. I’ll talk about hexing someone else.” She smiled widely and rather cheekily. “Come on, I have to do a bit of Prefect work on the way down. Most of the third years know their way by now, so it won’t take long.”

Harry followed her from the Great Hall and watched her herd the third years down the path toward the village, stupid smile on his face and a sigh permanently lodged in his throat at the sight of her.

“She’ll figure you out in a heartbeat if you don’t wipe that love-sick look off your face, Prongs,” Sirius muttered with a smirk.

“Keep your bloody mouth shut or I’ll hex you before she gets the
chance."

"Have I mentioned lately how much I enjoy your being secretly in love?" James smirked. "Gives me quite the card to play."

"Git," he repeated gruffly and turned away, walking with his usual confident swagger despite being rather pink in the cheeks. James continued to smirk, wondering how long it would take his best mate, a bloke he thought braver and more outspoken than anyone he had ever met, to work up the courage to finally tell Harry the truth.

"What’s up?" Lily asked, following his eye to see Sirius pulling Harry away. "Ah, there’s Potter. You talk Black into keeping him occupied for the day?"

"Something like that," he smiled.

"I’m surprised he isn’t trying to sabotage our date," she admitted. "Everyone knows he fancies you."

James snorted and muttered quietly to himself, "Not everyone."

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"I can’t watch anymore," Harry groaned and moved his hazel eyes to focus exclusively on his butterbeer.

Sirius looked at what had so offended his companion: James and Lily sitting together at a small table in the Three Broomsticks, their shoulders touching and faces so close they had to be breathing one another’s air; they were so near to kissing it was maddening, although Harry clearly thought it sickening. "Why do you always turn green when it comes to snogging Evans?"

Harry just groaned again. "Can we not talk about that?"

"Fine," he agreed with a shrug, pausing to take a drink of his hot chocolate and enjoy being alone with Harry, but he couldn’t stop his brain working or his mouth from opening again. "If it’s so disgusting, why did you want to spy on them?"

"Making sure he behaves himself while pretending to be me," the boy said.

Sirius had to admit that it sounded a valid enough excuse, but he kept thinking there was more to it than that. Harry was not keeping a hawk-like watch on James, hissing when the boy put his hands where they didn’t belong or cursing when he was forward enough to drop a kiss onto Evans’s cheek. Whenever anything happened, Harry did not grow indignant or worried about his reputation; he looked as if he might throw up. No, whatever the boy might claim, he was not watching out for himself or Evans. Sirius just wished he could sort out what it was Harry was doing.

"Bugger," he cursed and hauled Harry up from his seat. "It’s that bloody sister of yours. Hide." He shoved his companion rudely into a dark corner, one he often took advantage of during dates. Sadly, he couldn’t use it for that same purpose now, not when Hermione was so close to finding James and Lily on a date. It was one of Harry’s later-added stipulations that the girl be kept far, far away from the couple for fear of her discovering them. It was a stipulation that made no sense to Sirius.

"Where the bloody hell is Moony? He’s meant to be keeping them apart," Sirius wondered as he forced Harry farther into the corner.
“Distract her!” Harry hissed.

“Are you daft? I’d like to keep my bollocks, thank you very much.”

“I didn’t say you had to do anything stupid, just get her talking about Transfiguration or something.” He pushed Sirius out into the pub. “Go on.”

“Bloody, buggery hell,” Sirius mumbled to himself. “If I didn’t fancy you, I’d kill you for this.” He made his way awkwardly through the crush of students, weaving a path as best he could considering how little room there was and how much he really did not want to be approaching Hermione Granger. “Hermione!” he called happily. “What are you doing here all alone? Where’s Moony?”

“Oh, he kept trying to drag me into Madam Puddifoot’s,” she snorted. “I’ve no idea what’s gotten into him today.”

“Distracted by your beauty,” Sirius offered with a smile. The girl narrowed her eyes at him, and he clamped his mouth shut before she did it for him. Distract her, Harry had said. “I’m surprised you didn’t just camp out at Tomes and Scrolls. I’m sure there’s material enough to keep you both entertained for the rest of the afternoon.”

She nodded slowly as if trying to determine if he was winding her up. “Their selection isn’t quite that good and certainly not in the area of my need,” she said, sounding at once both scholarly and ambiguous.

“What is your area of need?” he asked before he could reel in his curiosity. “I can’t seem to sort out what this pet project you and Harry are working on is. What’s the secret?”

Hermione flushed and not from the warmth of her Butterbeer. “There is no secret, Sirius. You just have a suspicious mind.” She turned away from him and from the messy-haired boy he had been bodily blocking from her view, allowing Sirius a momentary sigh of relief. The girl was dangerous to have around, too observant and clever for anybody’s good. He would have hated to have her as a sister.

“Hermione!” Remus shouted over the noise and forced his way to the bar. “I can’t believe you left!”

“I can’t believe you actually thought I’d want to go to Madam Puddifoot’s,” the girl retorted. “I’d sooner go to the dirty old Hog’s Head than have those nasty cherubs flying ’round my head.” She shook her head disbelievingly.

Spurred on by her insistence that she was hiding nothing, Sirius could not help but point out what to him was rather obvious. “For someone who’s only been to Hogsmeade twice, you sure do know an awful lot about it. How do you know about the cherubs? And the Hog’s Head? Nobody’s ever been brave enough to set foot in that place but the four of us, and I doubt even Remus would have mentioned it to you.”

He did not expect her to finally tell the truth. He didn’t actually want her to. After all the work he had put into accumulating and arranging the items on his Operation Not-Prongs list, he would hate to have the girl just blurt out her secret as if it were nothing. No, what Sirius wanted was to make her squirm and stutter and in her panic provide him with something more for his list. He wanted to sort it out for himself, though a few more clues would have been extremely welcome.

Hermione did squirm and flush and stutter a bit, but she said nothing more about it. “Remus,” she
said in a slight squeak, “let’s head back to the castle, shall we? I’m a little tired after all that walking."

“Okay,” the boy agreed readily, looking back over his shoulder and smirking at Sirius.

Snogging her senseless was certainly one way to keep the girl too busy to notice that her brother and James had swapped places; it was a wonder neither of them had thought of that before. It would have made the trip infinitely less stressful and allowed Sirius to enjoy more of his time with Harry James Granger. Remembering Harry, he ran back to the dark corner as quickly as the crowd would permit, wishing the whole way that he could use it as he normally would, to snog the boy senseless. Instead, he gave the ‘all clear’ and they took up their old positions, sitting and watching James and Lily grow ever closer.

“I think it might have worked.” Sirius smiled as they walked some ways behind the couple on their return to the castle.

“I hope so,” Harry muttered. “I don’t think I could tolerate another day like this.”

“I am offended, sir!”

“Not you,” the boy snorted. “You’re fine company.”

“I am fine, thank you for noticing,” Sirius waggled his eyebrows suggestively. It was the closest he had come to admitting how he really felt, this caricature of flirting.

“Git.”

“Well, at least I got you to admit that I’m fine,” he replied, forcing his voice light and careless.

They walked and joked their way back to the warm and welcoming common room, where James and Lily had claimed the couch by the fire and were leaning against one another. They looked so happy; it was almost a shame the truth would have to be revealed.

“He’s going to have to tell her soon,” Harry said, sounding almost disappointed. His face held no revulsion. He looked blissful, his eyes shining as if he were struggling to hold back tears, an odd smile pulling at his mouth. Sirius could not explain the shift, though perhaps it had to do with not being able to see the colour of James’s eyes from this angle. From where they stood, James looked like no one but himself.

“Think it’ll work?”

“We’re about to find out,” the boy replied darkly, turning away as James brought his wand from his sleeve and waved it at himself.

A moment of silence stretched into two, then three, before Lily’s angry voice filled the entire common room. “YOU DISGUSTING LITTLE TOE-RAG!” the girl shot to her feet, distancing herself from the boy she had been inches from kissing just seconds before. “DON’T YOU EVER COME NEAR ME AGAIN!”


Harry groaned, “I’m doomed.”

“Looks more like Prongs is doomed if you ask me,” he replied, slight smirk on his face. “Doomed to a life of eternal loneliness as he pines for the one that got away. He’ll never get over Evans.”

Sirius frowned his lack of understanding at the boy, but could not voice it as the irate girl stomped across the common room toward them. Harry ducked behind him and tried without success to disappear from her view entirely.

“Evans,” Sirius greeted her.

“Don’t,” she warned, her eyes as fiery as her hair. “Granger, get over here. Now.”
Harry hurried to follow Lily up the stairs and into his room. James and Sirius were downstairs, one sulking and the other alternately laughing at him or trying to cheer him up; Remus was off snogging Hermione somewhere in the castle; Peter was still on his date with Marlene, so there was no one to help him, no one to distract her, no one to dull the anger or hexes that the girl was going to throw his way.

The second the door closed she turned on him and he knew he was doomed.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she demanded, her voice harder than he had ever heard it. “I can understand something this stupid from them, but from you?”

Harry said nothing. He couldn’t reasonably explain that he was only trying to get his parents to start dating, now could he?

“Answer me, dammit!”

“I w—“

“Look at me,” she ordered. “After what you just let him do to me, you’d better look me in the eye when you try to explain yourself.”

Fearful of what he might see, he obeyed, turning his hazel eyes to look at her face. She was livid, flushed red from anger and embarrassment, her whole body was shaking and giving off an electricity that could only be barely-restrained magic. The second their eyes met, her wand came out. “Fix your eyes before I hex you. You look too much like him as it is.”

Again he obeyed immediately, performing the spell that ended the transfiguration of his eyes. It must have worked because the crackle of wild magic he felt coming off her fell away abruptly, though the girl still shook with anger. “I’m sorry. I thought that maybe if you got to spend time with him you’d find you kind of liked him.”

“Where did you come up with such a stupid plan?”

“James,” Harry said, still holding her eye though he was desperate to look away.

“I’ll kill him.”

“Don’t!” he cried, jumping forward to grab her arm, knowing that she was angry enough to mean her threat.

Her jaw flexed so hard she had to be in danger of breaking her teeth. “I nearly kissed him thinking he was you.”

His stomach rebelled in a way it had not since September, and Harry ran from the room, fleeing to
the washroom. He stood gripping the cold porcelain of the sink, wishing the mental images away as he fought off his nausea. He had seen people killed, murdered before his very eyes, but the thought of having him mum’s tongue in his mouth made him wish he could scrub raw his mouth and eyes and brain. This really had been a bad plan. He was reluctant to leave the washroom, afraid looking at Lily would make that horrifying picture return to his head, but he had to try to soften the girl’s anger enough that she would not continue to hate James.

‘I hate time travel,’ he sighed to himself as he pushed away from the basin. In trying to bring his teen-aged parents together, he might have driven them farther apart, perhaps to the point of preventing his own birth.

“Lily?” Harry asked in a tiny whisper, peering around the door cautiously in case she was ready to hex him.

The girl was still there. The few minutes it had taken him to calm his nerves and stomach had been enough to quell her fury a bit. She was no longer shaking and her skin was no longer such a deep, angry red. She still looked displeased, however, her brow creased deeply as she turned and considered him silently, studying him as he had often seen her study books; when her hard eyes fell on his proper green ones, she stepped closer and looked at him, saying nothing. Somehow he knew she was not looking into his eyes but at them.

“I’m not James,” he promised, assuming she had been trying to sort out which boy had come back to the room.

The girl made no reply, though her eyes made one last sweep of his face and form before she brushed past him quickly and left him to stand alone.

“Bad idea,” Harry muttered. “So not worth the psychological damage.”

Lily stopped sitting beside Harry in class and in the Great Hall, stopped walking with him, stopped speaking to him entirely. What little interaction she ever had with the Marauders was cut off completely; she refused to acknowledge James even when he was doing something blatantly against school rules.

In the week before the train departed for London, the Chaser tried everything he could think of to draw her attention. It started innocently enough, with the boy sending his owl to her with apologies and chocolates and flowers, none of which were accepted. He tried talking to her directly then indirectly when that did not work, but all of his emissaries were summarily dismissed. Finally, he resorted to pranks, knowing that she was a Prefect and that she would have to look at him and talk to him again if only to tell him off. If his only options were being ignored or being shouted at, he would much rather she shout at him.

That didn’t work either.

Lily walked past him as he stood in plain view of anyone with eyes, writing curse words on the walls of the corridor. She said nothing, although the Ravenclaw Prefect noticed and reported him. He got a detention for it. He got another from Professor Sprout for throwing a clod of mud at Lily’s Herbology partner; Lily did not even spare him a dirty look. Flitwick gave him another detention after the desperate boy had charmed her chair to walk across the room toward him with her stuck to it; he had hoped that if she was unable to move, he might apologise to her, but he didn’t get the chance as Lily marched from class the second Flitwick released her from James’ sticking charm. His pranks only grew larger and more elaborate with each failed attempt and
detention.

By Friday afternoon, as the rest of the students were packing to leave for the holiday, James had more detentions to serve than there were hours in the day. He had set a new school record, receiving more hours of punishment in a single week than any previous student in the past thousand years, enough to fill every Friday evening and Saturday morning for the next two months. Yet for all his effort, Lily still refused to look at him.

“What am I going to do?” the despondent boy moaned, sinking into his chair in the Great Hall.

“I suppose being patient is out of the question,” Remus replied; he, too, was in the proverbial dog house for having helped deceive Lily. Hermione had not spoken to him all week, but, unlike James, he was confident enough in the girl’s feelings to know that she would forgive him his part in the fiasco soon enough.

“Patience is highly overrated,” Sirius said.

“Not to mention boring,” added Peter.

Harry just sat silently beside them, dejected and wondering at what point he would start to fade from existence. Or perhaps he would simply vanish as if everyone in the world blinked as one and in that split second he would be gone. His mum did not seem like the sort to give up a grudge easily and he could not foresee her getting over her hatred of James any time soon, if at all. No, Harry was doomed to fade or vanish, leaving no trace that he had ever been. He wondered what would happen to Hermione. He was the reason she was in the seventies. If his meddling had prevented his ever being born, would Hermione have ever come to the past?

“What about?” Sirius asked, nudging his ribs gently.

“No really,” he replied absently. “Just wondering.”

“What about?”

“If someone travelled through time and while there prevented the person who had sent them back from being born, would that someone still have travelled back in time at all?” he muttered, frown on his face and eyes unfocused on a distant point that even he couldn’t see.

“You have too many thoughts, Harry James Granger,” Sirius replied with a sad shake of his head. “You’re meant to be putting that devious brain to good use helping Prongs.”

“No use. Doomed,” James sighed and dropped his head to the table with a hard ‘thud’.

“Doomed,” Harry agreed.

Their mourning was so heavy that Harry was actually quite happy to see them off. He was hoping that with two uninterrupted weeks to scour the Restricted Section and practice every potential spell, they might find the one they needed to return home before he started to fade. This was all assuming that Hermione was still willing to speak to him. She had been as painfully silent as Lily during the past week, offering him only a cold shoulder and icy glare.

“Well, if she won’t help me, and I’m doomed to non-existence,” Harry reasoned while alone in the common room, “then I might as well change some other things, right? I could at least try to save Sirius.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Harry,” Hermione chided in the harsh tone she usually reserved for Ron.
“Hermione!” he cried and leapt up to hug the girl. “Help me! I’m doomed!”

“You’ve been spending too much time with those prats,” she shook her head. “You aren’t doomed.”

“I am! She won’t even look at him. She’ll never date him or marry him. I’ll never be born. I’m doomed!”

The girl sighed and looked at him with the tried patience of an indulgent parent. “She’s embarrassed. You two played a horrible trick on her. That’s not the sort of thing anyone can get over quickly, Harry. If your dad had even half the brains everyone thinks he does, he’d see that and lay off for a while.”

Harry dropped onto the couch and glowered. “It wasn’t a trick. We just thought that she might see how much she likes him if she spent some time with him. And now I’m doomed. Let’s hurry up and go home before I muck anything else up.”

“Might be a bit late for that,” she replied quietly and looked away before Harry could read her expression.

The boy was already losing sleep fearing that he had prevented his own birth. Hermione’s comment only added to his ulcer-inducing stress, and he started running through all the things he could remember saying or doing since arriving in 1976 that might have altered their past. He had joined the Quidditch team, which meant someone else had not; was that it? Or was it that he had helped that first year to History of Magic in September? Maybe that kid was meant to do something while lost in the corridors, meet the girl he would one day marry and have kids with, or possibly meet his partner in magic that he would work with to develop some break-through cure for lycanthropy.

Or was it all the time he spent with the Marauders that had changed the future? James should have started to mature by now, at least according to what Lupin had told him. Was he preventing that from happening? Was the new blood he provided the devious quartet enough to prevent his young father from turning more responsible? Surely, a boy who would pull such horrendous pranks to get the attention of the girl he liked would never be promoted to Head Boy.

Or perhaps it was Sirius. He knew so little about his Godfather, there was no knowing what he was meant to be doing at this point in his life, but with all the time he spent glued to Harry’s side there was surely something else he ought to have done by now, some girl or boy whose heart ought to have been broken by him.

He paused and frowned. From what everyone had told him in this time and from the way Lupin mentioned it back in June, Sirius was something of a serial monogamist, dating someone new every few weeks until he got bored and moved on, but Harry had not seen him go on any dates at all. His Friday and Saturday nights were always spent with his head in Harry’s lap as they read or talked Quidditch. His Godfather made no obvious advances toward anyone outside the sly wink at passing girls just to get them to giggle or drop their books, but nothing to give him the reputation of heartbreaker that everyone seemed to have attached to him. For heaven’s sake, the boy spent more time flirting with Harry than he did anyone else.

His frown fell along with his jaw, his eyes growing huge as he thought of all the winks, smirks and batted lashes, all the arms Sirius had draped over his shoulder and passages of his eyes over Harry’s body.

“Finally figured it out?” Hermione asked politely, though her laughter was barely contained.
“Sirius…”

“Fancies you,” she finished the sentence for him. “Yes, he does. Has for quite some time. Everyone’s noticed but you. He’s not exactly been subtle about it.”

The boy shook his head. “No, he’s just being friendly. They’ve no idea of personal space, him and Tonks,” he insisted, grasping for some alternative explanation, however flimsy it might be. “Sirius would hug me for five minutes at a time back at Grimmauld Place and, Tonks, she would stick her hands up my jumper all the time. That’s just what they do.”

“Really?” Hermione smirked so blatantly that it felt like slap in the face. “Have you seen them do that to anyone else? Tonks never put her hands up Ron or Lupin’s shirts. Sirius doesn’t keep his head on anyone else’s leg by the fire or spend nearly as much time with any of his other friends, and he’s known them far longer than he’s known you.”

“No.”

“Yes,” she said. “He fancies you.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to do. Hermione was dating Lupin. She had told Tildy and Lily where they were really from. Memory charms would fix all their interferences after they left, he was sure; any feelings Sirius might have for him would be erased along with his memories of Harry James Granger. Still, he didn’t know what to do, what to think, how to respond. His Godfather fancied him.

“I’m doomed.”
Culpable

Harry flatly refused to speak to Hermione unless it was about the spell they were looking for or a book which might hold reference to it. Even then, she smirked and sniggered and insinuated. Weeks – months even – he had been completely blind to what Sirius’s attention truly meant and now that he knew he was mortified to have been so utterly stupid. This, he realised too late, was how Lily had felt after the spell had been removed from James’s eyes and the truth made plain before her. He was not angry so much as embarrassed to have been so ignorant. There were so many signs that he ought to have recognised; he had seen them, obviously, but had chosen to read them differently.

He had no idea what to do come the fourth of January, when the Hogwarts Express would return. Sirius would be back, head in his lap, arm around his shoulder, smile on his face, and this time Harry would know what it was about; he was lost for how to act. Before, when he thought it was friendliness, he paid it no mind, enjoying being so near the younger version of the man he had loved as family and friend.

Now, though. Now it was different.

Thirteen days he spent worrying about it. Thirteen nights he spent sleeping fitfully, if at all. The train would be back in a day and the poor boy was still desperately lost for an appropriate reaction. “What am I going to do?” he groaned.

“Well, that would depend on what you want,” Hermione said sagely.

“What I want?”

“Yes, what do you want from Sirius?” she asked.

Harry blinked slowly, trying to sort out the meaning of the deceptively simple question. “I… don’t know.”

“Do you want him to leave you alone?” she pressed.

“No, he’s my friend.”

“Do you want to snog him?”

He flushed a deep crimson and dropped his eyes to stare at the book in his hands. “That’s not really something I ever thought about.”

“Well, think about it now,” she told him. “Because he’s going to be right back here trying to get you to kiss him by this time tomorrow and he’s going to know there’s something different. You’d better figure out what you want before he thinks you don’t like him.” The girl turned back to her dusty old tome, reading through the archaic script and leaving Harry with his thoughts.

What did he want? He stared, unseeing, at his own book as he imagined what it be like if Sirius stopped being Sirius, if the boy sat down beside him at a respectful distance and kept his hands and arms and head to himself, if he stopped winking and subtly insinuating himself into Harry’s life, if he was only a friend and nothing more. While such actions would have been more normal and appropriate, he couldn’t imagine Sirius doing things that way. Perhaps it was because he had taken to invading Harry’s personal space almost as soon as he arrived in this time, but to have him do anything else seemed wrong somehow. Still, he was sure he ought to prefer things the proper way,
the only-friends way. He sat and thought on the matter for so long that Madam Pince came and ejected them from the library.

“Well?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied truthfully.

oOo

The train pulled into Hogsmeade Station early, its return trip made easy by good weather and magic. As the students spilled into the common room, laughing loudly and shouting their greetings to one another, Harry sat stock still on the couch, determined not to make a move until he saw how Sirius behaved toward him. He hoped, rather foolishly, that the past two weeks of dilemma were merely the product of his overactive imagination and a pining for the lost Nymphadora Tonks and her continuous invasion of his personal space. If Sirius acted the same, then he would know what Hermione said was true; if not, then Harry could relax and just enjoy his Godfather’s company while he still could.

James led the Marauders into the common room, hauling his trunk behind him as if it held something of far more gravity than clothes and presents. His every step was slow and ponderous. Sirius and Peter and Remus followed at an equally sedate pace and with faces so sombre it was unnatural.

“What’s the matter?” Harry asked, fearful that James had tried once again to win Lily and failed beyond redemption.

The boy only shook his head sadly and went to their room. Sirius followed with barely a greeting to Harry.

“His dad’s sick,” Peter informed Harry, his voice thick and eyes more watery than usual.

“What?”

“Spent the entire holiday at St Mungo’s,” he said sadly. “We went to visit yesterday. He looked awful, all grey like he had no blood left in him.”

Harry’s jaw fell as much from the fact that Peter was actually concerned as from the ill man being his grandfather. While he had read the letters the Potters sent their son, partaken in the baked goods and candies the boy’s mother sent weekly, he had never really connected them to himself. They had been long dead before Voldemort attacked, and he had never seen any photographs of them. So, to him, they hardly felt like family at all, but they were. Thinking of them now, it saddened him that he would be there to bear witness to one of them passing away. As with James, he wished he could let the man know who he was, but as a stranger he would never be granted permission to enter the hospital let alone sit at the bedside of the dying man.

“Do they know what’s wrong?” he managed to ask.

His shaggy blond hair fell in his face as he shook his head sadly. “Prongs said the healers and nurses spent all week running charms and spells over him. Couldn’t find anything. They told Prongs that he’s just old.”

“Rubbish,” Harry muttered.

“Yeah.”
The mood did not improve as the boys unpacked, or during dinner, or breakfast, class or lunch the following day. James remained drawn and quiet, concern stripping him of even his confident strut. He sat alone in the library studying or writing letters home when before he would have been at the centre of attention in the common room, singing a rude song and sending harmless hexes at younger students just for fun.

When they tried to keep him company, he turned them away. “Just need some time to think,” he mumbled and they could only share a concerned glance and walk back to Gryffindor Tower.

“Any news?” Harry asked.

Sirius shook his head. “Nothing good.”

He had been nearly as withdrawn as James since returning from holiday. As the days passed and Sirius grew no more boisterous than James, everyone knew just how grim the old man’s prospects really were. The loud and playful Sirius Black would never have made himself so sombre over a short-lived illness. Harry could understand his feelings in the matter. Charlus Potter had all but adopted him after he ran away from home. If he had not offered the boy a place to stay, then Sirius would have been forced to return to Grimmauld Place. From what he had said in the past months, Harry knew that Charlus had more than just accepted him into the house; the man had insisted he stay, sent a house-elf to take possession of the boy’s things and even squared off with one very irate Walburga Black when the woman came pounding on their door, demanding they hand over her ‘good for nothing’ son. He likely loved Charlus Potter as much as Harry would have loved his Godfather if he had actually managed to save him from the Dusleys third year. Harry knew how devastated he was when Sirius was killed; he suspected he knew how pained Sirius was now.

Not caring that it might be taken as flirtatious, Harry put his arm around his friend. Sirius made no move to respond, just continued to slump on the couch and stare at the fire but finally the boy leaned into him and muttered a ‘thanks’ that sounded nothing like the smirking reply he would have given prior to the holidays. Whatever Sirius’s feelings might have been, right now he was only after some comfort.

The days turned into weeks, but James never cheered. Letters from home held no hope, and they all began to wonder when the letter would arrive requesting the boy return to say his final farewells. Peter’s attempts to cheer him up earned some momentary, if wan, smiles, but he soon fell back into his reading or letter writing.

“Um,” a quiet voice interrupted their quiet table one evening. “James?”

The boy looked up and offered a slightly more enthusiastic smile to the girl. “Lily.”

“Your dad… how is he?” she asked.

His smile fell as his shoulders rose in a half-hearted shrug.

“Oh,” replied the girl slowly. She stood there a moment, shifting her weight anxiously between her feet but saying nothing more for a painfully long time. “If…” she paused again, “if you wanted someone to talk to, I wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh,” he said, hint of a smile taking over his face as the girl hurried back to her own table. “So that’s all it takes to win her over.”

“If only we’d known,” Sirius said with a playful smirk once again touching his mouth, “I would have poisoned the old bastard ages ago.”
James snorted. “Git, you wouldn’t have the heart to hurt him; you love him more than I do.”

“And for damn good reason,” he agreed, taking advantage of his friend’s momentary return to cheek. “But you’ve more to gain if he croaks, so really it ought to be you to do him in.”

“Too suspicious,” Peter chimed in, stroking his chin and narrowing his eyes at them. “The Aurors will know it was him what done it. No, it needs to be someone without a connection to the old man, someone they would never even look at because he has no place in the man’s life... Moony!”

“They’d never suspect the Prefect,” James agreed.

“But they might if he was a dangerous and deceitful thing.” Sirius waggled an eyebrow. “Just look at how he’s managed to woo that new girl away from her books. No, he’s a devious creature, that one. Anyone can see it just by looking at him.”

“Wormtail, then,” Remus suggested. “Look at that angelic face, all innocent blue eyes and cheeks just begging to be pinched.” He demonstrated his point by pinching the boy’s cheek until he cried for mercy.

“They’d suspect him instantly for that very reason,” James argued, peering sideways at the boy. “Too innocent, they’d say.”

“That leaves only you, Harry James Granger,” Sirius decided. “No one would suspect you would have anything to do with this crime. No blood connection, just enough deviousness in your face... yes, you could easily get away with it. Remember not to get caught or Prongs will never get the girl.”


Harry had been fighting down his laughter until they dragged him into their demented game of who-should-do-it. He forced his voice as sober as his amusement would allow, replying, “You don’t think the physical similarity would be suspect?”

“The old long-lost brother ploy,” Sirius growled, tapping a finger against his chin in consideration.

“That git couldn’t pass for my brother,” James snorted.

“Look at the evidence before you, Prongs,” Remus shook his head in disagreement. “No, if you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. If we look at only the possible, it’s the long-lost brother ploy.”

“Damn,” the boy swore dramatically and hit the table with his fist. “Then my father will live forever and the girl will never sympathise. I’m doomed to live a life of loneliness!”

“And bad acting,” Sirius added with a smirk. They laughed loud and long and for the first time in over a month, drawing a few odd looks from the Gryffindors closest to them, but not caring one bit.

As their laughter petered out slowly, Sirius patted his friend on the back. “Prongs, happy as I am that you’ve got your humour back, what the hell are you still doing sitting here? The girl came looking for you.”

“Invited you to sit with her,” Peter agreed with an eager nudge to his friend’s ribs.
“Get your arse over there before she realises what a horrendous mistake she’s made,” he ordered, pulling James up by his tie and pushing him toward Lily. “Go on!”

Breath securely trapped inside their lungs the remaining Marauders and Harry all watched as their friend wove a nervous path around the common room to find Lily Evans in a chair a short distance from the fire. Lips were bit as the girl looked up, fingers crossed as the smile pulled at her mouth, relieved sighs released when she pointed to the chair opposite and James, for the first time since the train ride to Hogwarts six years ago, was actually permitted to sit with her.

“Not doomed after all,” Harry smiled.
The Marauders’ world took a rather interesting turn Tuesday morning. Lily Evans, who for the past six years had gone out of her way to avoid all things James Potter, sat down beside him in the Great Hall without prompting, persuasion or potion to make her do it. She talked to him as if he were a regular person and not a badly behaved dog in need of scolding. She smiled at him, actually smiled.

Toward Harry James Granger, however, she was decidedly chilly. She neither looked at him nor spoke to him, leaving everyone to assume that she was still quite cross about having been tricked all those weeks ago.

“Hardly seems fair,” Peter grunted as he watched the girl smiling at James. “He was the one who tricked her, not you.”

Harry offered a noncommittal ‘hm’.

“She’ll get over it now she’s so keen on Prongs,” Sirius assured them quietly with a broad grin as he draped an arm around Harry’s shoulder. The boy did not respond to the gesture, not that he ever did, he was too busy watching the friendly banter between Lily and James. Sirius scowled and opened his mouth to say something, though he was not sure what.

“Class,” Remus said, kicking the boy before he could say something he might regret.

Defence was far more interesting now that Morven was loosening up. He still slammed the door shut in the face of any student who was so much as half-a-second late, but he smiled a bit more and made reference to his own past if it related to the subject he was lecturing on. While hardly a startling change, it was enough to make lessons a lot more fun, especially on practical demonstration days. On those days, Morven shined.

Sadly, it was not one of those days. Today it was straight lecturing on Inferi, a subject frightening enough to need no dramatics to get their attention. Even Sirius’ skin crawled at the mention of those unfortunate reanimated dead, and he leapt from his seat as soon as the professor bid them good day.

“Mr Granger,” Morven called. “I want a word with you.”

Harry’s eyes went wide, but he moved from his seat down toward the lectern. Sirius considered hiding, but now that they all knew what sort of jobs the seemingly dull Aloysius Morven has succeeded in, the boy was not so willing to become a target for the man’s presumably potent hexes. He glanced over at James; his friend was half-way to the door with Lily Evans at his side. Just yesterday Sirius could easily have ducked under a desk with him and hidden beneath the invisibility cloak, now he would have to chase the boy down and drag him away from the girl to get what he wanted. Suddenly James with Lily did not seem such a wonderful thing if it would put such a damper on their spontaneous eavesdropping and pranking.
He walked as slowly as he could without making himself too suspicious, all the while his ears were straining hard to hear every inflection of the pair’s voice.

“Mr Granger,” Morven said with a wide smile he apparently held in reserve for Harry James Granger. “Any luck on finding a solution to that complicated problem of yours?”

“Uh, no, sir,” Harry said slowly as if he were sorting out how best to phrase his response. “We’re narrowing it down.”

“But?”

“I think I’ve managed to make myself a massive new problem,” the boy admitted flatly. “I mean once we find a way home, Dumbledore can fix whatever mess we’ve made, but until then… I’m doomed.”

Morven laughed, a laugh to put Sirius’s loud bark to shame, it filled the room, echoed off the stones and vibrated in their bones. It was the kind of laugh that made any problem seem insignificant, and his words only mirrored that. “If you’ve nothing to concern yourself with after you have ‘gone home’,” the man paused, giving the boy a hard look and a raised eyebrow at the phrase, “then I don’t see how you could possibly be doomed.”

“I am!” Harry insisted. “There’s someone who fancies me who shouldn’t fancy me because we’re family and if there are rules about fancying your best mate’s sister then there are definitely rules about this. Carved-in-stone-at-the-beginning-of-time type of rules. This is…”

What it was, Sirius would never know. He had no choice but to keep walking further out of earshot, but he had heard enough. Someone else fancied Harry James Granger. Someone in his family. He frowned at that. So far as he could tell, the Grangers had no family. They received no letters. They had no photographs and shared no stories of parents, uncles or cousins. There was always that vague reference to their ‘going home’, but to-date Sirius had never seen or heard evidence of their being any actual home for them to go to. No, the only family Harry James Granger had was his adopted sister.

“What’s with that face?” Remus asked as Sirius threw his books down on his bed.

“She fancies him,” the boy said through clenched teeth.

“Who? Lily? Yeah, that’s what we’ve been working toward for the past three years.”

“No, not that,” he growled and slumped on his trunk. “Hermione. She fancies Harry.”

The amused smile dropped off his face. “No, she doesn’t.”

“I heard him talking to Morven. He was freaking out because someone fancied him, someone who was family,” Sirius informed him. “Who else around here fits that profile? If you’ve got another name, I’m all ears.”

The boy sat himself slowly down on his bed, eyebrows draw together in serious contemplation. No one wanted to lose their girlfriend, especially not to someone she called a brother, but what other explanation was there? Neither could say just what it was about the idea of Lily and Harry going on a date that had upset Hermione so much, but she had been livid when she found out precisely how they had tricked Lily into the date. Add to that the fact that neither of them knew what had passed between them over the holidays, and Hermione fancying her brother seemed as likely as not.

“I’ll ask her,” Remus said quietly.
“Yeah, because we all know how forthcoming the Grangers are,” scoffed Sirius, jealousy and anger cracking his generally perfect mask of indifference.

“I’ll ask her,” he repeated, standing and moving purposefully from the room. Sirius followed.

He cringed as his friend tried to broach the sickening subject with his girlfriend. He felt for him, since his own prospects were equally as dim if this theory turned out to hold any truth, but he could not imagine how horrible it must be to ask the girl he was dating if she secretly wanted to snog her brother. Even in his family, that was wrong. And that was saying something.

“What’s with Moony?” James asked in a low whisper during Charms. “He looks like he’s about to vomit.”

“ Might be,” Sirius muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. Girl troubles.”

“Oh,” he said with a nod and went back to the spell they were practicing. Well, he went back to waving his wand in the general direction of his desk. His thoughts and eyes were focused entirely on Lily Evans, while Sirius’s were on Harry James Granger. The NEWT-level charm to reveal enchantments was considerably harder to master than the lesser version they had learned for OWLs. Even if they had not each been distracted by their own love lives the two Marauders would have found it difficult. Preoccupied as they were, it was virtually impossible.

“I’m surprised at you, boys!” Flitwick said, sounding cheerful even as he admonished them. “A foot each on the wandwork for this charm and an hour practicing it for homework. I’ll be testing you two on it next time.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied.

“I never thought I would see the day that I was actually better at Charms than the two of you!” Lily crowed, her green eyes twinkling merrily. It was nonsense, of course; the girl was brilliant at Charms, but she loved to rub it in on the rare and unnatural occasions when they were rubbish.

“I was distracted!” James defended his poor performance.

“By what?”

“By you,” he admitted.

“Aren’t you sweet?” she said and sounded only slightly sarcastic. Her laughing mouth opened to say more but clamped shut the second Harry came to stand beside James. The girl made the most abrupt change of posture and colour Sirius had ever witnessed. She dropped her eyes to the floor, refusing to look at the boy, as her skin flushed instantly before it drained of its colour, leaving her both ghastly white and slightly green.

“I’ve got to go,” she muttered and ran.

James turned and looked at the boy, “What did you do to her, Granger?”

“Nothing,” Harry insisted. “She’s not spoken to me since your date.”

“She can’t still be cross about that, can she?” Sirius wondered.
“Looked more ill to me. Like Harry did when you thought he fancied her,” contradicted Remus. He studied the boy a moment, eyes narrowed in consideration before he shook his head. “I’m off to spend some time with my girlfriend.”

“Behave yourself!” Harry shouted after him. Remus just sent a pair of forked fingers over his shoulder at him. Oddly, Harry laughed. If he knew that his sister fancied him and not Remus, then surely he would not be joking and laughing with his competition; it was enough to convince Sirius that he was wrong. When the boy started walking in the same direction as Remus, however, he worried that perhaps the boy might attempt to sabotage their date and win Hermione for himself.

“Where are you going?” Sirius asked.

“Meeting with Morven about our project,” he shrugged. “The man’s too persistent for me.”

“Why’d you let him help and not us? We’re clever, you know.”

“Too clever,” Harry agreed. “But he was a curse breaker and an Auror. If anyone has the experience to fix this mess, it might just be him.”

Sirius frowned as he leaned in. “One of these days, you will stop being such a bastard and tell us the fucking truth.”

“One of these days,” Harry agreed quietly, sounding pained. The boy was turned away, but Sirius could tell that he had that look on his face, that look that he had seen only once. Before he got the chance to say anything more, Harry was disappearing down the corridor toward Defence.

James slapped his friend hard on the head. “Smooth.”

“You’re telling me it doesn’t annoy you, his keeping secrets?” Sirius demanded, rubbing his head and scowling. “Six months he’s been our friend, and I know more about Filch’s bloody cat than I do about him.”

“It’s a wonder you fancy him, then, you know so little about him. Maybe you ought to make a move on Mrs Norris instead,” he replied with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

“Be serious.”

“Why? You’re depressing enough for the pair of us lately. Cheer up, yeah?” James said. “Dad’s getting better, no more worries there. I’ve got my girl, so first goal of the year is done. Moony’s got his, there’s the second goal done. Now, let’s make Harry and you our third goal. With all the Marauders on the job, we’ll have you two snogging in no time.”

Sirius shook his head as much in amusement as in despondency. Hard as it was for him to admit, Harry James Granger did not seem the sort of problem that their particular brand of nonsense could solve. Clearly, since they had been at it for months with little to show for it. The boy was no closer to them than he had been in September. He was the first to laugh when a prank succeeded and more than happy to banter with them, but that was it. “You can try, Prongs,” he sighed, “but I don’t think it’ll make a difference.”

“Oh, quit your whinging and cast some spells for me to find,” the Chaser said, shoving him away. “You were way more fun before you fell in love, you know that? I wasn’t nearly as lame as you when I fell for Lily.”

“Nope, you were worse,” Sirius snorted. “’And her hair, Sirius, her hair is like fire, mate. I could burn myself on it. And her lips…’ Hours I had to listen to that drivel!”
“Poetic description,” correctly James irritably.

“A rose by any other name would still be a pain in the arse to listen to every night for a month and a half,” he laughed as he sent charms around their room. “Done.”

“Me, too,” his friend said. “In my defence, I was thirteen, and raised by parents who spent every other minute calling each other pet names and saying how much they love each other.”

Sirius had no retort to that. His parents’ marriage was not a match of love but an arrangement for prestige and money, a political alliance. What time Walburga and Orion Black spent in one another’s company was used to schedule upcoming engagements and events as if they had social secretaries instead of spouses. The idea of spending every moment of his childhood hearing his parents speaking words of love and devotion sounded pretty good to him. Damned if he would admit it, though.

“Ready?” Sirius asked.

“Yeah,” James said. “Let’s make them glow.”

Swapping sides, they waved their wands, saying the spell to uncover a hidden or disguised object. It took three attempts but the air finally shimmered like heat waves off hot tarmac in the dead of summer, revealing the location of each of the items James had charmed – the clock on Moony’s bedside table and the box of chocolates under his bed, the jumper he would not have noticed under his own bed, three dungbombs under Harry’s table and the plaque on the boy’s trunk. He thought the plaque an odd sort of thing to charm, even for Prongs.

“You charmed his trunk?” Sirius asked as he bent to inspect the plaque.

“Nope,” James replied absently as he dove under Peter’s bed. “Found Wormtail’s secret stash. Ooh, kinky.” He was too absorbed in the magazines to pay Sirius much attention as he studied the nameplate.

It was something he had looked at often during his covert attempts to pick the locks of Harry’s trunk. He had all but memorised the compound-curves of the metal and pattern of the tarnish around the edges. The entire thing was in desperate need of a polish; the brass, once shining, was smudged by fingerprints, dulled with a patina only age could bring.

While it no longer shined, it still shouted. It shouted an impossible name: Harry J. Potter.
The Impossible Thought

Chapter Summary

In which discoveries are made.

Sirius stared at that name he had revealed with his spell, trying to force his brain to understand what it meant. Harry Granger wasn’t really a Granger, but they knew that already. Harry was adopted, so he was Harry Potter by birth then.


Harry James Potter. James for his father.

Harry James – for his father – Potter, who looked eerily like James Potter.

“Prongs,” Sirius breathed, too preoccupied by his own thoughts to speak with any real volume. “Please tell me you’ve a long-lost Uncle James.”

The Chaser laughed lightly, “Sorry, Pads, I’m the only James in my family.”

“Bugger.”

“Why?” James finally looked away from Peter’s magazines to see just how ashen his friend was. “What’s the matter?”

Sirius could only shake his head and point, unable to voice what it was about the name that so concerned him. Somewhere in his head, the pieces were being rearranged according to the information the plaque had provided. It was an irritatively incomplete picture, even with this new clue.

“Well, that is odd,” James said, sitting himself down to read the plaque on Harry’s trunk, wondering what it might mean.

“He looks just like you, Prongs,” Sirius said, his voice hushed to a terrified whisper.

“It’s a prank,” replied James loudly and laughingly. “He’s pulling our leg! Harry, come on out!” He stood and started poking his wand into every corner and nook that might contain the boy.

“He’s in the library,” Sirius replied, his eyes still fixed on the name.

“No, it’s a prank,” the boy insisted stubbornly. “He’s had more than enough time to finish with Morven, steal my cloak and change that name. He’s hiding and he’s going to pop out any second now.”

“Prongs,” Sirius said, his voice hard. “Do you honestly think I don’t know exactly where the bloke I have a secret crush on is at all times during the day? He’s in the library. Trust me.”

James fell back onto his arse and stared intently at the name before his eyes. Harry J. Potter. “Potter’s not all that unusual a name.”
“That isn’t the problem, Prongs. It’s enough to know he’s been lying to us this whole time,” he said, though there was more to his growing unease than just the lying; they all knew he had been lying to them, hiding things and keeping some very dark secrets. Sirius shot to his feet as the thoughts started flowing without filter through his mouth, “He said he had been a Granger for as long as he could remember. If that were true, he wouldn’t have a trunk with his real name on it, now would he? If his name was just the simple, common sort, why would he have bothered to hide it unless it was part of a bigger secret?”

“What bigger secret?” James demanded.

“I think he really is your long-lost brother. I mean he looks just like you!”

“Middle name for his real father, remember?” he scoffed. “He’d be Harry Charlus Potter.” The boy’s condescending smile fell away as he looked again at the plaque. “I got my middle name from my dad, same as him.”

“Prongs?”

“Nobody in my family has green eyes,” he muttered, speaking more to himself than to his friend. “Nobody but Lily has eyes that green. And he turned poorly whenever we said he fancied her, properly poorly.” His hazel eyes still staring fixedly on the name, he extended his hand. “Give me that list of yours.”

Frowning, Sirius dug into his bag and pulled out the parchment, rumpled and torn from being scoured so often, and set it in James’s outstretched hand. The boy studied it for several long minutes, his brow pulled together tightly and his eyes narrowed. A look crossed his face, one Sirius had not anticipated, a broad smile verging on rapture. “Impossible!”

“What?”

“It isn’t possible,” James declared, jumping to his feet and running from the room. Sirius chased after him, confusion and annoyance warring for dominance as he entered the common room and found his friend moving purposefully toward Lily Evans.

Cursing, Sirius turned away, stomping angrily back up the steps and parking himself before Harry’s trunk. He studied the list as James had, same look of absolute determination on his face, but whatever the impossibility had been it did not occur to him as readily as it did the other black-haired Gryffindor. So he stayed on the floor, sorting the list and trying for the thousandth time to fit it together in a way that made sense. James had effectively put to rest the idea of Harry being his long-lost brother, but he clearly had another idea, one involving Evans and her eyes and Harry’s reaction to her.

The door opened, but Sirius did not look up from his task even when James asked, “What are you doing?”

“Being aggravated, that’s what I’m doing.” he snarled. “You run off shouting about things being ‘impossible’ and don’t tell me what they are when you know I’m at my wit’s fucking end over this. So much for me being clever if I can’t sort of what in the hell Harry’s secret is.”

There was a long pause before he replied. “Ever think he’s got more than one? Might make it easier if you tried figuring only one out at a time.”

“Real helpful,” he scoffed and looked at his list again. “Now what was so impossible?”

“Don’t know.”
“You are an absolute git, Prongs,” Sirius growled and glared at his friend.

“I know he is, so what does that make me?” the boy replied with something of a smile, his green eyes bright with amusement as they always were when Sirius mistook him for James.

“Oh hell.”

Harry sat down beside him on the floor, and looked at the parchment in his hands, quickly reading the ever-growing list of oddities he and Remus had compiled. He ‘hm’ed and snorted occasionally, but said nothing until he had reached the end. “So not been as careful as we’d hoped, then.”

“You’re not denying it?” Sirius asked, dumbfounded.

“I’m denying this one,” he pointed to the very last item on the list. “I’m not secretly snogging Hermione. Never have been, never will be. She’s like my sister, Sirius. That is just gross.”

“Oh,” he accepted the boy’s answer and crossed it from his list. “Anything else?”

The boy’s eyes darted over the list again. “No…” he said slowly. “The rest of it is annoyingly spot-on.”

Sirius could not keep the smile off his face. “Well, since I have you here and in such a truthful mood, mind helping me with this? It’s been driving me mad since September.”

Harry considered him a moment before giving a slow nod. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Dementors,” Sirius said before he could change his mind. “Have you met one in person?”

“Several,” the boy replied darkly, his smile dropping off his face.

Recognising the signs of despondency in his friend, Sirius quickly changed subjects, eager to keep his mood light and to keep him talking. “Have you ever taken History of Magic?”

Harry nodded.

“Well, since I have you here and in such a truthful mood, mind helping me with this? It’s been driving me mad since September.”

Harry nodded.

“With Professor Binns?” he added, eyebrow rising with his curiosity. Harry said nothing in reply and offered no gesture other than a sly smile which pulled slowly across his face. Sirius tried very hard not to scowl. Having the boy there offering vague replies and enigmatic smiles was worse than having only the list and his confused thoughts. At least when he was alone he could pair the clues in whatever fashion he chose without worrying about Harry laughing at him.

“Tell me how you got your scar.”

“Which one? I have several.”

“I’ve noticed,” Sirius commented. “Start with the manly and impressive burn.”

“Dragon,” Harry said proudly. “Hungarian Horntail, real piece of work that one was.”

“Pull the other one,” he laughed, certain the boy was having him on, but Harry’s posture and smile did not falter with his disbelief. “You’re serious? A dragon? What the hell were you doing near a dragon?”

He shook his head. “Can’t tell you that.”

“What?” Sirius balked and slapped him on the head. “You’re meant to be helping me with this, not
“I never said I was going to make the list shorter,” Harry said. “I just said I’d help. It’s your list. You figure it out.”

Sirius glared at him. “Git. What about the other scars, then?”

“Horrid teacher,” Harry said pointing at his hand where the writing etched deep into his skin was still hidden by magic. “Coward,” he pointed to his arm. “Very bad man,” he pulled up his fringe and revealed the lightning bolt on his forehead. “I also have one on my ankle from my Aunt’s dog and another on my elbow from when my cousin and his friend threw me into a construction skip… in case you cared.”

“What’s your cousin’s name and address? I’ll go hex him for you.”

Harry grinned. “I appreciate the offer, but that wouldn’t do any good at this point in time.”

“Well, can’t say I didn’t offer to avenge you,” he sighed and studied his strange friend. “Are you really from South Africa?”

Harry shook his head. “Never been there in my life.”

“Is your middle name really James?” Harry nodded. “James from your father?” Again he nodded. Remembering the odd comment James had made before he ran off, Sirius looked at his friend’s vibrant eyes. “Where’d you get the green eyes from? You said your mum, was that true?”

Again Harry nodded and Sirius paused, looking down at the list. Whatever it was that James had realised, he had done it with without Operation Not-Prongs. Perhaps it was not where he ought to be looking. He glanced again at the boy beside him, vibrant green eyes from his mum, middle name from his dad, wild black hair just like James’s… “Whose hair did you get?”

“My dad’s,” he replied, adding, “Got most of me from him, actually. All anyone ever says I got from my mum are her eyes. Although, I’ve apparently got her temper as well.”

Sirius thought it through again. Green eyes from his mum. Hair and name from his dad. A fairly common surname that he felt the need to hide. “How long have you known your real last name?”

“All my life,” Harry said.

“Why lie and say you never knew it?”

He just offered a half-hearted shrug, “Dumbledore’s idea.”

“You really don’t like him,” Sirius observed.

The boy’s face grew dark again. “He helped get someone I love killed. All his secret-keeping.”

Sirius scoffed. “You’re one to complain.”

“Oi, I’m doing the best I can,” Harry elbowed him sharply in the side. “I’d like to see you do better in my position.”

“Perhaps I could if I knew what position that was,” he retorted.

Harry offered up a grin. “That is your job to find out, Mr Black.”
“You, Mr Potter—“ He stopped as the name fell from his mouth. It was the first time he had said it aloud since reading it on the plaque, the first time he had connected it to Harry. He had repeated it countless times in his head, certainly, but saying it to the boy’s face somehow changed the way he thought of the name, how he thought of the boy. Harry James Potter, with a common surname he thought it necessary to hide and the middle name of a boy he looked almost identical to. “Oh, hell.”

Harry raised an eyebrow as he waited.

“You are related to James,” Sirius said, unease colouring his voice and sickness twisting his gut. “You’re not his brother. And he doesn’t have any uncles you could be named after. He’s the only James in his whole family…”

“Which tells you what?”

“That I’m fucked.”

oOo

James moved purposely across the common room, trying and failing to keep from walking with his usual, assured stride. He had made a real effort to quell the motion, knowing his tendency to strut about the place annoyed Lily, but right now he was so confident he could not prevent the swagger.

He had a thought, a brilliant and impossible thought. It was the kind of thought he had dreamed of but could never believe would ever come true, but he had the evidence now… maybe.

He pushed through a pride of first years to reach a far corner where his red-haired target sat with Tildy, hunched low over a small table, whispering and discussing something that looked nothing like any assignment they had been given recently. At his approach, Lily slid the parchment off the table and Tildy grinned toothily.

“James!” Tildy cried. “How’s your dad?”

“Much better,” he said honestly. “Mum wrote that he’ll be coming home soon.”

“Fantastic!” the girl cried with far too much volume. She was clearly trying to distract him while Lily hastily folded the parchment and hid it in her bag. “So are you here to flirt with Lily? Would you like me to go?”

The girl in question blushed and glared at her exuberant companion, but James smiled. “No, actually, I was curious about the Grangers.”

At the name, their smiles became fixed, rehearsed.

When Harry let him take Lily on a date in his stead, he had started to wonder about all the times he caught them together in the common room; all those instances when he had looked upon the pair with suspicion and jealousy suddenly made no sense. If the boy was willing to give up a proper date, then clearly he was not involved in a clandestine romance with the girl. They did, however, spend a great deal of time with their heads together, whispering, conspiring. There had to be some reason for it, but none came to him until now.

Now that he had the impossible thought in his head, he knew that it was because Lily was privy Harry’s secret; Tildy, too, apparently.

He had intended to woo the information from Lily somehow, to take advantage of her growing fondness and find out what he wanted about the Grangers. It would not have been easy and it might
even have endangered their budding relationship, but with Tildy’s fixed smile, he had a much better plan, one that would get him the information he wanted and let him keep the girl of his dreams. The excitable girl would be much easier to gain information from; she was already bouncing in her seat from the effort of maintaining her silence. Tildy wanted to share, desperately.

“Do you know when their birthdays are?” he asked innocently, watching as their tension and nervousness melted. “Sirius is starting to get desperate and thought a massive party might be the way to shout ‘I want to shag you’ to Harry.”

Lily frowned disapprovingly, a tinge of green touching her face. “I don’t know, but I can ask.”

“Thanks,” he smiled again, unable to stop himself. “Out of curiosity, if I wanted to shout ‘I want to snog you’ what would be the best way to do it?”

Lily flushed a deep scarlet to match her tie. “A Hogsmeade weekend where you come as yourself might do the trick,” she replied.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said and left them alone to recommence their whispering. He grinned as he set himself down near the fire to do some conspiring of his own. It had been far too long since he set his mind to plotting, so intent had he been on worrying about his dad, winning Evans and foiling Harry. Now, though, he had a new aim: Tildy Moorehead. Eager as she was to share whatever information she knew, the girl was a Gryffindor, proud, loyal and stubborn, and if she had promised to keep the secret then keep it she would; he would have to find the right way to approach her if he was to make her tell him everything she knew.

There was always stealing that parchment the two girls were debating; he suspected it would be a list of spells just like the one Harry kept in his pocket. He and Sirius had already gotten their hands on Harry’s copy and found it to be completely useless to determining the great secret.

‘Shame asking doesn’t work,’ he thought.

James paused, his mouth pulling downward into a thoughtful frown. Of all the things he had considered, that, surprisingly, had never occurred to him. Just ask.

“Why not?” he shrugged and stood, walking back to stand by the girls.

“Out of curiosity,” James said again, “is Harry my kid?” He held Lily’s eye as he spoke, watching those vibrant green eyes as they widened and grew more prominent against her paling skin. He had never seen anyone else with eyes as vibrant as hers, not until he met Harry. The boy had said she reminded him of his mum, and everyone thought him a relative of James. With his true last name revealed and knowing he shared the Potter’s tradition of carrying on the father’s name as a middle one, James had known the truth. It was impossible, but it was there. Harry was his son. His and Lily’s. Seeing her enormous eyes, it was clear she knew it, too.

“Congratulations!” Tildy squealed. “It’s a boy!”
Hermione leaned into the kiss, all thoughts of having a professor’s tongue in her mouth long gone. Well, they did crop up on occasion, but Remus was far too good a kisser to let something as silly as that get in the way. Today, however, he did not seem quite as keen on the kissing. His lips and talented tongue were going through the motions but with almost none of the usual fervour.

She broke from him. “What’s the matter?”

Remus pulled his eyebrows together and bit his lip, but even after a moment’s consideration, he still shook his head. “Nothing.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not. I’m fine.”

She sighed and pushed away from him, setting herself down on the couch. His lap was a perfectly fine place to sit while snogging, but it hardly gave her the respectability she required in matters of serious discussion. “You weren’t kissing like there’s nothing wrong. There’s something distracting you. Now, please, tell me what it is.”

Again he paused, taking in a long breath. She thought for sure he would deny it again. “Sirius overheard something…”

“Okay,” she said and waited for him to continue.

“Something Harry said,” he said.

Hermione fought to keep herself looking normal even as she cursed and shouted in her head. How many times had they nearly been caught discussing their situation? She thought he had learned his lesson by now, but clearly not if he was flippantly saying things within earshot of Sirius Big-Mouth Black. “What did Harry say?” she inquired in a voice she knew sounded strained.

“Well, he was talking to Morven and mentioned a problem,” Remus told her, his eyes moving slowly across her face as she struggled to keep from showing just how anxious he was making her. “He said he was doomed because someone fancied him. Sirius is understandably put-out.”

“I’m so sorry!” she cried. “He figured it out over Christmas. I tried—”

“It’s true?” the boy said, blanching instantly.

“Everyone knows,” she frowned. “I thought you knew, too. He’s not exactly been subtle about it.”

“Yeah, he has!” Remus stood, shouting, “Nobody would have guessed! I live in the same room with him, and I had no idea!”

“What?” she practically laughed. “The way he goes on? Friendship must have made you blind.”

“Don’t you dare laugh at me,” he warned, a hard and dangerous edge taking over his voice. “I may have been his friend, but this is unforgivable. And you helped him.”

“No more than you,” she shot up from her seat, poking him hard in the chest. “How dare you try to pin this on me? I’ve done nothing worse than you. If you’re going to get angry at anyone, get angry at Sirius.”
“Sirius? How is this his fault?”

“For being such a bloody coward he couldn’t tell Harry how he felt to begin with!”

“Oh, so that makes it alright to swoop in and take advantage?”

“I did no such thing. I made one passing comment and he sorted the rest out on his own,” she insisted. “Took him long enough if you ask me.”

“‘Took him long enough’? How bloody long have you been after him?” Remus gaped.

Hermione blinked. “After who?”

“Harry.”

“After him to what?” she asked. “I’m always after him to do something, his homework, generally, but I swear I wasn’t after him about Sirius at all. I was honestly curious how long it would take him to sort it out, and I only made one little comment. It wasn’t even about Sirius, either, but it must have clicked because he just—“

“Wait,” Remus interrupted, lopsided smile replacing his furious scowl. “So you don’t fancy him?”

“Sirius? No!”

“No, Harry.”

Her nose wrinkled in disgust. “He’s like my brother! Wh—” Remus hurled himself at her, cutting off her words and taking over her mouth with a great deal more eagerness than he normally did and easily compensating for his earlier distractedness. She let him dominate her tongue until understanding struck her. Forcing him off, she stared at him. “You thought I fancied Harry? Is that what he said to Morven?”

“No, he didn’t say who fancied him, just that it was family,” Remus said, absentmindedly as he kept his eyes locked onto her lips. “Thought that meant you.”

“Idiot.”

“Wait,” he muttered, breaking free of his preoccupation. “You’re his only family. Who else could he thinks fancies him?”

“Oh, never mind,” Hermione said lightly. “Misunderstanding solved.” She took his mouth and hoped that she was forceful enough to keep his mind from continuing along his previous line of questioning. He was certainly working his tongue as if it was all he had thought of at the moment. If only she could kiss him thoroughly enough to remove all memory of their conversation. Oddly, she would rather he think that she liked Harry than have his clever brain at work sorting out who else the boy might consider family.

oOo

“It’s a boy!” Tildy squealed gleefully, clapping her hands and hugging James and Lily in turn. “And quite the handsome boy, too. You must be so proud!”

“Oh, shut up, Tildy!” Lily hissed as she leapt up from her seat and gripped James by the arm, pulling him even farther from the bustle of the common room. “Where the hell did that question come from?”
James shrugged and ran through all the evidence they had managed to gather, taking particular care to mention her eyes. “It would explain why he always turned green when we thought he fancied you. I’d be sick, too, if someone thought I wanted to snog my mum.”

The girl looked ill as she turned her eyes to focus exclusively on her shoes.

Realisation hit him and he cringed, his stomach turning. “Oh, you didn’t.”

“It’s your fault!” she practically shouted. “You’re the one who tricked me into that damned date! I never would have thought of him like that at all if it weren’t for you! Now I can’t even look at him without knowing what I almost did.”

“You didn’t ‘almost do’ anything,” James insisted. “You almost kissed me.”

“Thinking you were him!” she groaned and slumped against the wall, pulling at her hair. “I wanted to kiss my own son. Who does that? What the hell kind of person does that make me?”

“But you didn’t know,” he said. “If I’d known he is who he is, I wouldn’t have pretended to be him. If anyone’s to blame in all this, it’s Harry. He never should have let me pretend to be him on a date with you. He was the only one who knew better the whole time.” He glared across the common room, catching sight of Hermione and Remus arguing, and he finally understood why Harry had wanted her kept far away from them that Hogsmeade weekend. The girl probably knew about this entire convoluted family tree and would have hexed him for pretending to be Lily’s son out on a date with his own mum.

As he watched Remus launch himself at the girl, taking over her mouth and sneaking a feel of her backside, James’s frown deepened. If she knew, then that meant Hermione was from whatever time and place Harry was. In that place Remus was old enough to be her dad. That was not right. That was as not right as Lily wanting to snog her son, as not right as Sirius wanting to shag him. His eyes narrowed as his teeth began to grind.

“James?” Lily asked, waving a hand before his face. “Are you all right?”

“No, I have to go kill Sirius.”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes, that! I’ll kill him, bring him back to life and kill him again,” the boy seethed as his knuckles turned white and nails dug hard into his palms.

“Make sure it’s painful,” she advised and returned to her chair, pulling the parchment from her bag. “I’ll not have my son being one of Black’s cast-aside romances.”

He nodded, too livid to notice how readily Lily accepted that she was Harry’s mother, that James was his father, that they would become serious enough to have a child at all. No, killing Sirius in the most excruciating manner imaginable was far more important than all that. He stalked up the stairs, wondering whether manually plucking every hair from the bastard’s head would be a severe enough start or if he ought to add some stinging hexes to disfigure his face first, but was forced to stop as Harry stole past him. He was running, face flushed from what James really hoped was the exertion of the action and not from Sirius making a move on him.

“Harry!” he shouted after him.

“Can’t talk, I have to meet Dumbledore!” Harry called back, not even turning around.
James scowled. “That’s no way to treat your father, git,” he mumbled and continued contemplating Sirius’s punishment.

He shoved the door wide, glaring his ire at the boy, his best mate, his near-brother and partner in crime; the only one of his friends he would ever consider making Godfather to his future children, and the only one that had been trying to shack up with his son from the future. Pervy bastard. Judging by his posture, Sirius had not been the cause of Harry’s flushed face, though it did little to stem his wrath. James, more than any of the other Marauders, knew just what he had planned for Harry, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“I think I know what was impossible,” Sirius said, sounding as dejected as he looked.

“Yeah,” James replied, quickly closing the distance between them, pulling his fist back and punching him hard on the jaw. It hurt like hell, but it was worth it when Sirius fell backward with a shout. “Dammit, Padfoot, you turned my son into a shirtlifter!”

Surprisingly, Sirius did not retaliate or protest. After the initial cry of shock and pain, he said nothing at all. It was enough to stop James’s attack momentarily. He held his fist up to strike again but took a breath to look at his friend, properly look. He looked sick. “What are you looking so poorly over?”

“He’s your kid, Prongs,” Sirius said, the words tore from his throat, aching and ragged, as if it was the worst possible fate for the boy.

“Yeah, figured that out for myself.”

“No, he’s your son, my best mate’s son. I’ve got to be nearly forty where—in when—he’s from; the uncle that always sneaks him dungbombs to take to school and gives him advice on picking up girls,” he shook his head. “No wonder he never said anything about me throwing myself at him.”

James just shook his head. “You, Mr Padfoot, are a drama queen.”

“I mean it!” Sirius shouted. “He’s never batted an eye or done anything to stop me laying my head down on his leg in the common room or walking the length of the castle with my arm around him. Even you would have said something if I did it… Oh, Merlin, I’ve turned into gropey old Uncle Ignats. What must he think of me?”

Despite his anger, he snorted.

“Shove off, Potter,” the boy glared at him.

“Oh, Potter now, am I?” James smirked. “Well then, Black, let me tell you something. You are going to be that kid’s Godfather.” Sirius groaned at the news, but James persisted, “He is going to know you his whole life, see you fake-flirting with Moony every time you’re over for a lager, taking advantage of when the idiot forgets not to sit on the couch and laying your head on his lap just like you do to Harry now. If he’s not said anything to stop you, it’s probably because he’s used to it and doesn’t care. It’s just what you do. We’ve accepted it. So has he. We know it doesn’t mean you want to shag us. He thinks the same... probably.”

“Git,” Sirius muttered.

James laughed at his obstinate self-loathing. “Sirius, I love you. If it was up to me, you’d have been a Potter since second year. As far as I’m concerned, it doesn’t matter who you fancy; you can swing whatever way you please and carry anybody you like with you on the ride, but if you try picking up my kid again, I will hex your bollocks off and hand them to you in an unbreakable jar.
Understand?"
Harry ran the length of the castle, leaping full speed onto a moving staircase as it started pulling away from the landing, determined to reach the Headmaster’s Office as quickly as he could. Sirius knew. He was screwed. He hadn’t intended to give his young Godfather any help in learning their secret; the boy was sitting, staring at the plaque on his trunk as if it had personally wronged him, holding a worn and creased parchment in his hands, and it had, rather understandably, intrigued him. It was even more interesting once he read the list on the parchment. It was all about him, Harry, and written in the distinct hands of both Remus and Sirius.

He and Hermione had been so sure they gave almost nothing away. Things slipped out on occasion; they accepted that they were each only human and mistakes would be made, but not as many as appeared on his list. When he read it, Harry was sure Sirius already knew. Everything he needed was right there, but clearly he didn’t know. How could he not know?

So, stupid idiot that he was, Harry sat down and let Sirius pry him for information.

Why had he done that?

Everyone knew how clever Sirius was. He was lazy with his schoolwork, lazier even than Harry, leaving him with grades were nowhere near what they could have been, but anyone with eyes could see that he was brilliant, anyone with ears knew that he could solve any problem put to him. Why had been so foolish as to provide him with proper answers? Idiot.

Hermione was going to kill him.

Dumbledore, too.

He stopped abruptly, his shoes skidding on the stones mere yards from the gargoyle guarding the office. Perhaps Dumbledore wasn’t the best person to talk to about all this. The wizard was wise, but he had not been the most helpful person since their arrival, setting them up at the school and promptly ignoring their existence unless they approached him. Considering what was at stake in all this, Harry thought the old man ought to have at least met with them once a week to check on their progress. Instead, they went weeks without hearing from him. Twice Hermione had gone to speak to him only to find he was off school grounds. The same had happened to him three times. Six months they had been in the seventies and Harry could count on one hand the number of times they had spoken to the Headmaster privately.

“No,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes at the statue. “I think I’ll talk to someone else.”

As if in reply to his comment, the gargoyle leapt aside, calling down the corridor to him, “He knows you’re here. Might as well go up.”

Lines of confusion etched into his face as he moved past the gargoyle and onto the revolving stairs. The door was open already and he walked in without knocking, knowing he would not be punished for it. He looked to the desk where the old man usually greeted him, but found he was not alone. The dull olive jumper of his guest was unmistakeable.

“Professor?”

“Harry,” Morven smiled. “We were just talking about you and your little problem.”

“What?” Anger spiked in his chest. He had trusted the man, told him as much of the truth as he
dared with the understanding that it was done in confidence. True, Dumbledore already knew, but that did not give Morven the right to run to the Headmaster the second his back was turned to tattle on him like some snivelling Kindergartener.

“Have no fear, Harry,” Dumbledore interceded. “Aloysius did not betray your trust. I approached him on the matter.”

That was hardly an improvement. Instead of Morven exposing him, it was Dumbledore.

“Despite outward appearances, Harry, I have been keeping watch on you and Miss Granger these past months. Professor McGonagall has told me how often you have come to find me out of the office, and I must apologise, but even I could find nothing among our books to help answer your riddle. I have been visiting friends, scouring their libraries and brains for possibilities, and I think I might have found something.”

Harry stared at him, not daring to hope, “What?”

“At the suggestion of Miss Granger, I took a visit to Knockturn Alley to inquire among those less scrupulous witches and wizards who frequent the area,” he continued. “While not the most forthcoming of creatures, they can be very helpful when appropriately compensated for their information.”

Staring at him in awe, Harry dropped into the empty chair beside Professor Morven. “You bribed them?”

“Hardly,” Dumbledore said with a gleam in his eye and a smile on his face. “I reimbursed them for their help, as I would anyone in my employ.”

He could only nod, a slow nod as ponderous as his understanding. “Okay.”

“Regardless of the means, I believe I have a clue to solving your problem, Harry,” he said. “I required the expertise of Professor Morven to find if it was worth bringing to your attention. I’m afraid it is not quite as hopeful as I had thought.”

Harry’s heart sank. “What? Why not?”

Morven shook his head. “It’s too weak a spell on its own. Rare and dark, yes, but hardly the stuff Dark Lords are made of. It’s called the Split Apart Curse. Almost nobody’s heard of it anymore. The only reason I know about it is because it was used on one of the skeletons I had to clear from a catacomb under Rome.”

“What is it supposed to do?” he asked, not really sure he wanted to know.

“Just what is says, splits you apart,” Morven replied as if it were obvious. “I think the Muggles used to do something similar with four horses tied to peoples’ limbs.”

The boy cringed and shrunk into the chair, imagining the pain such a curse would have caused. He knew Malfoy was a coward and a prat, but he had never thought he would hate him enough to literally tear him limb from limb. He shivered, “Why do you think it was that spell? Nothing like that happened to us.”

It was Dumbledore who replied. “The Split Apart was once cast on a man holding a portkey not unlike your own. He was apparently so unpleasant that people hexed him whenever they got the chance; Bartholomew the Belligerent they called him. He was attacked so often he took to wearing a portkey to help him escape whenever he ventured too far from the safety of his home. Well, the
Split Apart Curse was cast on him and he found himself back at his house five minutes before he had even left it. He was able to warn himself against leaving via that same route."

"That’s what happened to us,” Harry agreed excitedly. “Was there anything else? Do you know how to reverse it?”

“Unfortunately, I do not believe it was the same spell.”

“What? But that’s the same as what he did to Hermione and me, exactly the same!”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Not exactly. You and Miss Granger have travelled a far greater distance than Bartholomew or any of the men and women who attempted to repeat his experience once he reported the incident to the Ministry, twenty-seven in all; in each instance, the Split Apart Curse managed to send the wearer of the portkey back in time only a few minutes, an hour at most.”

Harry scowled and kicked the carpet with his heel. That was the spell. It was the only thing he had heard of that came even close to what had happened to them. They had been scouring the Restricted Section for months, reading every tome and scroll, and they had found nothing, not a hint or a whisper of anyone ever going back in time without having some magical device to make it happen. Harry had no Time-Turner, so it had to be this curse.

“I thought perhaps something might have managed to amplify the spell,” Dumbledore continued, “as a wand does the holder’s natural magic.”

“Were you holding someone else’s wand at the time?” Morven asked. “Two powerful wands might have enough magic to carry you farther into the past.”

Harry frowned. “I fell backward into Hermione, but I don’t know if that really counts since the spell only hit me and my portkey. She just got dragged along with it.”

Morven scratched at his chin and considered the boy, “You had nothing else?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, then, we’ll have to keep looking,” the man sighed and stood. “I’ll send a few letters in the morning. I know some people who have friends in the Carpathians. There are still some pockets of old magic there that no one has managed to record yet.” He nodded to the Headmaster and placed an apologetic pat onto Harry’s shoulder. “We’ll find it. Don’t you worry.”

Harry offered the best smile he could muster, barely a twitch of his lips, before glowering down at the carpet for a long minute. “That was the spell.”

“I believe so,” Dumbledore agreed. “But I cannot begin to consider a counter-spell without first explaining how it could have been so much more powerful. The effects of the young man’s curse still clings to both of you whether you realise it or not, Harry. If I were to cast the wrong reversal spell, the results could be both painful and disastrous. In this matter, caution must come first, I’m sorry to say.”

“If it keeps me from being magically drawn and quartered, I’m all for caution, professor,” Harry said dryly.

The twinkle shone in the man’s eye as he smiled appreciatively down at the boy’s macabre humour. “Quite,” he replied. “If I may ask, Harry, Professor Morven mentioned you came to him regarding a secondary crisis.”
Harry’s dark smile fell and the sickness returned. If the Headmaster was in fact keeping watch over them then he was sure to know that Hermione was dating Remus and that Sirius had taken to him. Still, he was worried that Dumbledore would shout at him, call him any number of names he knew he deserved for letting all this happen. Sirius and Remus were not the ones to blame; they had no idea they were messing with the timeline. He and Hermione knew. This was their fault. They knew and they did nothing to stop it. “Um…” he said slowly.

“Operation Not-Prongs was a success, I take it,” Dumbledore smiled.

“What?” Harry frowned, then remembered the list Sirius had in his hands. At the top of the parchment, barely visible for all the words crammed in around it, was the title of the list: Operation Not-Prongs. He snorted, “What a stupid name.”

“Young Mr Black has actually made considerable progress in his titles. As I recall he once had one called ‘Operation What’s Weird About Remus’ and another he entitled ‘Mission Make Gillespie Cry Like a Two-Year-Old Girl with a Toothache’.” He shook his head sadly, “I do wish his friends would stop allowing him to be responsible for such things. Mr Pettigrew has far greater imagination for titles.” For the first time in over a year, Harry found himself pleasantly surprised by the old wizard. This was the Dumbledore he had known and trusted until last year. This was the Dumbledore he wished had never left him, but he supposed war could steal more than just lives. It stole the man’s better judgement along with his humour. Not yet, though. This was still a Dumbledore he could trust.

“Yes, Sirius had some success with Operation Not-Prongs,” Harry said. “He knows, sir. I didn’t tell him. Not directly.”

“He is your friend, Harry,” the man said. “I did not expect you to hold out against him for long. Mr Black can be quite persistent and persuasive. However, I would recommend sharing no more than is necessary. Mr Black is a clever young man. He will understand the need for discretion in all matters that concern you.”

Harry nodded his agreement. “I should make sure he’s not telling everyone in the dorm now. I didn’t exactly tell him the whole truth, and I don’t know if he realises how important this is.”

“Believe me, Mr Potter,” Dumbledore said, his eyes shining, “Mr Black understands just how important you are.”
Elated by his encounter with Hermione, Remus bound into his dormitory, throwing the door wide and proclaiming loudly for all the residents to hear: “My girlfriend does not want to snog her brother!”

“That isn’t something you hear every day,” Peter commented, a look of concern taking over his cherubic features. “I think I might have missed something.”

“No worries,” Remus grinned. “All a misunderstanding, but it boils down to Sirius being an idiot and a jealous one at that.”

Peter snorted while Remus sharpened his tongue for the verbal brawl that was sure to follow such a blatant smear to Sirius’s carefully maintained persona of absolute cool. He waited, but nothing came. The smile dropped off his face when Sirius made no reply, defence or rebuttal. He looked over at the silent Animagus and saw the normally boisterous young man crumpled on his bed, staring unseeing at his Operation Not-Prongs parchment. He had not heard a single word Remus had said.

He prodded the despondent boy in the arm. “Problems, Mr Padfoot?”

“More than you’ll ever know,” he muttered.

“Cheer up,” Remus ordered. “Hermione doesn’t fancy Harry. I’m certain he doesn’t fancy her. Whatever you overheard is complete bollocks. He’s still all yours.”

Sirius didn’t look up from his parchment, but this time Remus was certain that his friend had heard him. His response was so far from anything he had expected, however, that he recoiled as the pained laugh forced its way from the boy’s throat, grating on his ears and heart. “All mine. Hardly,” Sirius spat and tore the list in half.

“Oi! We worked hard on that!” Remus protested, lunging to grab the damaged list from him before he could destroy it completely.

He had no idea what Sirius was on about, but he knew that Harry and his secret were the most important extracurriculars the boy had ever taken up, more important than Quidditch or learning to ride the motorbike he had kept hidden in the Potter’s garden shed for the past two years. Sirius made no move to keep him from the list, but his face was enough to stop his attempt to take it. He looked beyond horrid, pale and gaunt with eyes so bloodshot Remus actually thought he might have been crying, something which Sirius Black would never do in a million years unless he was in actual physical pain and even then he was as likely to crack jokes just so he could claim them as tears of laughter.

“Pads?”

“Forget it, Moony,” Sirius sighed.

“I think I’m the one who’s missed something now.”

His friend just shook his head and tore the list in half again.

This was bad. The possibility that Sirius was crying was weird enough, but destroying Operation Not-Prongs? Sirius never gave up on one of his operations, especially not after putting so much
time into it. He might put it away until he had more clues, but he never just quit. Something had
happened while he was down in the common room snogging Hermione. Clearly, it wasn’t the
boy’s earlier misconception that Harry and Hermione were somehow a romantic item since Remus
had disproven that nonsense theory. It had to be something else.

He had seen Harry running from the dorms, red-faced and cursing.

“He turned you down?” Remus speculated, watching as Sirius sunk further into his pillow and his
complexion turned an off shade.

“Just forget it,” Sirius said, sounding even worse than he looked. He scrunched the bits of
parchment into a tight ball and threw them into the dustbin beside his bed.

After seeing so many impossible things in the last few minutes, Remus just had to know what all
this was about. Rejection seemed the most obvious reason for Sirius’s misery, but his reaction was
all wrong if that were true. When rejected—a rare and unusual response from any boy or girl—
Sirius’s eyes would sparkle and he would grin like a madman as he plotted a new approach. Defeat
was not Sirius’ style. ‘Defeat’ wasn’t even in his vocabulary except where it was applied to other
people.

No, he was probably still too much of a coward to admit his feelings, which left only one other
explanation: Operation Not-Prongs had been a success. Sirius knew the truth and it had been so
disappointing he wanted to forget that it ever existed.

Remus could not let that happen, not before he, too, knew the truth. Admittedly, he had been rather
distracted since winning Hermione’s affection, but he still had a lot invested in that parchment. He,
like Sirius, had put too much time and energy into the mystery that was the Grangers to abort the
mission without a damn good reason, not even if the truth was as unsatisfactory as Sirius made it
seem. He, too, would know what their secret was.

“Whatever you say, Pads,” he assured his friend, though he had absolutely no intention of
honouring his implied promise.

oOo

Harry ran. He knew there was no dire panic, but he still ran. He ran from the Headmaster’s Office
down the corridor and across the castle to the library where he hoped Hermione would be. So
much had happened in the last sixty minutes, he was not certain even that reliable constant of
Hermione in the library would hold true anymore. So much had changed. He was not sure if they
had changed for the better or not. Maybe Hermione would know.

Ignoring the hateful glare of the librarian, he ran through the stacks to the caged Restricted Section
and started calling for his fake sister. “Hermione! Hermione!”

“Why are you shouting?” she asked testily as she emerged from behind a teetering pile of books.

“What do you know about Split-Apart?” the boy questioned, barely able to speak from his race
across the castle.

Surprisingly the girl scoffed. “Romantic nonsense.”

His jaw dropped. “Didn’t sound particularly romantic to me, being torn apart.”

She just snorted again.
“But you have heard of it,” he insisted. “Dumbledore and Morven think it might have been what brought us here.”

“I don’t see how.” She shook her head, but stopped as Harry looked worriedly at her again. “Oh not again,” she sighed. “Harry, tell me exactly what you think a Split-Apart is.”

“A curse,” he said. “A nasty, horrible curse that tears someone limb from limb.”

Her reaction was more appropriate this time; her eyes widened and cheeks paled. “That’s not the Split-Apart I’ve heard of. Dumbledore thinks that’s the curse Malfoy threw?”

Harry nodded. “He said it was too weak, though, but I know that’s what it was. We’ve got to find out more. I thought for sure you would have heard of it.”

“No,” she said sadly. “I’m not even sure where to start research on something so horrid.”

“Ask a Slytherin.”

Her brow folded in on itself as she considered it. “Maybe not.”

“Huh?” he asked, a little stupidly.

“Harry, you’re in The Slug Club. Think about how many great minds have come from it. It’s the ultimate Brain Trust in the wizarding world,” she said. “There has to be some expert on Defence that owes Slughorn a favour.”

That was true. Slughorn did have a nose for sniffing out talent and collecting it for his own prestige and gain. As the months had passed and he attended his fair share of Slug Club dinners and parties, Harry had seen more and more famous faces, and more than a few infamous ones. He had counted at least five Death Eaters, though it seemed to him that they had not yet turned their admiring eye from Slughorn to Voldemort; two of them actually seemed like decent people, hard as it was to admit.

“I can ask,” Harry said slowly as he considered how to broach the subject.

“You’ll find a way to approach him,” she said, sounding confident. It was a feeling he did not share and he could only nod his reply.

“How did it go with Sirius?” she questioned.

“Ah… about that…”

“You told him?” she guessed, her voice an octave too high.

He flinched, unsure if it had been the pain to his ears or the fear of a hex that made him do it. “Not exactly. He just sort of put all the pieces together; I might have helped him along a bit.”

The girl did not groan or shout, much to his surprise. Instead she took a step back as if to look at the whole of him, examining him as she would a flobberworm in Potions to gauge its quality. “What did he say?”

“Nothing,” Harry replied, thinking back over the incident and considering his young Godfather’s reaction. “He didn’t say anything. Just sort of sat there and looked ill.”

Hermione made a noncommittal noise, which did nothing to encourage him.
“Is that bad?” he wondered aloud.

Again the girl only replied with a ‘hm’.

“Will you stop making that noise!” he growled, annoyed that she was not being more useful and opinionated. He was in a bloody awful mess and she was meant to be helping him, spouting some text or other on how to fix such convoluted relationships.

“Well, what do you want me to say?” she demanded with a huff.

“Something helpful.”

“Dumbledore will take care of it when we leave,” she said with an odd smile.

“What?”

“That was what you told me when I was worried about the consequences of dating Remus,” she reminded him, her odd smile turning decidedly smug. “You told me that he wouldn’t risk them knowing about all this after we had gone, that he would take care of it when we went home. You said, and I quote, ‘It’s not normal, but if you like him…’. So, do you like him?”

Harry blinked back his confusion. “Of course I like him, he’s my friend.”


“I don’t know.”

She groaned. “You are as stubborn as Lily, you know that? Just admit it already!”

“But I don’t know!” he said, as irritated as his fake sister. He really didn’t. He had only ever fancied girls. Well, one girl. And that hadn’t actually turned out all that well. But just because his one and only date and crush had crashed and burned did not mean he suddenly fancied other blokes. Not that there was anything wrong with blokes liking other blokes, he added hastily in his thoughts. He had just never been one of them.

“Harry, you risked arrest and death to save him. Twice. You love him.”

“Of course I love him, he’s family,” he insisted.

“You love him as family,” she sighed. “You like him as a friend. Why is it so hard to admit you fancy him, too?”

He glared at her, refusing to answer.

“Stubborn.”

He glowered down at the polished floor. It had been covered in a thick layer of dust when they first started visiting the Restricted Section in September, looking like a dim grey carpet. They had worn it away, leaving the true colour of the ancient stones visible. Just what Hermione was trying to do now with her logic, wear away the blurry line separating friend from boyfriend.

“What did you think a Split-Apart was?” he asked, keen to move the conversation away from the topic of Sirius.

She let loose a quiet laugh. “A soul mate.”
Harry took on the appearance of a boy who swallowed a lemon, but that did not keep her from talking.

“Plato wrote that humans had once been bound together, two bodies as one, until the Gods split them apart, tearing the human soul in half. Ever since, each human has walked the earth in search of their other half.”

“Romantic nonsense,” Harry grumbled.

That oddly smug smile took over her face again. “Funny thing, that hex having the same name as such an ancient idea. Plato lived and wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ; I doubt if the Split-Apart curse existed then. Maybe there’s more to it than we think… Maybe if it’s cast on someone with a portkey it will take them to their soul mate.”

“Will you shut up?”

“I will when you finally admit that you fancy Sirius.”

“Shut up,” he muttered.

“Stubborn git.”
In the darkest hour of the night, with Peter snoring loudly and Sirius muttering unintelligible curses to himself, Remus snuck across the room. He was an expert at moving covertly after so many years of planning and executing their pranks. Not even Sirius, who was obviously wide awake, knew the boy was just outside his curtain, collecting the bits of Operation Not-Prongs from the bin, where he had thrown them with disgust hours earlier.

Parchment in hand, Remus stole back to his bed, closed the curtain tight and set about reassembling their list, spell-o-taping it back together and studying it diligently as he would his notes before an exam. If Sirius’s reaction was any indication, then this was far more important than his Transfiguration final.

He took out a new sheet of parchment and began recopying the damaged list in his own style, not simply recording the odd behaviours but offering potential reasons, meticulously laying out every quirk and explanation in more detail than he put into his class notes. By morning, he had three sheets of parchment filled with every observation and potential theory. Sleep-deprived as he was, he was still able to note how often one particular explanation popped up among his notes. On their first list, he had speculated that Harry had spent far more time in the castle than he claimed, marking with stars and arrows the points that most illustrated that idea. Once again it was obvious that Harry and Hermione were far better acquainted with the school and village than two people who had only spent a few months there; the Grangers had the same knowledge of those who had studied there for years, which Remus suspected they had.

What was more, he thought he understood the previous day’s misunderstanding. He thought he knew just who the family member who fancied the boy was.

The others were just stumbling from behind their curtains as he rose from his bed, knowing smirk firmly affixed to his face. James had already cornered Harry to talk Quidditch strategy. Standing side by side, Remus had no idea how he hadn’t known sooner. He wondered how none of them knew.

Did they know now?

Sirius certainly did, judging by the sickly tinge of green touching his otherwise impassive face. He was generally flawless in his lies; that he showed any discomfort at all was testament to his thorough understanding of the situation and relationship he had fallen into. The poor sod.

“Morning,” Remus called with a hair too much enthusiasm.

Harry returned the greeting, glancing at him and frowning slightly. “Should I be worried that you’re so happy this early? What did you do?”

With a vigorous shake of his head, he insisted, “I didn’t touch her. Well, maybe a little.”

“Oi!”

“She didn’t complain; I don’t see why you would. Unless you fancy me, too,” Remus replied, batting his eyelashes coyly. “Admit it, you fancy me.”
“Oh, yeah, I spend loads of time thinking of you,” Harry snorted.

“I knew it,” he declared. “All those weeks of Sirius wooing you were all for nothing. So sad. If—”

His taunts were cut short as a book flew at his head, narrowly missing his nose before crashing into the wall. “Shut it,” Sirius snarled and stalked from the room.

“Wow, he usually gives a warning even when he is cross,” Remus commented as he watched the door swing shut behind the boy. He wasn’t sure which nerve he had hit, the flirting or the fact that it had been wasted effort. Remus had made such jokes countless times before, and Sirius had never once reacted in such a way. Normally, Sirius had a sense of humour about these things. He would grin and smirk and place a bet on how much longer it would take him to snog whoever he was after. He saw reluctant lovers as a challenge and took great pride in winning them over.

“You shouldn’t have said anything,” James muttered and slapped him on the head before turning a sheepish smile to Harry, who was standing in shocked silence. “Uh, listen, Harry, you’re probably wondering—”

“I figured it out,” he interrupted in a matter-of-fact tone that gave no indication as to whether he was displeased about learning the truth of Sirius’s attentions. “Took me a while, but I got it. He fancies me.”

“Shit,” James cursed. “Forget about all that. He’s over you. Moved on. Greener pastures and all that. Best not mention it again, yeah?”

Harry’s frown spoke to his disbelief in the lies James was telling him, but he said nothing to contradict him. “Sure,” he replied slowly.

Remus held his tongue as he waited for the boy to leave the room. It took an eternity as he kept turning and glancing back at James as if he had lost half his brain. When the boy had finally gone to the washroom, Remus pounced. “What the hell was that all about?”

“What?” James asked innocently.

“Don’t give me that look. I was with you when you invented it. It doesn’t work on me,” he warned. “What’s crawled up Sirius’s arse?”

The boy’s shoulders slumped along with his too-wide smile. “Operation Not-Prongs. Sirius and I figured it out.”

“Oh, that,” Remus waved his hand as if batting the idea away like an insect. “He’s your kid. So what?”

James gaped at him, his mouth flapping open and shut. “When? How?”

“Last night after Sirius tore the list up. I’m rather surprised we didn’t sort it all out sooner, really,” he shrugged. “So, you win the girl and have a strapping young lad of a boy. What’s that got to do with Sirius throwing shit at me?”

James snapped his fingers irritatingly close to his face, testing his vision or awareness. “Are you in there, Moony? Or have you gone daft from snogging? He is my son,” James said as if it were obvious.

“Cut that out,” he swatted the boy away.
“I will when you use that freakishly large brain of yours. Think about it: How far in the future do you think he’s from? Twenty-five years? Thirty? How old will we be then? How old will *Sirius* be? And he’s been throwing himself at Harry like an idiot.”

Remus paused, trying to imagine the *Sirius* Harry had grown up with, older, though likely no wiser, with greying hair and crow’s feet around his eyes, flirting with the boy as he was doing now. His face contorted at the thought. “What a dirty old man.”

“Precisely.”

“So he’s just giving up?” he asked. “That’s not like him, even if Harry is your kid.”

James glared at him with a steely hardness that he usually reserved only for Slytherins. “Do you think I’m going to let my kid turn into his flavour of the week?”

Remus’s eyebrow rose gradually during the long silence that followed the boy’s rhetorical question. Only two days ago his friend had been helping *Sirius* plan his attack to win Harry. It amazed him how quickly the boy’s paternal protectiveness kicked in, despite their being the same age, living as friends in the same dorm, studying as classmates and playing as teammates. It amazed him even more that he had not realised just how keen *Sirius* really was about Harry. Knowing it would be pointless to try to convince him of *Sirius’s* astonishingly noble intentions, he just raised his hands in surrender. If *Sirius* wanted to give up, that was his decision; he was, as he pointed out on multiple occasions, a big boy. Big boys were fully capable of making their own mistakes, which was precisely what Remus thought this was, a mistake.

He held his tongue for the rest of the morning, though it took monumental effort. Watching Harry and *Sirius* in the Great Hall was enough to make his teeth grind. They sat beside one another as they always did, though it was nothing like their old dynamic. *Sirius’s* refusal to look at Harry was so obvious it must have been insulting to the boy, but Harry was little better, glancing his way only briefly and through the corner of his eye.

“Strategy meeting and warm-up after breakfast,” James said in an overly loud voice, clearly trying to compensate for the other boys’ silence.

“I’m meeting Morven,” Harry protested.

The Captain levelled him with a withering glare. “This is our final game before we face Slytherin, Granger. We need to secure our lead.”

The boy snorted. “We’re ahead by over four hundred points. I could sit this game out and we’d still be ahead of Slytherin.”

“Braggart, you’ve been spending too much time with *Sirius*,” he grumbled before he bit his lip and hurried the conversation along. “What’s the meeting about?”

For once Harry did not try to lie or hide the truth behind bogus excuses. Instead he offered his young father a lopsided smile and a raised eyebrow, which left James nodding his understanding and *Sirius* fighting the lovesick sigh he was so desperate to release. Only Peter, it seemed, was lost for the precise meaning of Harry’s look; he glanced between each of their faces, searching for what in the hell they were all saying.

“What’s it about?” Peter demanded.

“Nothing,” Harry and James said together, making the boy scowl.
“Tell me!” he practically whined.

“Leave it, Wormtail,” Sirius muttered, the first words he had said since storming from their room earlier that morning; he sounded no less curt when he continued, “Come when you want. We’ve got a spare Seeker.”

“Nice to know how valuable I am to the team,” replied Harry sarcastically, raising a melodramatic hand to the imagined wound in his chest.

“Did I say anything about your worth?” Sirius snapped. “For fuck’s sakes, I just wanted you to know you could take your fucking time.” He shoved his bench away from the table, apparently not caring that he was taking three other students along with him or that he was getting rather a lot of attention for his outburst.

Jaw hanging down, Harry watched him go. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

“Nothing,” James said again. “Nothing at all. Leave him be, he’ll get over it.”

“If it’s nothing, then he’d have nothing to get over. Is this because of his fancying me?”

“No, not at all. Nothing of the sort. He’s fine, a bit wound up about the game.”

“Liar,” Harry said and stood. “Could you please sort him out before the game? I’ve already spent enough time in the hospital wing, and would rather not spend any more, thanks.”

James agreed while Remus frowned. Aside from a single week following the match against Ravenclaw, Harry had spent no more time with Madam Pomfrey than any of the Marauders, Remus and his monthly visits notwithstanding, so it seemed a rather odd comment to make. The young werewolf wondered how much time he had spent in the hospital wing before coming back in time; the number of scars littering his body certainly spoke to a rather exciting life. Watching the boy push away from the table and leave the hall, he noted the boy was neither clumsy nor accident prone. From the months he had spent with him, he knew Harry was no thrill-seeker aside from the rare and dramatic dive to catch the Snitch during the game, so he could not imagine where half the scars on the boy had come from.

“What I wouldn’t give to get some truth out of him,” he muttered and turned to James. “You best get Sirius sorted. The mood he’s in, he’s as likely to aim the Bludger at Harry as the Ravenclaws are.”

“Aren’t you going to help?” James balked. “You’re better at talking sense into him.”

He took a moment to gather his thoughts before replying, his eyes bright with mischief and his voice somewhere between thoughtful and devious. “I had a different plan in mind for dear Mr Padfoot. It’ll put a damper on your plot against Hooper, I’m afraid, Peter.”

“What? But I had it all planned out,” Peter groaned. “It was perfect.”

“The general health and welfare of the Marauders takes precedence over your sex life,” Remus reprimanded him.

“Won’t have a sex life if you lot keep getting in the way.”

“Just go apologise to the girl, Wormtail,” James ordered. “She liked you well enough before Sirius bollocksed it up.”
“And he’s bolloksing up my plan to get her back, too. Prat keeps getting in the damned way.” The boy glanced mournfully across the aisle at Tori Hooper before trudging from the hall, leaving James and Remus to coordinate.

Chapter End Notes

Random and totally unrelated question: If it's doing the (wizarding) world a favor... is murder still wrong?
In which Quidditch is played and an idea had.

I am amazed at the responses my question brought in. Thank you for your input. I shall consider your replies while writing.

Last day of school today. I'm hoping half the kids won't bother turning up because then there might be enough pizza leftover (from the pizzas I accidentally ordered for the wrong date... party was yesterday, SNAFU, what?) that I can have it for dinner before falling onto my face and sleeping for two solid days.

The game was a disaster, at least according to James. All his carefully choreographed plays might as well have been left in the changing room loos as emergency toilet paper for all the good they were doing the Gryffindor side. Despite the hour-long shouting James had given him, Sirius was doing everything in his power to stay far, far away from Harry, leaving gaping holes in their defence that the Hufflepuff Chasers easily flew through. By the end of the first hour, Gryffindor was down nearly three hundred points.

The team came together beneath their goalposts for a mid-game strategy meeting.

“We’re losing,” Fenton commented.

“No thanks to you,” Silvia scowled. “You’re meant to be guarding the posts!”

“I’m not the one who let a bloody Hufflepuff steal the Quaffle from me – five times!”

“SHUT UP, THE LOT OF YOU!” James shouted. “Fenton, stop letting them throw you. That feint on the left hoop has gotten you every time; watch out for it. Silvia, quit being an arse. You let the Quaffle get away. I know you fancy Kemper, but letting him win isn’t going to work. Marsh, Harry, the lot of you are doing fine. Keep at it.” He slapped them each on the back and shoved them away until only Sirius was left.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you?” he hissed and slapped his friend hard on the head. “Are you trying to lose this game single-handedly? Do you have any idea how many times I was nearly knocked off my broom already? How many times Harry’s nearly been hit?”

Sirius said nothing, but James could see the boy’s jaw work as he ground his teeth together. He didn’t know if that meant Sirius was intentionally letting the Bludgers near them or not. If it was on purpose, he was a git. If it was a side-effect of his attempt to distance himself from Harry, he was still a git.
“Get your head together,” James ordered.

“It’s only a game, Prongs,” Sirius replied darkly.

“Not to me. Not when there’s a half-wild Bludger sailing at my head, at my son’s head,” he said in a dangerous whisper. “If you thought I was cross when you wanted to shag him, imagine what I would do to you if you let my kid get killed before he was even born.”

Sirius met his eye defiantly but said nothing.

“Get over it. Save it for later. Shag someone else. I don’t care,” he said, slapping his friend one more time before kicking off the ground and flying up to meet Quatermain mid-pitch for the release.

As Madam Hooch threw the ball high, James easily took control of the Quaffle, slicing through the Hufflepuff defence with the assistance of a Bludger well-aimed by Marsh. It was the easiest ten points they had made all game, and it only got better. Fenton stopped letting the Hufflepuff Chasers trick him on the left hoop; Silvia let Kemper steal the Quaffle once more but she took control of her crush after that. Only Sirius failed to follow orders. He was better but far from his typical form, knocking the hell out of the Bludger and scattering the opposing team’s line; he never missed the ball, but his aim was poor and his arm nowhere near as strong as it ought to be. Despite the Beater’s deficiencies, they were gaining.

“Are we up enough for me to catch the Snitch now?” Harry shouted to him. “I think we’ve a strong enough lead on Slytherin.”

“Not yet,” James hollered back.

“I don’t know how many more times I can trick Whyte into following me,” he warned.

“Cheeky bugger! How many times have you tricked her?”

Harry shrugged and grinned.

“Give me two more goals,” he called.

“What does twenty points matter?”

“I like even numbers!” James retorted with a cheeky grin of his own.

The boy shook his head and laughed as he flew higher. James had no worries on that front, knowing Harry was keeping the Snitch within easy reach. Through two games and countless practices, Harry had proven to be the best Seeker he had ever played with or against. It was a rare day – pouring rain with gale-force wind, when Harry had a head-cold and hadn’t slept the previous night – that he ever managed to lose the tiny ball to the opposing team. Damn, if he was not the proudest parent to ever father a child. So what if his son was the exact same age as him? He was still damn proud. It was just a shame Sirius was ruining it for them all. The git.

Much as he wanted to say it was nothing to worry about, he had never seen Sirius act this way. Even when he ran away from home and came pounding on the Potters’ door at three o’clock in the morning, he hadn’t looked as horrible as he had since learning Harry’s secret. He hoped they could sort him out before the final game against Slytherin. If he played as poorly in that vital game as he was playing in this one, the cup was lost.

Harry gave him four more goals before he made a mad dive for the Snitch. Those forty points plus
the one hundred and fifty points for catching the miniscule ball gave them a lead of nearly seven hundred points over Slytherin.

The Chaser grinned as he landed on the grass. “That’s my boy,” he cried and hugged Harry without thought.

The boy froze in his arms. “You know, too?”

“Ah, bugger,” James muttered.

“Listen—“

“Don’t ruin the bloody moment, you git,” he ordered. “I’m damn proud right now and I’ll not have you saying something daft to change my mind about you.”

Harry laughed, “Yes, sir.”

He slapped the boy hard on the back before turning his grin to the rest of the team. “Brilliant! Greatest turn-around in the history of Hogwarts Quidditch! I—”

“Harry!” a jubilant voice called, cutting into what was sure to be a fantastic off-the-cuff post-game speech. James scowled at the intruder. Everyone knew that to interrupt a James Potter pep-talk was to risk being pranked in the most inconvenient and embarrassing manner possible. Sadly the culprit was not someone he was able to prank with impunity. Professor Slughorn was hurrying across the pitch toward them as fast as his girth would permit, his moustache bouncing and hands clapping eagerly. “Harry, my boy, what a brilliant show!”

“Uh, thank you, Professor,” he replied uncertainly, glancing at James.

“How many times did you lead that poor girl on? I counted four at least!”

“Well, I, uh.”

The man continued talking about the genius of the plays for several minutes, not bothering to note how uncomfortable the boy looked or that he was inching further away with each ecstatic clap of his hands; he barely took note of the rest of the team scattering as the rambling lauding continued. His stream of praise came to a stop so abrupt that James thought he might have been petrified until the man gave a startled cry. “Oh! We must have a party in your honour!”

“That really isn’t necess—,” Harry began, but paused, his face taking on a decidedly Marauder-ish appearance, eyes narrowed and smile sly. “That would be great, Professor. I’ve so been looking forward to meeting more members of The Club.”

“Wonderful idea, Harry. There are a few who I’m sure would be thrilled to meet a Seeker of your talent.”

“I know my sister, Hermione – You remember her, right, Professor? Brilliant at Potions and every other subject. Well, she was so keen to attend one of your dinners. Surely, you wouldn’t mind extending her an invitation,” he said, his face affecting wide-eyed innocence despite this clearly being a shrewd play on the man’s insatiable appetite for new talent.

Slughorn smiled widely. “Capitol idea, my boy.”

“Yes, capitol, my boy,” James muttered as the man turned and moved swiftly away, making a beeline for the Gryffindor stands and Hermione.
Harry’s cunning smile fell. He glanced over his shoulder before turning back to James, speaking in an urgent whisper despite there being no one within earshot. “Will you stop with that ‘my boy’ stuff?”

“What? You’re my boy,” he replied.

“Shut up! No one is supposed to know that. Did Sirius tell you?”

“Nah, figured it out before he did,” grinned James.

“Well, no one else finds out. Not even Remus,” Harry insisted.

“Already knows.”

“What?” he groaned. “Oh, Hermione’s going to kill me. No one else finds out.”

“Well, Wormtail—“

“No one. Not even him,” Harry said, his voice growing loud with his command. “This is not your secret to tell, and I will hex you if you tell anyone else.”

“Fine way to talk to your father,” James sniffed and crossed his arms. He refused to admit that Harry’s threat actually scared him. He had seen the boy in Defence Against the Dark Arts and knew he could deliver on such a promise.

“I said stop that,” he hissed.

“Spoilsport. So what’s the plan, then? Prank Slughorn? You hate those parties.”

“Maybe next time,” he batted the foolish thought away. “I need information and Slughorn probably has some expert in that club of his who can give it to me.”

The Chaser snorted in disbelief. “You’re from the f—Johannesburg,” he said, altering his words with Harry’s hard glare, “anything they know, you’ve probably learned already at school. The books and lessons are sure to have tonnes of new information in Johannesburg.”

“No,” Harry said, speaking at an annoyingly slow pace like he was talking to an idiot. “The books in Johannesburg don’t have this kind of information. It’s very specific and very dark. I need an expert.”

“Well, if you got here from Johannesburg, why can’t you just go back? Why do you need an expert?”

Harry sighed, his annoyance seeming to melt as he admitted the truth. “We’re stuck. Without knowing how we got here, we can’t ever go back to Johannesburg. Fun as this is, we need to get home.”

“Stuck?” James frowned. He had to admit that since learning the impossible truth, he had not bothered considering Harry or Hermione’s reasons for being so far in the past. If he had to put into words the unspoken assumption, he would have said that they had come of their own free will and were just staying for a laugh. That’s what he would have done if he had the ability to travel back in time. Go see his old man when he was sixteen and stupid.

“Someone did this to you?” he asked.

Harry nodded, a single solemn shake of his head.
“Who?”

“Can’t say.”

“Git. Well, what’s this dark information you need to find out about?”

He opened his mouth to reply then shook his head. “Later. Do you think you can get Lily to invite you to the party? It would make it easier to find what we’re looking for if there are more people asking.”

“Easy,” James replied confidently. “She loves me. Still turns poorly whenever I mention you, though. Hates herself for nearly snogging her own kid.”

Harry’s face contorted and his hand flew to his mouth. “Can we please add that to the list of things you never say again?”

James snorted. “Who are you taking to the party, then?”

“Tildy, I guess,” he said after a pause, though he did not seem certain. His brows remained knitted together long after he made his decision, as if debating whether it was the best one. James couldn’t blame him for questioning the choice; Tildy, while pretty, was often more trouble than she was worth. If Harry had a second choice, he might be better off.

“Have someone else in mind?”

“Not really,” Harry muttered, still frowning slightly. “Even if I did, she’s not here anyway.”

He launched himself at the boy, wrapping him in a hug so tight he had no hope of escaping it. “So you do have a girlfriend! Not that ginger bird you’re always on about, is it?”

“No, Ginny’s my best mate’s sister.”

“So who?”

“No one,” Harry said dully, like he had been through this discussion countless times. “Why can’t everyone just leave it alone?”

“Because you’re far too handsome to be flying solo. Who is she?”

“No one,” he said again, trying and failing to break free. “Just someone Tildy reminds me of.”

“Name!”

“Piss off.”

“What sort of name is that? Is she foreign?” he grinned and leapt clear of the boy’s grasp, running all the way to Gryffindor Tower with Harry chasing him the entire way.
“Divide and conquer.”

Lily snorted and rolled her emerald eyes. “It’s not a battle, James.”

“It is. Absolutely it is. It’s a charm offensive,” the boy insisted with a hard look that defied any of them to argue with him.

“All right, Captain,” Harry laughed. “What’s the battle plan?”

“We’re after information; it’s best to split up, spread out and access as many people as we can. Lily and I,” he paused almost imperceptibly at being able to reference her name in the same breath with his, “will take the south wall by the office door. Remus and Hermione, you take the north wall. Tildy and Harry will be in the centre. Maintaining mobility is essential. Don’t get bogged down in a conversation with any one person, do not re-engage once you have determined a person useless, and always leave an opening to escape a dead end conversation.” His hands made sweeping gestures directing each team in how to proceed through their assigned areas.

Hermione was sure that if he had a quill and parchment, he would be drawing up plans with exes and noughts to show them precisely how to move. She wanted to laugh at his fanaticism, but couldn’t bring herself to; she was pleased that he was taking this so seriously, putting as much thought into this night as he did into the detailed Quidditch plays he was so proud of.

“So what exactly are we looking for?” Tildy asked.

“An expert in hexes and curses, specifically the Split-Apart curse,” Hermione replied, looking around at each of them as they nodded their understanding. The only one she did not make eye contact with was the boy by her side, her date. She had asked Remus to come with her, to help her find an expert among the multitude of brilliant witches and wizards, but she had not told him why.

It was obvious that Remus knew something was up, but he had not asked nor had Hermione told him. In truth, she was too afraid to tell. She hadn’t meant to like him so much, and it was terrifying to think what he would say if he found out the truth. She couldn’t bear the idea of him shouting at
her for her stupidity, for allowing them to kiss. No, it was much easier to lie to him and deal with the hard reality of her actions later. Twenty years later.

“So—"

“Harry, my boy!” the jovial voice of the host called, cutting through any further plans James might have been about to make. “There you are!” The man grinned as he hurried through the crowd toward them, offering rushed greetings to his guests as they went. When he finally reached them, his grin only grew more enormous, making the ends of his moustache tickle the lobes of his ears.

“Harry, I hope you aren’t trying to hide. I have so many people to introduce you to.” Without waiting for the boy’s reply, Slughorn took hold of his arm and all but dragged him into the crowd and away from his friends. His voice carried over the chatter, deep and booming as he introduced Harry to some guest or other.

“Well, I guess Tildy will have to cover the centre on her own,” James commented, frowning at the space Harry had just occupied as if the Seeker had intentionally let the professor carry him away just to avoid the task at hand.

“No worries, I can do it,” the girl cried with a mocking salute. “You can count on me, Captain!” She smiled toothily and marched into the crowd. Hermione could not imagine the tactics she might employ to gain information. The girl would probably just charge into an existing conversation to ask outright if anyone had heard of the Split-Apart; that seemed to fit with her everyday style. Considering the number of people in attendance, so blunt an approach might be the smartest option. Hermione could only guess at how many guests were actually at the party. She had lost count of the unknown faces around fifty and couldn’t imagine trying to build a rapport and subtly inquire about hexes with each individual. Such a subtle approach would take weeks. They had only four hours.

Sobered by the magnitude of their task, Hermione looked to her date. “Best get started.”

“Divide and conquer,” Remus repeated grimly.

“Yeah,” James agreed, offering his arm to Lily and smiling stupidly when she accepted it. “To your positions.”

Hermione slid her arm around Remus’s, though the boy hadn’t offered it to her. It wasn’t a slight, she knew; the boy was simply too distracted to bother with the little niceties of being on a date; his hand was tugging at his collar, trying to pull it higher to cover as many of his scars as he could. If he could have come to the party in James’s invisibility cloak, he probably would have.

“You look fine,” she assured him.

“I look ridiculous,” he countered, smoothing the shirt he had borrowed from Sirius. It was far nicer than any of the ones he owned, fine and expensive, not a single thread out of place, but he kept running his hands across it as if he might discover some flaw and use it as an excuse to leave.

Hermione’s heart ached for him. He was a brilliant student, cleverer than half the Ravenclaws she had ever spoken to in either of the decades in which she had studies at Hogwarts. In a perfect world, he would have been attending these parties since first year, but he insisted on keeping his head down, letting his accomplishments go unnoticed and without recognition or the slightest praise. Even now he was trying to avoid being noticed, to keep people from seeing him and his scars, from determining the exact nature of their origin. It was unfair that his condition should dictate his successes in life.
She was tempted to grab his arm and haul him through the crowd directly to Slughorn, to list the boy’s accomplishments directly to the man so he could finally take notice of the boy he had ignored for the past six years, but she knew she could not. This night was not about Remus, much as it ought to have been. It was about Harry and their expert. Harry was with Slughorn now, and she knew that in the company of the host he was more likely than she was to find a great witch or wizard with knowledge of hexes.

Remus tugged her away from the crowd, positioning them in a corner half hidden behind a table of hors d’oeuvres.

“Remus,” she chided.

“Just for a minute,” he begged. “I’m not used to being near so many people.”

“There are more people in the Great Hall for dinner every night.”

“That is so not the same thing,” he protested, tugging his collar up even farther until it reached his chin and eyeing the crush from which they had just escaped. With a sigh, she pulled him down to kiss away his troubles. He was slow to respond, but she eventually coaxed him into a reply and a groan.

“Not fair,” he protested against her lips.

“I know,” she smiled. Her hands moved quickly, folding his collar back down and smoothing the wrinkles from his face and shirt. “Now we are going to go mingle. All you have to do is be yourself, because you are brilliant and will fit right in.”

The boy scoffed and offered a gesture to his scars in reply, but allowed her to pull him away from the corner toward the nearest group of people. It was a small group, just two people, which Hermione decided was just enough to get Remus’s feet wet among these clever party goers. The closer they got, the tighter his grip became on her arm, but his feet still willingly moved forward.

Just three paces to go.

Two paces.

One pace.

As Hermione opened her mouth to greet the two members of The Slug Club, her body was jerked backward and she found herself running to keep up with Remus as he retreated back to the corner.

“Honestly,” she cried and pressed at the stitch in her side. “We need to talk to someone!”

“Why?” he demanded, his insecurity brimming over into anger. “What’s so bloody important about this curse that I have to risk—that I have to do this?”

“We need to know,” she insisted gently.

“Why? Why do you need to know so badly?”

“We need to know because—,” she stopped, wondering how best to phrase it. They had been lying since they got to the seventies, but it still had not gotten any easier for Hermione, especially not when she had to lie to Remus. “Because it’s something we need to know.”

Remus repeated her response in a mocking, bitter tone before growling, “That’s not an answer.” He
opened his mouth, ready to shout something at her, but stopped as abruptly as she had, as if he remembered something important that held him back. He scowled and shook his head, but said nothing more.

“We need to know. It’s important.” She tried to sound patient and confident, but all she wanted to do was scream the truth at him, to tell him that she knew why he was scared, to tell him why they needed this information. But even if he accepted the truth without being furious at her, she knew he would never agree to help find information that would send her away. He fancied her almost as much as she did him, she was sure of it, and that affection would have him doing everything in his power to keep her here and not where she belonged.

He offered little more than a snort of derision in reply.

“If you aren’t going to help then maybe it would be best you go back to Gryffindor Tower,” she suggested, trying not to let her voice sound as strained as she felt.

“James would have my head on a pike for it,” he muttered and pushed himself away from the wall, stiffly following her to the pair they had attempted to approach moments before.

“Hello,” Hermione greeted with false brightness.

“‘Evening,” a man replied through his mouthful of biscuit.

“Charming,” the woman beside him commented. “Imelda Zabini.”

“Hermione Granger,” she said with a fixed smile. Zabini. She had to be Blaze Zabini’s mother or aunt. Pure blood and probably just as snobbish.

“Lupin,” Remus said in a tone that left little doubt that he wanted to be elsewhere. “What do you do?”

“We write for the Prophet, roving reporters for lack of a proper title. It’s—“

“So none of you know hexes. Good to know. Moving on.” He offered a sarcastic smile and pulled Hermione on toward another near cluster.

“Remus!”

“What? We need information,” he reminded her coldly, stepping close and dropping his voice low. “It’s important.”

She ignored the jibe, forcing herself to remain the voice of reason and sensibility. “We can spare time for some pleasantries. These people might be interviewing you for a job in the near future, and they will remember how wretched you behaved today.”

The laugh that pulled from him hurt to hear. “Interview? No one will interview me. I’m—never mind. Let’s get this over with.”

She could see the muscles of his jaw working hard even as he put on a smile for the group they approached. Three men all about thirty years old, if she was any judge of age at all. From the few words she overheard as she approached, she could tell that they were discussing potions and also knew each other fairly well.

“Hullo, there,” one smiled warmly, the apples of his cheeks round and rosy from the spirits in his cup.
“Hello,” Hermione greeted. “Were you discussing potions?”

“Dam was,” replied the man on his left with a grin as he gestured to the balding man who had not yet spoken to them. “We can only smile when he gets on about his latest experiment. I’m not much for potions meself. Quidditch, that’s what I know, but will he let me get one word in about a Quaffle? Not one! It’s all cauldron this and Wolfsbane that. Now I—“

“Wolfsbane?” Hermione interrupted, turning her enormous eyes to stare at the third man. “What might that be? Dam, was it?”

“Only to those who think themselves amusing,” he offered a wry look to his companions, “to everyone else I’m Damocles, pleased to meet you. Wolfsbane is my latest experiment. I’m studying the curious effects of the herb Acontium lycocotonum when used in potions. It’s poisonous, I know, especially to lycanthropes, but if you read back far enough you see the reason it got the name is not because it’s lethal. No, no! It’s called ‘wolf killer’ because it kills the wolf consciousness, if only temporarily and allows the human mind to remain in control on full moons.” His smile was broad and proud.

“Fascinating,” Hermione replied earnestly, not daring to turn her eyes to Remus. He had to be riveted, but looking at him would show him that she wanted to see his reaction to this specific expert, would show him she cared what he thought on this subject, that she knew he was a werewolf. No, she kept her eyes fixed on Damocles.

“Course it’s proving right tricky getting the dose so it doesn’t actually kill a person or werewolf; it is poisonous after all.”

“Who cares if it does kill them?” the rosy-cheeked companion griped. “Wipe them all out and be done with it, I say.”

“Right,” Hermione said with a hard smile. “We best be moving on.” She took Remus’s arm and pulled him away, though he was proving far heavier than she would have expected given the anti-lycanthropic tone the conversation had taken.

“Did you hear that?” he asked, so quietly she barely heard him.

“Yes, bigoted idiot.”

“No, not that bit. The potion bit. Someone is actually trying to find a cure.”

“That isn’t quite what I heard,” she hedged.

“No, of course not. Yeah, foolish idea.” He shook his head and pulled at his collar once more, but his eyes kept looking back to the shiny pate of Damocles. “Think he’ll find it? The balance for his potion?”

“I’m sure he will,” she replied with absolute confidence.

Remus looked at her, something undefinable flitting across his face too fast for her to read, but after it had passed all the anxiety fell away. He looked positively elated.
Grin and Bear It

Chapter Summary

In which a party is attended and a rescue is made.

Chapter Notes

My joy I feel at the likelihood of not being called for Jury Duty is being severely dampened today by back pain like whoa. Seriously, how do you throw your back out while sleeping? HOW??!!?

Harry had to fight to keep his eyes from rolling back in his head. It was about as easy as defeating a basilisk, but he managed to put a bland smile on his face as Slughorn guided him through the room. The boy did not feel like a guest of honour, more like a hostage locked in the man’s surprisingly strong grip as he was pulled along and introduced again and again as the most promising Quidditch player Hogwarts had ever seen. Each time the praise got more elaborate until Harry barely got to say ‘hullo’ and brush his fingers against the new acquaintance’s palm before he was dragged off to meet someone else.

With no time to even learn these people’s names let alone what they had done to win placement in The Slug Club, he had little hope of finding out if they knew what the Split-Apart curse did. The entire evening was beginning to look like a waste of time and effort.

Another face was shoved before him, and Harry held out his hand yet again. A woman nearing forty with bulging eyes and greying hair, who Slughorn greeted as Margery, smiled broadly and offered a greeting to them both. The professor sucked in a deep breath, but before he could begin his long-winded boast about his new find a young man stepped in front of her and took hold of the offered hand.

Harry was slightly offended by the pushiness and how rude this man was, but Slughorn looked positively elated.

“Alfie, my boy,” he cried with great enthusiasm. “Have you met Harry? Great Quidditch star…” As the man continued, Harry eyed Alfie. He certainly didn’t look like someone who ought to have such a diminutive name. He was too tall, too handsome; his features were sharp, his irises so pale a blue they seemed to disappear into the whites of his eyes, his honey brown hair pomaded back in perfect waves. He looked like an old fashioned movie star, certainly not an Alfie. That was the sort of moniker that belonged to a sticky-fingered child, not this neat young man opposite.

Harry had no intention of paying the young man much attention; he looked like he was barely out of school, hardly old enough to be an expert in anything. His eye was already off Alfie and searching the room for an older witch or wizard he might approach, but when the young man tightened his grip on Harry’s fingers, he had no choice but to notice him.

The near-translucent blue eyes fixed on Harry as if he were trying to transmit a secret signal.
“We’ve met, Professor. At the Christmas party, sir.”

“Ah, how foolish of me!” Slughorn laughed deeply.

The professor moved to take hold of Harry again and navigate him toward another guest, but he was too slow. Alfie had already wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders and pulled him free of Slughorn’s tenacious grasp. He walked deftly through a thick cluster of guest, all the while talking as if he were taking up an on-going conversation. “Now, Harry, you were telling me all about that marvellous play you had made, dodging a wild Bludger or was it a Quaffle?”

Harry could barely breathe for the panic. He hadn’t told anyone about Dobby’s mad attempt to keep him ‘safe’ second year, not even Sirius. “I don’t remember saying that.”

Alfie laughed lightly, apparently unaware of the anxiety he was causing in his companion. “It sounded like the sort of story a Quidditch star would tell. I wasn’t even at the Christmas party. Avoid these things at all cost when I can.”

“Then why…?” Harry wasn’t sure precisely what he was asking, whether he was questioning why this stranger had lied to Slughorn, why he had saved him from his grasp or why he was attending now. They all seemed appropriate questions, though most would have come across as rather rude given the favour the young man had just done him.

“I remember what it was like being Slug’s new find,” he said, letting his icy blue eyes roll. “I was made to attend a party just like this one. Four hours of my life I’m desperate to get back. My hand was so sore I wasn’t able to practice spells for a week afterward, which is ironic when you consider that I’m supposed to be the ‘most promising hex caster Hogwarts has ever seen’.” His long fingers came up in sarcastic inverted commas and he rolled his eyes again as a smile pulled at his mouth.

“Well, thanks.” Harry took a small step away, giving him space to leave and find someone else to talk to; his work was done, after all. He had saved Harry from any further attempts Slughorn might have made to parade him around the room.

Harry expected the young man to turn and walk away, but he continued to stand opposite as if he were waiting. After an awkwardly long silence, Harry realised that his rescuer wasn’t going anywhere, that he really was waiting, waiting for him to speak. He had grown accustomed to just shaking hands and moving on, and wasn’t sure where to begin. He replayed their brief conversation and his eyes grew wide with understanding and heart filled with a balloon of hope.

“Wait, did you say hex caster? What sort of hexes?”

“The usual, I suppose,” Alfie replied with a languid shrug, as if his grand talent were nothing at all. “Although, I did invent a nice little hex just for Slughorn that makes the hexee cough up slugs for about an hour. He loved it.”

“I’ve seen that one,” Harry exclaimed, remembering when Ron had attempted to use it on Malfoy second year. “Didn’t work out quite as planned. Broken wand. Shot the hex right back at him.”

The young man cringed. “Bad luck.”

“But that’s amazing. I’d never thought of anyone making up their own hexes.”

Again he shrugged. “They had to come from somewhere.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Harry paused, considering his new acquaintance and his forte. It would be too much to hope for that this young man opposite would be exactly who he needed. All his effort
went into keeping a calm façade, not bouncing on his toes or leaping at the boy with the question on his lips he so desperately wanted to ask. He needed to keep the boy talking about things that interested him long enough to bring the Split-Apart up naturally in the course of conversation. He wished it was Hermione who had discovered him. The girl was a rubbish liar, but she would have been far more suited to talking about such things with this potential treasure-trove of information. Harry was none too eager to drag the conversation out or talk about other things that held no interest to him, but he thought there might be a way to keep Alfie’s attention and perhaps gauge his depth of knowledge in hexes.

Clearing his throat delicately, he asked, “Did you ever look into resurrecting old hexes nobody bothers with anymore?”

His face offered few clues to his thoughts save a raised eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“My sister, Hermione,” he gestured vaguely to the crowd of guests, knowing she was there somewhere, “she reads a lot, and she sometimes finds hexes and spells nobody’s ever heard of. She said she found one called Vecturo.”

“The Transport Charm. Nobody bothers with it since they invented Apparition and Portkeys. How old was that book if it talked about Vecturo?” He took an hors d’oeuvre from a passing tray and popped it into his mouth as he waited for Harry to answer.

It took every ounce of self-control the Seeker possessed not to leap into the air and shout for joy. Alfie appeared to be just the person he had been searching for, the sole purpose for suffering through the previous one hundred and fifty excruciating minutes. Moreover, it seemed that the young man was settling in for a long conversation, that he actually wanted to stay with Harry and not seek out someone more elegant or advanced to speak with; he couldn’t imagine what a sixth year Quidditch player would have to offer a professional spell creator or whatever this young man did for a living, but he wasn’t about to argue.

“Old,” Harry said, trying to keep his tone even, as if this were not the most vital conversation he would ever have. “She’s got a list of spells that no one else has ever heard of. I’m not sure what she’s planning to do with it, but I suspect she’s trying to use them to make up new charms or something.” He let his voice sound sceptical, as if he didn’t believe such a thing were possible. Until a moment ago, he truly didn’t believe it was, but clearly if someone could invent a new hex, then an old one could be modified for a new purpose.

“Well, she’s going about it the right way. It’s near-impossible to make a spell from scratch without training. You’re as likely to blow yourself up as anything else. It’s best to start with one people have tried before.” His companion nodded his head, a smooth, slow motion, barely quicker than the previous nod; something about his casual, can’t-be-bothered gestures reminded him of Sirius, which made him considerably easier to talk to.

Harry paused. “Why hexes?”

“Why not hexes?” he said with a devious smile. “Everybody uses one at some point, the more potent the better. Like swear words, the stronger they are the more you mean it.”

He couldn’t help smiling before his curiosity had him asking, “So what do you do?”

“I study.”

“You study hexes? That’s a real job?”
He laughed. “No, I study here. I’m still a student.”

“Really? I’ve never seen you,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes as he gave the young man a more thorough examination. No, he had definitely never seen him before.

“Hard to look past Sirius Black, I know,” he said with something of a smile. “But I’m a seventh year. You wouldn’t see me much. I’ve seen you, though. You spend a quite a bit of time in the Restricted Section. Is that where your sister found her obscure spells?”

Harry nodded, a little put-off by the boy’s observations. How had he not noticed this young man watching him? He seemed the sort anyone would notice.

“I’d love to see what you’ve found.”

Despite his desire to play it safe and take his time getting to know this boy, who he knew nothing about and didn’t even know if he could trust, Harry found himself very willing to share the list right then and there. “I’ve go—“

“Harry!”

The boy cringed as Tildy barrelled into him, nearly knocking him into the bowl of punch that was floating nearby.

“Harry, save me! I’ve been stuck talking potions with Snape and some funny-looking little Ravenclaw for the past twenty minutes. Did I mention how much I hate potions?” She gripped his arm painfully and shook it with all her might.

The boy could only sigh. “Tildy, Alfie. Alfie, Tildy.”

“I’m his date,” Tildy offered with a toothy grin.

“It’s not a date,” Harry said for what had to have been the fiftieth time since he invited her.

Alfie laughed and patted him consolingly on the back. “I’ll see you around.”

Harry was so keen on getting his information that he nearly chased the older boy through the crush of guests. Thankfully, Tildy kept him from embarrassing himself as she took his arm in her vicelike grip and pulled him further from Alfie.

“So, I met Joshua Churlish,” she said as she led him through the room. “He’s got rubbish taste in music but works at the Ministry. Knows loads about hexes.” She offered a smile and wave to a round little man with a shock of white-blond hair and a large, black mole on his chin. After a swift introduction, Tildy had them talking as if they were old friends. Unfortunately, they were not discussing hexes.

“What are you talking about?” the girl demanded. “The Rezillos are the greatest band ever to come out of Scotland!”

“The Clutha—“

Tildy scoffed, interrupting the man’s attempt to defend his opinion. “Yeah, let’s all wear kilts and dance like Brigadoon! I’m talking about real, modern music, here, Joshua. What do you think, Harry?”

“Uh, I like the Buzzcocks,” he offered weakly, not really sure what they were on about but
knowing that he had to contribute something. It must have been the right thing to say because Tildy was practically crushing his ribcage as she hugged him. The odd little Joshua Churlish was laughing hysterically, but Harry could not bring himself to smile. It all reminded him too much of the painful summer when Tonks hugged him fiercely as she begged for his dead Godfather’s records.

“Harry?” Tildy asked, realising he was the only one not laughing.

“I’m not feeling that great. I think I’m going to head back before Slughorn finds me again,” he said, adding in a low whisper. “Get him talking about hexes.”

She nodded, her face uncharacteristically sombre. As he walked away he heard her change the subject as abruptly as Tonks did her hair colour: “So, Josh, what do you know about hexes?”

He had to smile at her absolute lack of subtlety.
From Afar

Chapter Summary

In which, once again, Harry has to have it spelled out for him. ...sigh...

Chapter Notes

I wasn't going to post another chapter so soon, but I'm so freaking overjoyed that my back and stomach issues from yesterday are gone that I had to celebrate in my own small way. I was having a legit panic attack that something was wrong, my back and stomach started hurting so bad. I was convinced my appendix had burst, my kidneys were failing... 'Is that a twinge in my shoulder? Shit, my spleen is swelling!!!' You get the idea. Panic and WebMD ought never be combined. Seriously.

Muttering and cursing as he always did when stuck researching on his own, Harry climbed the rickety wooden ladder again to carry another armful of books down from the highest shelf. Four hours he had been here, reading and climbing, reading and climbing, and he still had not found a single mention of the Split-Apart curse. He was starting to wonder where Malfoy had even learned it if no one ever bothered to record the damn thing.

‘Maybe in wizarding families, spells are passed down,’ he thought, ‘like furniture or jewellery or secret family recipes. Secret family hexes.’ His mouth turned down as he wondered if there were any special spells his father never got to share with him.

He dropped his latest collection of books onto a table, sneezing as they let fly a thick cloud of dust. A low chuckle stopped him as he batted the offending dust away. He froze, listening. He could hear the rasping whisper of students discussing notes or gossip; the enticing song of the books, the dark magic held within calling out for someone to read it; the hard thump of Madam Pince’s stamp as she set the date of return on borrowed books. He did not hear anyone laughing. Shaking his head at his own foolishness, he sat down and picked one of his books, furrowing his brow as he worked to understand the complicated spells being described.

Noises came to him as he read, the usual sounds of the library heard through the locked gate of the Restricted Section. He had been at this so long, it all sounded like the buzzing of insects to him, but a name caught his attention.

“Alfie,” someone said in a quiet voice.

Harry looked up. He could see through the bars, down a row of towering shelves to a table halfway across the library. It was piled high with books just as his own was, and the boy sitting at the table looked equally as put out, though he was looking rather annoyed at the person talking to him and not at his tomes. Alfie glared at the girl standing over him, saying something that sent her scurrying away then turning back to his studies, though not before offering the Restricted Section a brief glance.
‘So that’s how he knew I spent so much time here,’ Harry realised with a troubled frown as he pretended not to see the seventh year looking his way.

The frown remained fixed on his face as he stared unseeing down at the pages before him, wondering what it meant that Alfie noticed him. He shook his head violently, dislodging the suspicions before they could take root and taint his opinion of the boy whose help he needed. It was obvious why the older student would notice him. He and Hermione were the only ones ever locked in among the sequestered books. The thick coating of dust on every book they touched was enough to show him how rare it was for a student to be allowed access. Any passing student would see them in here and take note. Alfie was no exception.

But even as he thought it, he could feel the boy’s eyes on him. Now that Harry knew he was there, knew he was paying attention, he couldn’t keep his skin from prickling with the certainty that Alfie was watching every move he made.

“How long do you think he’s been sitting there watching us?” he asked Hermione at lunch.

She offered an odd smile. “I don’t think he’s been watching us.”

“He has!” Harry insisted, eyes huge and hands flapping with his agitation. “He can practically see the entire Restricted Section from that table. There’s no telling how much he’s seen or heard.”

James slapped him on the head. “Calm down, you git, she means he’s been watching you.”

He glared at his father before turning his sceptical eye toward Hermione. The girl nodded knowingly, the same maddening smile on her face as when she insisted Sirius fancied him. “No,” he said doubtfully.

“Yes,” they said together.

They had all but laughed in his face when he finally realised the truth of the Beater’s attentions, each one saying they had known weeks or months longer than Harry had. It really wasn’t so farfetched to think they could see more to Alfie’s interest than he could. What was it about the 1970s that had so many boys falling for him? He slumped on the bench, his spine seeming to bend under the weight of his confusion. “Why does this keep happening? No blokes fancied me back in Johannesburg. Shut up, Hermione,” he warned when the girl opened her mouth to speak, “I do not want to know if anyone fancied me back home.”

“Why not? What’s the problem?” Tildy grinned, hugging him tightly. “You are so very fanciable.”

He didn’t bother trying to push the girl away, knowing it was virtually impossible. Instead he looked around the table for support, for someone who thought this was all as strange as he did. Lily shifted away, odd touch of green still on her cheeks that only grew as Tildy continued to talk about how many people thought he was gorgeous and would go out with him. He understood why Lily still refused to speak to him or even look at him; she had been among those who liked him, who thought him attractive, who wanted to date him. Turning away before he lost his appetite, he looked instead to Sirius, but found the boy sitting halfway down the table among a crush of seventh year girls.

“Why is Sirius way down there?” he wondered aloud.

“He’s avoiding you,” Peter said bluntly.

“Why? What did I do?”
“I think you know, young man,” James said sternly. “But don’t worry, I set him right. He’ll get over it. Eventually. I hope. We’re buggered for the cup if he doesn’t.” Everyone stared at him in disbelief, not understanding how he could still be so obsessed with Quidditch when the health and happiness of his friend was at stake. “Anyway, I think you’re lucky that Alfie bloke fancies you.”

Harry blinked at him, “Huh?”

“He’s got information you need,” James said as if it were obvious.

“Huh?”

“You are so thick,” the boy groaned before speaking slowly just for Harry’s benefit. “Alfie is a master of hexes. He knows things you do not. He fancies you. You go flirt with him. He will tell you what you want to know.”

Harry stared, certain he had misheard him. “You are seriously telling me, your friend,” he paused to give the euphemism time to sink in, “to go take advantage of someone’s interest in me?”

“Sirius does it all the time,” he replied with a shrug, as if that made it a perfectly acceptable and everyday practice. “Did it with you until he realised he fancied you for real.”

“What? When?”

“Since you arrived,” James said again in that tone that implied his son was somehow mentally deficient. “Do you see him slinging his arm around anyone else? Laying down on anyone else? Nope. Just you. He wanted to know about you, and that’s how he planned to find you out. Honestly, how did I have a friend as thick as you? I’m blaming you for this, Lily.”

The girl snapped her head around, mouth hanging in indignation. “That is so not my fault. None of my friends would ever be as thick as that.”

“Then how would you explain him? He’s our friend, yours and mine,” the boy gestured to Harry. “Thick as a troll. Sirius flirting with him for months and he didn’t get it until his sister tells him.”

Lily considered him, looking her future son over for the first time without the slightest hint of illness colouring her cheeks. It made Harry’s heart glad even as she eyed him critically. “I think he’s open-minded and kind,” the girl decided. “He accepted without reciprocating so that his new friend wouldn’t feel put out. I’d happily have a friend like that.”

James buried a snort of laughter in his elbow but said nothing.

“So if you like the sort of friend I am, you wouldn’t want me flirting with Alfie, would you?” Harry asked hopefully, knowing his mum would never condone him using sexual advances against someone who was genuinely interested.

Her eyes narrowed and lips fluttered as if she were muttering a quick and silent argument with herself. After a painfully long pause, she decided, “I think the ends might justify the means.”

“What?”

“He might be the only one who can help you sort out your problem and get you back to Johannesburg,” she insisted. “I don’t know Alfie very well – okay, I don’t know him at all, stupid snob of a Slytherin – but I do know his reputation. He is the best student of charms and hexes at this school. If anyone would know a spell to help you, it would be him.”
Harry glowered at his plate. He missed the way things used to be back in Johannesburg, where boys fancied girls and no one particularly fancied him. It was so much easier not having to worry about who was watching him and what their intentions were. At least back home he knew that when someone was focused on him they meant to kill him. So simple. So easy.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

“That’s my boy!” James grinned and ruffled his hair to make it even wilder, ignoring Harry’s glare and Lily’s horrified gasp. “So, how are you going to approach him?”

“I don’t know. I don’t generally do this sort of thing.”

“Pity James threatened Sirius’s bollocks or he could give you some lessons,” Peter offered.

“You threatened his bollocks? Really?” Harry shook his head.

“He was hitting on my friend.”

“You never threatened his bollocks when he hit on me,” Remus reminded him. “You like Harry better than you like me. Admit it.” He kept his face pulled into a despondent pout but his eyes were bright with mischief. Harry sniggered, knowing his game; the prefect knew the Grangers’ secret as well as James did, knew that no one was permitted to talk about it openly with Peter around, leaving James on the spot for his draconian reaction.

James patted his head condescendingly. “I’ll threaten them next time.”

“My hero,” the boy cooed.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Honestly. Harry, just be yourself. That’s who Alfie has noticed. If you go in trying to play at being someone else, he will know you’re up to something. Especially if he’s been watching you for as long as you think he has.”

It was good advice, and he knew it. Still Harry couldn’t keep from snorting. Be himself. He had been lying since they landed themselves in 1976. Who precisely was he supposed to approach Alfie as? Even now among the people who knew his secret they were still lying, referring to his being a ‘friend’ and talking of him going to ‘Johannesburg’. He glanced down the table at Sirius and his pride of seventh years, all chatting away without a care. He could guarantee none of them had to pause to edit their words, craft a past around a glaringly obvious untruth.

Seeing his easy smile, Harry realised how much he missed Sirius.

Just as his dreams had predicted, telling the truth had lost him his friend for a second time. Somehow he thought it might have hurt less if Sirius had punched him in the gut as he did in his nightmares.

“Better go now before I lose my nerve,” he said in a hard voice that sounded little like the uncertain boy who had just asked Lily for help. He pushed himself off the bench and moved purposefully around the Ravenclaw table toward the far wall. It took him no time at all to spot Alfie; he was unmistakable.

His stomach twisted as he neared. He thought for a moment it might be because he was about to ask a bloke out on a date, but after another step closer he knew that was untrue. He didn’t particularly care who he was asking out; it was the rejection he feared. Thinking back to fourth year, he remembered how hard it was to ask Cho to the Yule Ball when she had been among a tiny group of her friends. That had been torture. This was worse. This wasn’t just something a few girls
would giggle about. This was the boy’s entire house. The image of every Slytherin of every year sneering and making jibes about him in the corridors flashed through his mind as he finally reached Alfie.

‘Dear sweet Merlin, please agree to this,’ he begged.

“Alfie,” he said with far more confidence than he felt.

“Harry,” the young man greeted. “What’s up?”

“You want to go out with me?” The words just came out, not in the speedy slur with which he had asked Cho outside the Owlery, but with calm sureness. It was so much easier to ask when he didn’t actually care about the person. Maybe he could do this after all.

He dared to add with a smile, “Next Hogsmeade weekend maybe?”
His jaw was so tight it ached, his teeth grinding painfully as he paced the common room. Waiting was always the worst part; the anticipation of what was coming, of the shouting and hexes that would inevitably end up being thrown. It had been months since he had this feeling. It didn’t pass the moment he grabbed his jacket and ran from his mother’s house. Nor had it passed when the Potters threw their door open and offered him a bed, not just for the night but forever. No, the fear of pain and punishment had gone when Charlus Potter refused Walburga Black entrance to his house, denied her claims on Sirius and sent the woman on her way without so much as raising his voice or wand. Sirius thought that had been the last time he would ever shiver with the knowledge that someone was going to rant and scream at him, but clearly he had been wrong.

As he paced and waited for Harry, he knew that the fear would always spike in him before a confrontation; it was ingrained after so many years. This feeling would never leave him.

His stomach crawled up his throat as Harry entered through the portrait hole, confident smile on his face and a swagger to his step. It made Sirius sick to see him looking so pleased with himself. Well, it made Sirius sick to see him at all if he were being completely honest. Still, he pushed himself forward.

“Harry,” he called.

The boy turned at his name, his eyebrows disappearing into his fringe when he saw who had summoned him. “You’re speaking to me now?”

“Shut up,” he all but growled. He gripped his arm and pulled him into a quiet corner. Just a few days ago he would have been eager for this private conference, would have considered leaning in to kiss the boy but now he just wanted information. “What were you doing talking to Alfie fucking Quintain?”

“That’s his last name?” Harry muttered with a frown.

“You asked him out and don’t even know his name?”

The boy’s emerald eyes narrowed as Lily’s always did when she was annoyed. “That’s what this is about? You’re cross because I asked him out?”

“No,” Sirius insisted a bit too quickly.

“What then?”

He bit back a string of curse words and the damned lovesick sigh that always tried to come out when he dared look Harry’s way. After nearly a fortnight of reminding himself who the boy really was, he still couldn’t keep himself wanting to be near him, and, when he spoke in that determined voice that Sirius remembered from the night he found the boy sitting in the moonlight, he was practically lost to that old feeling.
‘He’s going to be your Godson, you pervert,’ he reminded himself sharply. ‘You’re going to be forced to change his nappies when Prongs and Evans are out.’

“You should stay away from him. He’s dangerous.” There. He said it. He had given his warning. Now he could go back to avoiding Harry James Potter at all cost.

Harry thought otherwise apparently because he asked, “How is he dangerous?”

“What?”

“How. Is. He. Dangerous?”

Sirius glared at him as his teeth began to grind again. He had no right to take that tone, not when he knew better the whole time. Not when he could have put a stop to Sirius’s flirting from day one. The git. “He’s a Slytherin.”

“So is Regulus,” Harry replied without pause.

Sirius scowled. He was sure he had never said anything about his brother around the boy. “He’s dated half the school.”

“So have you.”

“Yeah, but he dumped them after only a couple weeks.”

“So have you.”

“He only dated them to get ahead, to get information or exam answers.”

“So have you,” he paused, raising a defiant eyebrow. “Or were you not flirting with me to get more items for your Operation Not-Prongs list?”

“Not the whole time, but that’s not the point,” he insisted weakly, his confidence faltering. He had no idea his actions would put him in the same light as Alfie *fucking* Quintain. Sure, some of the things he did were self-serving and slightly malicious, but the majority of the damage he caused was unintentional. Quintain broke hearts for sport; from the start of a relationship, he set out with the sole purpose of hurting people; everything he did was for his own amusement and gain. But, Sirius realised, he had flirted with Harry for his own gain, to find out information; he had dated that Ravenclaw boy second year and any number of others without ever intending to make anything serious of it; he had pranked people in public and humiliating ways just for a laugh.

“He,” Sirius paused, searching for something else, something obvious and tangible, something he could prove. “He’s too handsome.”

Harry breathed a laugh. “So are you.”

Harry waited, folding his arms over his chest as the desperate boy before him scoured his brain for anything else he could offer, but he had nothing. There was only one thing left Sirius could present in objection, but he didn’t dare say it. How could he live with himself if he did?

“Anything else?” Harry demanded. When Sirius said nothing, he turned and left up the stairs to their room.

“He’s not me,” he muttered quietly.

Refusing to stand alone in the dark and hear the echo of his own words mocking him, Sirius found
his way to the couch by the fire. He fell onto the threadbare cushions, burying his head under a pillow and all but screamed his inability to control his feelings or keep Harry from the boy who was too like himself.

“Cradle robbing not going well?”

His head shot up and he offered his most withering glare. Remus only smiled in reply. It was nearing the full moon; the boy’s moods were running wild, and he was clearly at his most suicidal if he was willing to make such comments aloud. Normally, Sirius would let it go or play it off with a smirk, but he couldn’t tonight.

“Would that make you the cauldron or the kettle?” he questioned baldly. “It doesn’t really matter; they’re both black.”

“Not me,” Remus declared, his smile only growing.

“And how do you figure that? Hermione came here with Harry,” he reminded his annoying friend, dropping his voice low so no one could hear. “You’re just as old as me where she’s from. If I’m robbing the cradle, then so are you.”

Sirius didn’t truly want to ruin his friend’s happiness. Hermione was the first girl to pay honest attention to him; too often girls only went out with him to get closer to his friends, which left the boy bitter and alienated a good deal of the time. He hated that the one girl who properly liked him would be leaving and travelling to a place where Remus was old enough to be her father. Still, as the boy’s smile grew so wide it threatened to split his face apart, he couldn’t help wanting to cause him at least a small amount of the ache he was feeling.

“Don’t think so,” Remus said with that lupine smile.

“Do you have some magical time travel dust up your sleeve, Messer Moony? That’s the only way I can see the two of you staying together without you being a perverted old bastard.”

The boy shook his head. As he did, the grin fell away. “You know what I am, Pads. How many of my kind live to see forty? I’m going to be lucky if I even make it to thirty-five, especially with you lot hanging around me,” he added with a wan smile. “Wherever Hermione is going, I doubt there’s an older version of me for her to go back to.”

“Moony, I–,” he stopped, completely at a loss for what to say.

Remus just swatted the words away.

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence which left Sirius forced to rethink everything he thought he knew. He cursed Harry for coming back and ruining the good life he had made for himself, for making him think about things he didn’t want to know or had flatly refused to ever consider. All these years, he had been living a joyous and relatively carefree life at Hogwarts, building a small family of his own, being the person he wasn’t permitted to be at home. Then Harry had to show up. Now he had to think about his friend’s impending death, another’s marriage, and, worst of all, just how similar he was to someone he couldn’t stand. It took Harry to make the obvious clear.

“I fucking hate Harry,” he groaned and scraped his palms down his face.

“Liar.”

Sirius ignored him. He ignored everyone, staring into the fire for hours wishing he could be consumed by the flames instead of his thoughts. When he finally tore his eyes away from the
hearth, he saw that Remus had gone. Everyone had. The common room was empty save him. The sconces had long been extinguished and the massive fireplace held little more than glowing coals, hardly capable of lighting the room let alone offering him the fiery cleansing he needed.

“Stupid,” he muttered, cursing himself for being so lost to a boy he couldn’t possibly have. He stumbled to the stairs, the fire dying completely as he climbed to his room and fell into bed.

The brief, fitful night did nothing to aid his mood the following morning. He snapped at anyone who dared speak to him and glared at everyone else. Any pretence of him being too cool to care was thrown away. He cared. Deeply, painfully, he cared. It was simply too late for it to make a difference.

The offer had been accepted and now Harry sat with their friends, discussing what he might do for his upcoming date with Alfie fucking Quintain. Even as far gone as he was, Sirius knew it wasn’t quite right for James to be helping the boy plan a romantic liaison with another bloke after so violently threatening him for flirting. He wanted to know what they were playing at, helping Harry seduce Quintain, but he knew any interjection he made would simply be brushed off as jealousy. And they were probably right for the most part, so he kept his silence as he wore his teeth down to the gums.

At Tildy’s cheeky suggestion that Harry snog the boy senseless, Sirius fled the table.

“So fucked up,” he groaned.

His feet took him without thought to the library. It was blissfully silent with all the students still breakfasting in the Great Hall, and Sirius welcomed the tranquility of the books, which sat on their shelves in companionable and non-judgemental stillness. The students free to visit the stacks first period of the day arrived slowly and with equal quietness, selecting their book and leaving with barely a whisper among them. Too often Sirius had an innate fear of silence, resulting in his insistence on filling it by any means necessary be it joke, rude song or quick and dirty prank, but now he was beginning to see what others saw in it; he was loathed to leave it, even for classes. So he didn’t. He remained in his chair, ignoring all around him until well into the afternoon.

It was some hours after lunch and Charms when someone arrived to pull him from his trance. He thought it was James judging by the strut, but it was Harry. He entered the gated Restricted Section without offering anyone in the library even a passing glance. Sirius wanted to leave, disgusted by the idea of what – or more accurately who – had put that spring into the boy’s step. Stubbornness or some masochistic desire to have his heart gouged out with a dull wooden spoon kept him rooted to his spot even when Quintain slithered into a seat at the table nearest Harry.

‘Leave,’ he told himself as he watched the two boys acknowledge each other, Harry offering a shy but flirtatious smile. He stayed.

Hiding like a coward behind an upturned book, he watched the glances and smirks, pained that they were being thrown at someone who wasn’t him. It galled him, but he refused to look away. Harry leaned against the bars of the gate, gesturing with a hooked finger to the boy who wasn’t him; Quintain obeyed the call, just as Sirius would have, leaving his seat to chat with Harry through the barrier.

‘All that time pretending not to notice me and now look at him.’ Sirius glared his envy at Quintain’s back, wishing there was something he could do to revenge his loss upon him.

Something of his old smile flashed across his face as he remembered the three dung bombs in his bag. James might have turned a new leaf in his efforts to make Old Charlie proud and to win
Evans, but Sirius was another tree all together; he still kept an emergency stock of pranking supplies on his person at all times should the opportunity arise for spur-of-the-moment mischief.

He dug deep into his bag, pulling out James’s invisibility cloak, which he had borrowed without permission after his previous attempts to prank had been derailed by James being glued to the comely Lily Evans. Next, he pulled out one of the bombs, weighing it carefully in his palm as he considered any consequences. There were none. He threw on the cloak and silently closed the distance to Quintain’s table. Setting the dung bomb to explode with maximum stench, he deposited the small brown ball into the boy’s bag and made for the door as quickly as he could. Much as he wanted to witness the boy’s reaction, he knew better than to stay. He had been caught in the blast of a dung bomb only once. Once was enough for anyone.

The bomb itself made no noise outside a hissing as the putrid liquid and stench were released, but the resulting screams were more than satisfying. From his perch on a window ledge, he watched as students fled the library in a panic, eyes watering and hands pinching noses in a vain effort to evade the smell. The smile fell from his face when neither Harry nor Quintain rushed into the corridor. Minutes passed, but neither came.

“Where—“ he stopped, heart falling like stone into his stomach.

Quintain and Harry came through the library door, laughing and hanging off one another as if they had been in on the prank. They walked, linked together, bursting into peels of hysterical laughter whenever anyone ran from them and the thick smell of dung that clung to them.

“Should have known better,” Sirius muttered numbly as he watched them go.
Perceptions

Chapter Summary

In which a date is had.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘So far so good,’ Harry told himself, as he paused to sip his drink.

It was true; he was doing a much better job on this date than he had his last one. No disturbing cherubs flew overhead, his companion did not burst into tears, and he was not a stuttering mess at a loss for what to say; he had been certain the ease of their impromptu date after the prank in the library had simply been a fluke brought on by the hilarity of the shared experience, but this was just as enjoyable. Maybe it was just because he didn’t actually have any feelings for Alfie, but this seemed no worse than when he came to Hogsmeade with any of his friends.

Admittedly, none of those trips had been dates.

Regardless of the circumstances, Harry found Alfie fine company, easy to talk to and quick to laugh. This had turned into a surprisingly fun day. He just wished they could move the conversation along. It had been nothing but talk of classes and Quidditch so far. While such matters made for easy discussion, it didn’t get him any closer to learning what he needed to know.

The boy opposite stopped speaking to drink his Butterbeer, giving Harry the chance to redirect their topic of conversation. “So have your family always been in Slytherin?”

Alfie nodded. “Since Merlin was in short trousers. We had one Hufflepuff, but no one talks about her.”

Harry had to smile. “Her name the worst insult in the family?”

“Oh yes,” the boy agreed, his voice going nasal as he impersonated some member of his family. “You are just like Great-Aunt Imogen; we should send you to the kitchens to toil with the house-elves.” He rolled his eyes as if it were something he had heard countless times in his childhood. “My mother actually followed through once. She sent me down to the kitchen dressed in a pillowcase just to make me appreciate how much better things were upstairs.” He paused when Harry didn’t laugh, “But you’re Muggle-raised, so you wouldn’t know much about house-elves.”

He shook his head. “No, I’ve met a few. My sister thinks it’s horrid how they’re treated, but most I’ve talked to can’t imagine being free.”

“We did our job well,” the boy said with no small amount of pride.

“Huh?”

“My family was the first to succeed in taming the house-elves. Others had tried, but their magic is quite strong. It was surprisingly easy, if family lore is to be believed. Only took some clever mind games.”
Harry sat back, staring in horrified wonder. “The house-elves were free once?”

The boy laughed. “They’re free now! They just don’t know it. There are no spells forcing them to work; they do it because they want to just as they always did. Like in that silly Muggle tale of yours about the shoemakers. That’s how it had been for a thousand years, elves popping in to do the work we couldn’t. Some families were better at manipulating them into doing jobs we simply didn’t want to do. My family was the best, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Harry echoed dully before he schooled his face into innocence to mask his true opinions. He couldn’t afford to offend him, and this seemed like the sort of talk that could easily lead them into an in-depth discussion of magic, the dark sort, specifically. “So if all it took was some mind games to make the elves think they had to work for a family, why did it take so long?”

Alfie turned his face toward the ceiling, eyes all but vanishing as he squinted at some spot that wasn’t there. “Early days, I suppose,” he said with a shrug. “Wizards were just more eager to exert their power back then and kept using magic to do the job. Some people only think of power in terms of brute strength.”

“Not you?”

“Not me,” he agreed, a slow smile pulling across his mouth making him look every bit the dangerous creature Sirius insisted him to be.

“Where do you think power comes from then?”

“Perception.”

“Perception?” Harry repeated, beginning to feel slightly uneasy.

“Yes, perception,” he practically purred the word. “Someone is powerful because others perceive them as being powerful. The more people believe it, the more true it becomes. The more people follow him, the more powerful he appears.”

This all sounded disturbingly like something Voldemort might have said. He supposed it was a common concept among purebloods. Really, what was purity of blood but a perception of being better? Both Harry’s parents were magical, so by rights that made his blood pure, too, but according to everyone he was just a half-blood because his mother had not come from a long and ancient line of magic. It was rubbish, but he would not alienate his companion by saying as much. Instead, he paraphrased an old adage his Aunt Petunia often quoted, “Power is in the eye of the beholder?”

“Precisely,” Alfie smiled charmingly as if he had been paid a compliment.

“Which is all well and good until someone who actually is more powerful turns up,” Harry said with a smile verging on smug.

The boy shrugged. “With enough people following, it doesn’t matter how powerful one single opponent is. But this has turned far too serious.” He paused a moment as if searching for a new subject before reaching across the table to push the fringe from Harry’s forehead. “How did you get that scar?”

“That would be another serious topic,” he hedged, more concerned with the Slytherin’s proximity and wondering how he had noticed the scar than with deciding exactly how much truth to infuse into the fiction he was about to spin.
“Go on.”

“Someone tried to curse me,” Harry began, pausing to allow Alfie’s questions to dictate the direction the story would take.

He was surprised that the other boy didn’t offer any sympathy or concern, didn’t question what curse it had been, who had performed it or why. He simply nodded his understanding, a completely opposite reaction to Sirius offering to avenge his injuries for him.

“Is that why you’re so interested in hexes and curses now?” Alfie asked.

“Kind of,” Harry agreed, all the while studying the boy opposite. He had seemed pleasant on first acquaintance, but the longer they talked the more Harry was convinced that Sirius might have a point. Even if the boy opposite wasn’t dangerous, he was certainly not the jovial saviour from Slughorn’s party; Alfie was leaning in too much, tilting his head so his best side was lit by the fire and nodding so vigorously that the thick waves of his hair fell just right across his forehead to make someone want to push them away as he had just done to Harry’s fringe. His icy blue eyes never warmed when he spoke of something he claimed to enjoy. His smile was somehow too perfect.

Perhaps it was the tone the conversation had taken, but he was beginning to distrust Alfie Quintain more than just a little, and did not want to offer up his most vital clues to getting home for fear of what the boy might do with the information. So despite having an easy opening to discuss obscure spells and mention the Split-Apart curse, Harry chose to move their discussion to something else, something that might get the other boy to open up a bit more and even the informational odds.

“Sirius came to talk to me after I asked you out.”

“I can’t imagine he had many polite things to say about me.”

“Nothing too bad.”

Alfie scoffed. “Please. I know him better than that. Did he tell you we grew up together? Of course not, why would he?” The older boy leaned even further across the table as if bringing Harry into his confidence. “We were friends once, best friends I thought. I spent more time at his house than at my own. We played together every day.”

Harry frowned. That couldn’t be right. Sirius cursed the boy every time he said his name. Friends don’t do that.

“It’s true,” he insisted. “There was a time I thought we were brothers, but by the time he got to Hogwarts thing weren’t the same.”

“What changed?”

“He did.”

“Why?”

“I suspect,” he said, shifting his chair over so he could whisper to the curious Gryffindor, “that he was jealous.”

Harry found it hard to believe Sirius would ever be jealous of anyone, perhaps in matters of having a pleasant and supportive family, but that was the only place where the tall, handsome boy might ever be considered lacking. He tried to keep the sceptical scowl off his face, but he must have
failed because Alfie was leaning closer to whisper again. “His parents made it plain to him that I was the son they had always wanted, that they found him nothing but a disappointment. I tried to talk sense into him, but he took their lack of love out on me.”

“I can see that,” Harry agreed.

It made sense, but not in the way Alfie meant it. Harry knew just how much Sirius hated his family; if this boy was everything that they wanted their son to become, then Sirius would certainly have spurned him, cut him from his life as a surgeon would a malignant tumour. Was that what Alfie Quintain was: a disease killing with smooth words and good looks? Once again Harry had to admit that Sirius was right to warn him if even half of the story was true. Anyone the tyrannical Walburga Black would approve of was not someone to be trusted.

“I’m tired of talking about this,” Alfie admitted in a quiet whisper.

“What would you rather talk about?”

“Actually, I’m tired of talking all together.” With that he closed the miniscule space between them and pressed his lips to Harry’s.

It was a shock to say the least. He had not intended to take any of their dates anywhere close to the kissing stage. Instinct had him wanting to shove the boy off and give him a hard punch to the jaw, but he managed to keep from doing anything so stupid. This boy, with his tongue teasing at his lips, had information he and Hermione needed to get home. He had to keep the ruse going. It didn’t mean he had to like being kissed by another bloke, though.

Closing his eyes helped. With nothing but his sense of touch and taste telling him what was happening, he found it no different than kissing Cho. Well, no, it was rather better than when she had manoeuvred him awkwardly under the mistletoe, considerably better actually. Still he hated the idea that it was Alfie’s lips and tongue he was enjoying.

‘Sirius hates him,’ he reminded himself.

At the thought, an image of the other boy sauntered up, confident smile on his face, shoved Alfie off and took his place at the table and on his lips. The idea that it was that smirking mouth on his spurred Harry to grasp the boy’s face, raking his fingers through his hair, as he matched his every move with alacrity.

It took some time but they finally broke apart, gasping for breath and hurriedly setting their hair to right when they realised they were still at a very public table in a very crowded pub.

“You are one hell of a fast learner,” Alfie grinned.

Harry flushed. “Are you still tired of talking?”

A smile pulled across his lips, which were still wet and swollen from their hard kiss. His icy eyes shone with the first real emotion Harry had seen since meeting him. “Ever so tired of it,” he replied, his voice growing deeper until he sighed. “But I suspect your friends don’t appreciate having to watch us.”

He jerked his head to the side, telling Harry which way he ought to turn his eyes.

Blood flooded his cheeks to see the small pride of Gryffindors he called his friends and family clustered around a table across the pub. There were so many students crushed between them that he was hoping they had not managed to witness everything that had just happened between the pair,
but seeing a red-faced Sirius being restrained in a headlock, he knew at least one of them had seen. He dropped his head onto the table with a hard ‘thud’.

“Next time we’ll go somewhere more private,” Alfie decided and patted him on the back.

“Next time?” Harry asked, his voice lost against the table.

He was sure his date hadn’t heard his words, but without warning he felt lips brushing his ear. “Do you honestly think I’d let you slip away after a kiss like that?”

Somehow the feeling of the boy’s lips and tongue on his ear made him flush deeper than their kiss, and Harry had to fight to keep from turning his face to claim the mouth that was so skilfully teasing his earlobe. Oh, Sirius was right. Alfie Quintain was dangerous.

Chapter End Notes

Fernitron007 asked a couple chapters back if Alfie was actually Alfard, as in Sirius’s uncle Alfard. I’ve yet to find a place to work his full name into the story, so I might as well tell you now that Alfie is actually a diminutive of Aelfric. If you can't be bothered to Google that, it means 'Elf Ruler'. .....see what I did there... :D
Chapter Summary

In which secrets are not spoken of.

Sirius fought against the hands restraining him, shoving them off easily. None of the Marauders could match his strength, and not even Tildy was persistent enough to continue trying to hold on to him for long. The boy was halfway across the pub before an arm was wrapped around his neck and he was pulled back.

Hermione watched with enormous eyes as her boyfriend hauled the taller, far more muscular boy back to their table. Sirius was red-faced and cursing, his fingers digging fruitlessly into Remus’s arm, while the other boy appeared to be putting forth absolutely no effort. It should have been impossible for the lean boy to drag his friend around as if he was a ragdoll, and apparently Remus knew it; he offered her a sheepish smile and opened his mouth to explain himself. Before his lips could form around a single vowel or consonant, his face paled, and he snapped his mouth shut again. Instead, he offered only a curt shake of his head in explanation. She could not understand the sadness that overtook his face. It was only there for a moment before he turned toward the door, forcing Sirius along with him.

Offering Harry and Alfie one last glance, she hurried to follow Remus.

“Let me go, you son of a bitch!” Sirius yelled. Remus just kept marching him toward the castle. “Like to see you try this tomorrow, fucking bastard! Moony, you absolute cunt, if you weren’t a fucking wer—!” His words ended abruptly in a choking gasp when the hold around his neck tightened sharply.

He rasped out his anger as his nails dug into Remus’s arm, clawing at his hand until they drew blood. Throughout the assault, Remus’s face was still impassive, but Hermione knew he had been listening, knew he felt the pain of the injuries. She knew what Sirius was about to call his friend, and she knew how someone so thin could throw around a boy with twice his muscle. She knew, but she couldn’t say.

“Moony, I think you should give him a little air,” James said.

“He’s more pleasant when he’s unconscious,” Remus commented, but let the boy go, stepping back and leaving Sirius to crumple to the snowy path.

“Remus,” Tildy said slowly, watching with fascination as her fellow Gryffindor lifted the boy onto his shoulder and continued walking without a grunt or grimace. “How are you so strong?”

It was a fair question.

It was a question Hermione ought to have asked, and Remus knew it; he held her eye for a brief moment before looking to Tildy and offering a slight shrug. “Magic.”

The girl scoffed. “Seriously, Remus, he has to weigh at least twelve stone.”

“Feels more like fifteen,” he said with a wry smile. When she only glared at him, his smile turned
innocent and tone playful. “No, really. It’s magic.”

Hermione heard none of the banter that he shared with the exuberant audiophile. She was gnawing at her lip, analysing the many subtle messages he had sent her in that fleeting glance. There had been worry, certainly, but also an apology and fear. The thing that concerned her most, however, was the suspicion. With that simple, earnest question, Tildy had unintentionally flicked on the light bulb, illuminating Hermione’s disinterest in all the things that were odd about him.

She swallowed hard, desperate to push her heart from her throat and back into her chest where it belonged.

‘What do I do?’ she asked herself as her feet took her in a nervous path around the worn rug before the fire of the common room. ‘Do I just tell him I know his secret? He’ll want to know how I know. I’ll have to tell him our secret, tell him I know him in twenty years. What if he hates me for it? What do I do?’

Before she could come to a decision regarding Remus and their respective secrets, he was standing in front of her. His face gave nothing away, giving her a moment’s hope before she remembered that he had been lying about this a lot longer than she had. She wondered for the first time just how long Remus had been a werewolf, when he had been bitten, where he had been bitten. It was unbearable, this ache of not being able to ask, to show that she cared and wanted to be a part of every bit of his life.

“Is Sirius still alive?” she asked, forcing her voice to sound light.

“Barely,” he smiled. “James is slapping him into consciousness now to give him a stern talking-to.”

Despite the anxiety pulling at her, she could not keep the smile away as she imagined him doing precisely that. “Will it do any good?”

“Doubtful. Sirius is too far gone. He’s doomed to live a life of stupidity before dying an early and painful death.”

Hermione dropped her gaze as quickly as she could, pain stabbing in her chest. Remus’s attempt at humour was far too accurate for her to be able to fake a laugh or keep her face from showing the twinge of loss. Minutes passed with Hermione staring fixedly at her feet. The clock on the mantle chimed a strident alarm, ringing out four times. It would be dark soon. The moon would be rising. Remus needed a means of escaping her company.

She cleared her throat delicately. “I really need to finish that Transfiguration essay. Do you mind if I call it a night?”

“Oh, no, that’s fine. I have to… yeah, fine.” Remus muttered, avoiding her stare as fiercely as she was avoiding his. He was ushered away by James the moment he descended the stairs, and vanished through the portrait hole without so much as a ‘goodbye’.

She stood staring at the spot where he had been standing, still wondering how best to broach the topic of his secret. Perhaps she could catch him while he was transformed. Seeing her boyfriend as a great beast of a werewolf would make it pretty hard for him to lie about it. She batted that idea away, remembering this was not her time and the werewolf had no potion reeling him back. No, this would take some thought.

“Problem?” Lily asked quietly.
“Lies.”

“Ah,” the girl said with a solemn nod. “Yes, it is getting pretty hard to come up with excuses to leave Remus alone on the full moon.”

Hermione spun around, terrified eyes larger than they had ever been. “What?”

“Oh, come on,” the girl said with a knowing smile verging on a smirk. “You can’t not know. It’s obvious to anyone with eyes and half a brain.”

“No, I know, but how do you know? Tildy went on and on after the first full moon, talking about Remus always being ill. She wasn’t in the least bit suspicious. Not even today when he lifted Sirius. I thought everyone believed…”

“Tildy doesn’t suspect anything because she’s Tildy. She’s one step up from being a Kindergartener. She takes everyone at their word, even when that word is a rubbish excuse like stomach sickness or ‘magic’,” she shook her head and fell into a chair. “I’ve known for a while now, since fourth year, I think. I tried easing him into telling me, but he’s so afraid of what people will say that he refuses to admit to anything. So I help him lie to the others. It’s a lot more believable coming from me than James or Sirius.” She shrugged.

Hermione lowered herself into the chair opposite, still staring. Lily was a constant surprise, so much brighter than she had expected, and far more observant. It was wonderful, and she wanted so very much for Harry to have known her. Well, more specifically, she wanted for Harry to have learned from her. He could be as thick as a troll sometimes.

“So you obviously know,” Lily observed. “Why not just tell him?”

“Like you said, he’s afraid. I don’t want to scare him off.”

The girl hid her face, but the laughter spilled out between her fingers. “Scare off a werewolf,” she giggled.

Hermione couldn’t keep the smile off her face. “Well, when you say it like that, it does sound ridiculous.”

As her laughter petered out, she asked, “How did you figure it out? I can’t imagine the world has become more tolerant of werewolves in twenty years. Did he tell you?”

“No. A teacher set us an essay on identifying werewolves, and I couldn’t help noticing how many of the items applied to Remus—well, Professor Lupin at the time,” she said quietly. “No one else realised what he was. I really liked Lupin and hated the idea of him being fired, so I kept it secret.”

Lily nodded, her brow folding in on itself as she considered the problem. It was a look that often crossed the redhead’s face, Hermione found. She was pleased to have that level on consideration and concern applied to her own personal issues and not just the ones that involved the girl’s future son. “Well, why not make that essay up again? Pretend Morven offered it as extra credit. He's on such special terms with Harry; Remus would easily believe he would give you further reading if you asked for it.”

“That might work,” Hermione agreed slowly, worrying her bottom lip as she sat considering the idea. Presenting the notion as research would mean Remus would not suspect she was looking up werewolves strictly to compare the creature to him. It would also remove one secret without approaching the other; she could claim it was the essay that showed her the truth and never have to mention meeting his uglier half beneath a full moon in 1994. “That might work quite well.”
Hermione did not wait for Remus to leave the hospital wing before she began borrowing books on werewolves, scattering them around the common room and pretending to read them with keen interest.

When the boy returned from his stay with Madam Pomfrey, he found her curled up on the couch by the fire, nose tucked into one of the thickest books she could find. She looked up and smiled, waving him over to sit beside her but intentionally leaving a book for him to move from the cushion. He picked it up, reading the title as he always did when presented with a new tome. What colour he had fell from his face.

“Seven Signs of the Werewolf?” he asked in a strained, tight voice.

“Hm? Oh, yes, Professor Morven said I could get some extra points if I write a paper on werewolves. There’s so much more to learn that what we covered for OWLs. It’s fascinating. There’s something about coming from a Muggle home that makes the idea of transformations seem just so incredible,” she commented, looking up at him with wonder in her eyes. “Feeling better?”

“I was,” he muttered.

“Well, sit. I know what will help.” She scooted over to press her leg against his and kissed his lips eagerly. He was slow to respond, lips barely moving and hands remaining in his own lap. Hermione urged him on, knowing that he always managed to find some store of energy just for her after the full moon, but today he was decidedly lacklustre in his reaction.

She pulled away. “Are you all right?”

“No, not at all,” Remus said, his voice hollow. “I’m going to go get some sleep.”

He rose and left without another word or kiss.

When she saw him again at breakfast, he appeared fine. Some colour had returned to his skin, though the bags under his eyes were so dark his eyes looked lost in shadow. Still, he ate with appetite and laughed with his friends. That changed when she came to sit beside him. His smile fell, and she swore he edged away from her on the bench.

“Good morning,” she said with false brightness. “Sleep well?”

“Well enough,” he said, looking away.

Knowing he wasn’t able to see it, she allowed the scowl to consume her face. Did it really just take one book to put that much worry into him? How on earth did he get through Defence lessons on werewolves?

“Remus,” she said, forcing her voice light. “I wondered if you would mind checking my essay.”

“Which one?” he asked, his suspicions clear.

“My extra credit essay.”

“Which one?” he asked again, this time with a hint of a smile.

“Morven’s.”

The smile fell away. “Uh, no, I’m sure you did fine.”
“I want to make sure it’s right,” she insisted. “Please?”

His eyes closed and Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed nervously. “Fine.”

“Thank you.” She kissed his cheek and dug the parchment from her bag, laying it beside the food he was no longer interested in. “Take your time, I have until Friday.”

“Yeah,” the boy said dully. He took up the scroll and left.

“He cross with you or something?” James asked. “Normally, he’d make us ill kissing you before leaving.”

Hermione shook her head, but she could not be certain. She was starting to think the Chaser’s observations might be right. That made three consecutive times Remus had forgone any departing affection, no kiss or promise to see her later. Her heart started beating too fast as she wondered if this idea had been a bad one, if the fear cut so deep in him that even the possibility of her suspecting his condition could have him running away. Surely not. Remus was brave and strong. Something like this could never terrify him into fleeing their relationship. Could it?

Patience, she decided, would be the best path. She would wait for him to come to her. And wait she did, anxiously, for days. It was torture, but she managed. She sat in her usual spot in the common room or in the library reading, or at least pretending to, until he finally sat quietly beside her.

The scroll landed lightly in her lap. “It was perfect, which I’m sure you already knew.”

“Can’t be too careful,” she replied.

“What are you reading now?”

Hermione glanced down at the book she had not managed to read a single word of for the past three days. “Werewolf Wiles: How to Avoid Being Ensnared by the Beast,” she read, snorting at the title.

“That does sound a bit daft,” he agreed.

“Well, what are you reading, then?” she huffed.


Hermione’s eyes flew across the cover of his book and up to his face. He was looking back at her, no smirk marring his face, but she was sure she saw triumph in his eyes. She knew how those baby blues sparkled when he was happy, and right now they were positively exploding.

He knew.

He shifted his chair closer so their legs pressed together beneath the table. His smile turned smug as she flushed. She wanted to slap him, but she was too thrilled.

He knew.

And he didn’t care.
Riven Heart

Chapter Summary

In which a realisation is had and a brain goes ‘what the huh?’

A laugh found its way through Harry’s lips when all he really wanted to do was cringe.

The past two dates with Alfie had grown progressively harder to subject himself to. The easy conversation of their initial encounter and first date had fizzled after nearly two weeks of the boy’s company. When Harry made no objections to the boy’s opinions on house-elves, Muggle-borns and Muggles, the other boy apparently took it as confirmation that he held the same opinions. Those opinions had only grown more vulgar. Alfie was proving himself to be the worst sort of Slytherin imaginable.

Harry was wondering how he or Hermione had not recognised the boy’s name from some list of infamous Death Eaters, for that’s clearly where the boy was heading in life.

Alfie finished the punchline of a joke no one in Gryffindor would have stood for, a vindictive glimmer in his eye as he laughed.

“Really, Harry,” the older boy scolded. “I made half the common room wet themselves laughing with that one. You must not be a fan of Muggle jokes. How about this one: A werewolf walked into a pub—”

“No,” Harry interrupted hastily. “My head’s just not up for jokes today. Too much reading, I think.”

Alfie nodded slowly, the glimmer in his eye shifting ever so slightly from malicious to hungry.

“You and all those books,” he said, his voice soft as a snake gliding over fallen leaves. “What I wouldn’t give to have free access to the whole of the Restricted Section. The spells you must have encountered…” He slid closer to Harry, his hand coming to rest on the boy’s knee. “The very idea gives me a little thrill.”

“Uh, yeah, loads of spells in the, uh, spellbooks,” Harry mumbled, his eyes and brain and every molecule focused on that hand. Pale skin, long fingers, veins pulsing ever so slightly with each beat of his heart, which at least proved that Alfie had a heart. He wanted nothing more than to slide out from under that hand, hex the boy within an inch of his life, force Veritaserum down his throat to make him give up the information and stop having to play these games.

That hand moved up his thigh, and Harry had to fight to keep from leaping from the seat.

That hand found its way beneath his jumper.

That hand danced across his stomach, up to his chest and down his side. It froze at the feeling of scarred skin. The fingers ghosting gingerly over it before moving back to the smooth, undamaged skin of his chest, pretending the burns weren’t there.
He said nothing, but it was clear Alfie did not like ugly things. So different from Sirius who stared with slack-jawed awe at the adventures he had survived and offered to avenge him for the abuse suffered at the hands of his cousin. No, Alfie was the worst sort of pureblood, and Harry was clearly tainted by association and experience. Still that hand played across his skin with seeming affection despite his scars, despite his Muggle family, despite his house.

‘He only dated them to get ahead, to get information or exam answers.’ Sirius’s voice whispered in his mind, warning him.

“How many of those books have you read, do you think?” the Slytherin hissed, his tongue flicking out to lick at the shell of his ear.

“Most of them,” Harry said, his voice surprisingly steady.

“Fantastic,” Alfie smiled. “Ha—"

“Merlin’s pants, get a room!” a Hufflepuff girl Harry didn’t recognise cried, covering her eyes as she hurried past their table. She was right. The library was hardly the place for Alfie to be feeling him up, but this had become ‘their spot’. Harry had shrugged the oddity off, knowing that different people were comfortable in different places; he knew Hermione and Remus spent loads of time together at the library. But with Sirius’s warning revolving around his brain, he reconsidered the idea of Alfie and his table, wondering why he always wanted to come here to sit together within sight of the metal gate of the Restricted Section.

‘He only dated them to get ahead, to get information or exam answers.’ Sirius’s warning echoed in his head. To get information. To get ahead.

Harry glanced down the stacks to the room where he and Hermione had spent most of their waking hours in the 1970s. The Restricted Section. The books. So that’s what he was after.

Turning his emerald eyes to the boy, he smiled. “Let’s get out of here. I spend too much time here as it is.”

“Oh, yeah,” Alfie said, hurrying to put a smile back on his face.

“I feel bad taking up so much of your time,” Harry said, putting an arm around Alfie as Sirius had always done to him. It felt like he was bringing the boy into his confidence, intimate but not obscene. “What would you have been doing if you weren’t with me?”

Alfie offered a slight shrug. “Nothing much.”

“Really? The best caster and inventor of new hexes at this school wouldn’t be doing anything important?”

There it was. A glow of pride took over the boy’s face at Harry’s words. “I might have been researching a spell I wanted to make use of.”

“Oh?” Harry said, pulling him closer and whispering his demand to know more.

Alfie smiled wickedly. “I heard of a spell that could tear someone apart. I wanted to see if it really existed.”

“That sounds pretty nasty,” he commented, training his voice to sound neither put off nor too eager.

This was it. This was what they needed to know.
“Like I said, they’re like swear words. The nastier they are, the more you mean it.” The rare glimmer of excitement lit in the boy’s eyes. He rarely showed such interest, so Harry knew what this spell must mean to him.

A slight frown fell onto his face as he considered what the boy had said. He had ‘heard of’ the spell, but didn’t know if it ‘really existed’. “So you don’t know the spell already?”

“Believe it or not, Harry, not every Slytherin is born with a catalogue of curses in our heads. Half my house is harmless as Hufflepuffs.”

“And the other half?” questioned Harry, unable to keep the darkness from his voice.

“Get their spells from me, obviously.” He grinned.

“I bet they do,” he forced a laugh. “So what is this spell?”

His quarry hesitated for only a moment but leaned in to whisper against Harry’s ear. “I’ve heard it called The Riven Heart or The Rent Heart. It hasn’t been used in a century or more, but people remember. Mothers still use it to frighten their children into behaving.”

“But if no one uses it, how can they know about it?” Harry muttered, more to himself than anyone. He was growing annoyed at wasting his effort of being nice to this boy; the spell sounded right but the name was all wrong, and Alfie didn’t even know what it was. He had forced himself to associate with this git for nothing.

Oblivious to his companion’s troubles, Alfie shrugged. “The great spells are never forgotten even after they fall out of fashion. Modern times hardly call for ripping enemies to shreds, but stories are shared over drinks, whispered in the dark. The idea is passed down until someone has the ambition to find it.”

“And you’ve found it,” Harry said, hoping he was right but no longer believing it.

“No. I haven’t.”

“But you’re, best hex caster—“

“At Hogwarts, I know,” he groaned as if tired of hearing the same old praise. “The professors know my talents, but they won’t let me access the books, not like you. I’ve been here seven years, Harry, and I’ve never seen anyone granted free reign over the Restricted Section. You can walk in whenever you like and read any of those books, bring back to life any of the spells people only whisper about in terror. Merlin, I would kill for that privilege.” It was the most earnest he had been to date, his eyes hungry as he looked at Harry.

Without warning the older boy shoved him against a wall. Harry thought it was an attack rooted in jealousy and anger because he had what Alfie wanted, but when the boy’s mouth closed on him he knew it was an entirely different sort of attack.

Harry had gotten used to the idea of kissing another boy. He still didn’t care for the idea of kissing Alfie, but that was easy enough to remedy with an active imagination and eyes shut tight. This kiss was harder and more desperate than any of the others they had shared. Alfie forced his mouth open and dominated it, taking everything as his own whether Harry offered it freely or not.

“The books, Harry,” he said in a ragged whisper. “Can you borrow them?”

“Yes.”
It must have been the right answer because his mouth was controlling Harry’s again.

“Any book?”

“Yes.”

He pushed him harder into the wall, pressing their hips together and making Harry’s brain stutter to a stop. With a groan he realised he wasn’t playing a role anymore. He wasn’t pretending to enjoy Alfie’s company, feigning interest or imagining someone else in his place. He had nothing to compare the feeling to. No girl had ever ground her hips against his. Sirius had never slid his hand down Harry’s trousers.

“I want one,” Alfie said, his voice hard even as his hand moved softly.

“W-what?”

“I want a book,” he whispered fiercely, sliding his hand in time with each word. Harry could barely think for the overwhelming sensation.

“Which one?” Harry groaned.

“Egilhard’s Opus. Can you find it?”

“Yes. Maybe. I can try.” He would have agreed to anything at that moment so long as he kept doing what he was doing. Merlin, he had never felt anything like it.

“Good.”

An embarrassing whine fell from his mouth when Alfie pulled away, leaving him wanting.

“We’ll finish next time,” he promised, kissing Harry softly. “When you bring me my book.”

“Book,” Harry repeated.

Alfie left him in the dark corridor, smug smile on his face and no outward signs of having been in the least bit affected by his actions. Harry, by contrast, was a rumpled mess, clothes askew, trousers suddenly far too tight. It was painful to stand, excruciating to walk, but by the time he reached Gryffindor Tower, all he really felt was humiliated.

“How was your date?” Tildy grinned. “Alfie behaving himself?”

“He stuck his hand down my trousers,” Harry said numbly.

“Remember that list of things we’re never to mention?” James said with a gag. “Can we move that one up to first spot?”

“Happily,” Lily chimed.

“He doesn’t fancy you, does he?” Hermione questioned, pink but not entirely put off. “I’d feel awful if he did.”

Harry narrowed his eyes as he considered the boy, his demands and actions to force him into compliance. “No. He just wanted me to agree to get him a book from the Restricted Section.”

“Which book?”
He flushed and his trousers grew a bit too tight as he remembered the actions attached to the words. "Egilhard’s Opus."

"Egilhard’s Opus," she repeated. "Egilhard’s Opus." She kept on repeating it like a mantra, again and again, as she dug a long scroll of parchment from her bag. Again and again as she drew a finger down one column and up the next. Again and again, she said the title. "It’s not here."

“How is that possible? We’ve read nearly every book in that place,” Harry insisted.

“We must have missed it. Why did he want it?”

“To look up a spell, the Riven Heart. It tears people apart."

Her eyes were huge as she looked up at him, not in horror but with hope. It was their spell. She knew it just as he did. And now they knew which book would tell them about it, which book would help take them home to where things made sense and no boy would ever put his hand down Harry’s trousers again.

“We’ve got to find that book,” she declared. “First thing tomorrow.”

“What about Alfie?”

Hermione considered the question before replying. “We might still need him. You said he’s good at changing spells to create new ones. We might need him to alter whatever we find in that book.”

He groaned. “If it’s exactly what we need, can I please dump him?”

“Yes, but we have to make sure first. String him along,” she ordered. “Pretend you can’t find the book.”

Harry wondered what would happen to a boy who toyed with the most promising hex caster Hogwarts had ever seen. Nothing good, he was certain. “He’s not going to like it.”

“Who can blame him?” Tildy swooned and fell into his lap. “So, did you like having his hand down your trousers?”

“Oh, shut up.”

Ignoring Lily and James’s protests to not mention that disturbing thing again, the girl grinned her incorrigible, toothy grin. “You did. I can tell.”

He felt his ears burning and was sure everyone saw them turning a dazzling crimson, but he refused to offer Tildy any further encouragement.

“I bet if you asked nicely, Sirius would do that thing I’m not supposed to mention.”

“He’d have to be in the same room as me first,” Harry replied with a snort. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go wash that filth off.”

“Have fun,” Tildy called. “Close your eyes and think of Sirius!”

“Shut it!”

He grumbled his way up to the boys’ dormitories, cursed as he threw his clothes at the floor and flushed as the water hit his skin. Alfie’s touch and Tildy’s suggestion together had him in the shower far longer than he had planned. He had never been one for fantasising; life, generally,
wasn’t kind enough to let any of his dreams come true, so he tried very hard not to wish for more. But in the warmth of the shower, with his eyes shut, he imagined a far different boy making him groan and whine.
“Oh fuck.”

Considering how often the words came out of Sirius’s mouth lately, it was surprising that Remus took any notice of them at all. The boy looked over, a bland expression taking over his face, as Sirius cursed again.

“Fuck fuckity fuck.”

“What is wrong with you?” Remus asked with a sigh.

“Harry is wrong with me!” he hissed and jabbed an angry finger down the corridor at the boy walking beside Hermione; neither had noticed the two Marauders, but they soon would. When they did Sirius would have to run, as had become his custom. Ever since witnessing his crush snog Alfie fucking Quintain in the Three Broomsticks, he had given up any shred of pride or pretence; he stopped pretending he had something to do or somewhere better to be and just fled the other boy’s presence. It was humiliating, but being near him was worse.

As the pair drew closer, Sirius ducked behind the prefect as if Harry might somehow fail to notice him behind the thinner boy.

Remus groaned at his stupidity, which was nothing new, admittedly, but Sirius felt his panic was fully justified and was about to offer a defence of his behaviour when his friend grabbed him by the arm. “Here,” Remus said and shoved him unceremoniously into the nearest classroom, closing the door behind him.

Sirius stumbled to a stop in the empty classroom, wondering why his friend felt the need to shove him quite so violently. He was all for anything that allowed him to escape the presence of Quintain’s plaything, so all Remus had to do was open the door and tell him to hide; why bother pushing him in as if he might want to avoid this room as desperately as he did Harry?

Just as the thought crossed his mind, he heard it – the sharp ‘click’ of the lock. He strained his ears and managed to hear Remus casting a spell around the door. “Oi! Moony! What’s the idea?”

“You’re going to sit there until you sort out your problem,” Harry called through the door.

“Dammit, I know what my problem is!”

“What is it?” Harry asked, his voice much quieter and much closer.

Sirius spun around.

Harry was there. In the room. With him.

“You’re my problem,” he said without meaning to.
“Yeah, I noticed. Well, I might be able to fix that,” he said, pulled up his shirtsleeve and spoke at the leather cuff on his wrist. “Lily-flower.” The boy blinked a bit stupidly and repeated the password again in a louder voice.

“You’re still here,” Sirius observed. “That’s not going to fix my problem.”

“JAMES!” Harry bellowed, pushing past Sirius to slap a hand hard against the door. “You absolute prat, stop stealing my stuff and pretending to be me! I am embarrassed to be your son! Let me out!”

“No, we’re tired of Sirius and his moods. The door is charmed to unlock when one of you apologises,” James called through the door.

“Fine, I’ll apologise. I’m—.” The words died on Sirius’s tongue. “I’m—.”

“Veritaserum won’t let you offer a false apology,” Remus told them, and Sirius was sure he heard the smug smile. “Try to sort your problems before it wears off. Peter will be furious if we upset his Hooper plans for nothing.”

“This day cannot get any worse,” Sirius groaned. Offering the door a savage kick, he stalked to the opposite end of the room and threw himself down on the floor, determined not to utter a word. He knew exactly what would come out if he spoke.

Harry must have realised what he was trying to do because he was shouting through the door, “You know, we can just sit here and refuse to speak to each other.”

“Please,” James scoffed. “Sirius can’t keep his trap shut for five minutes. Half his detentions are because he can’t keep from opening his gob!”

“Oi! I can hear you, you tosser!” Sirius called.

“Don’t hear you denying it, mate. Don’t think the potion will let you.”

“Don’t kill each other,” Remus ordered. “We’ll have the house-elves send food.”

“Gits,” Harry grumbled. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m going to sit here and pretend you’re not in the room,” Sirius said, turning his back on the boy.

A moment of silence passed during which Sirius thought for one hopeful moment that Harry would mimic his plan and remain silent. It was a good plan, one that would keep the tatters of his dignity around him and allow him to survive being so near Harry. Surely, the other boy saw the merit in it, too.

How wrong he was.

An empty ink bottle shattered to the left of his head. “I am tired of your moods and of you always hiding from me. Go fuck yourself,” the boy shouted, anger turning his mouth as foul as Sirius’s.

He could have kept his mouth shut. It wasn’t a question he was forced to answer. It was just a sentence. Imperative; derogatory, but still just a sentence. There’s was no reason to reply, except he couldn’t let Harry have the last word. James was right, he couldn’t keep from opening his stupid trap; he had to say something, and the moment he opened his mouth the potion had truth spilling from his lips: “Be thinking of you when I do it.”

His mouth fell open as he gagged on the words, nausea churning in his stomach and his throat
constricting after admitting such a terrible truth.

“You—“ Harry stammered and flushed as deep a red as his tie. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Every day of my life since you turned up.” He meant it as a joking play on his name, but the Veritaserum would not even allow puns. It only permitted absolute honest admissions, and Sirius ended up divulging more of his late night fantasies than he had ever wanted anyone to know, especially the subject of those fantasies. “Merlin pants, why are you even here?”

“I was hit with a curse that activated my portkey and brought me back in time,” Harry said. His face, unlike Sirius’s, did not fall when the truth was spoken.

“Why won’t you go home before you do any further damage?” he griped.

“Can’t. We don’t know exactly how it happened, and Dumbledore won’t risk killing us based on a near-as-we-can-get guess about which curse brought us here.”

“Git,” Sirius mumbled. He didn’t know who the slur was directed at, but in his present state of mind it was a word that applied truthfully to everyone in existence. He slumped against the wall, determined to remain silent. Enough humiliating truths had already spilled out of him, he really did not need to divulge any more, but Harry just wouldn’t leave him alone.

“Do you really do… you know… to me?”

“Fuck, yes. Dream about you every night. Dammit. Stop asking me questions!” The boy’s silence stretched out for far too long, and Sirius began to grow nervous without noise to fill his ears and head. Desperate to fill the quiet and to get back at him, he demanded, “Who do you dream about then?”

“You,” Harry said simply.

“And what am I doing in these dreams?” He couldn’t keep the satisfied smile from his face. Harry acted shocked and disturbed, but he was no better. The smile fell as Harry answered him.

“Shouting at me, abandoning me. All the same things you do during the day since you figured out who I am, so what difference does it really make if I’m awake or asleep?”

Abandon? Sirius had not abandoned him. He would protest that until the day he died. He was sick over what he had done; he couldn’t look at Harry without remembering all the times he had thrown himself at him, without imagining himself as the old man from Harry’s right time doing all the same things. It was disgusting. He was disgusting. How was it abandonment when he was protecting the boy from a pervert?

“It makes a big fucking difference to me,” Sirius cried. “Why would you dream about that?”

“Because I got Sirius killed.”

Sirius was halfway to slapping the boy on the head when he had answered. Hearing the truth, his gut wrenched. He ought to be used to the feeling by now, but this was somehow different. This was like a knife slowly twisting between his ribs, making his heart ache and stomach tighten. Harry wasn’t lying or exaggerating. He was incapable of it. They boy’s voice broke as he said it, said that Sirius was dead.

“I’m—” Sirius swallowed hard, forcing the question back into his mouth. He needed no confirmation to know that he was dead where Harry came from. It was truth. “How did it happen?”
Harry clenched his fists and eyes, trying to fight the potion, but he couldn’t hold out against it any longer than Sirius could. In a ragged, pained whisper, he let loose a story more excruciating than Sirius could have dreamed; suspicion, lies, imprisonment and death. How could one life hold so much grief? All those strange turns Harry James Granger took made sense now; that haunted look; the night terrors; the rabbit heart.

“Kreacher lied, said that Sirius was out but he was upstairs the whole time,” Harry’s face contorted into a mockery of smile as he fought to keep from crying. “We found our way into the Ministry but it was a trap. The Death Eaters were waiting. Sirius came, but—“

“Yeah, I got that. He died.”

Sirius paused, frowning.

That was wrong. He was Sirius. The same Sirius that died in Harry’s tale. He opened his mouth to correct himself, but the potion refused to let the right words come, as if they were a lie.

“That is so weird,” he muttered.

“What is?” Harry practically spat in anger, as if Sirius doubted him.

“I tried to say ‘I died’ but I can’t.” The frown deepened as he tried again. “No, it won’t let me. You try. Say that I died at the Ministry.”

“You—,” Harry’s mouth formed the words but the sound did not come. “You— He died.”

Sirius stared at him, his frown slowly turning up at the edges as realisation dawned. “I didn’t die. I’m not Sirius. Well, yes, I’m Sirius, but not your Sirius.”

Harry offered a rather wet snort. “I could have told you that. My Sirius was great. You’re a git.”

“Not what you used to say,” he sniffed indignantly. “And anyway, if you’re dreaming of your Sirius, then you must’ve loved him. So therefore you must love me.” His heart beat a little faster as he realised what he said, what the potion had allowed him to say. And suddenly he knew what he was dying to ask. He was afraid of the answer, but at least he would finally know. Closing his eyes as he took a steadying breath, he opened his mouth and let the question come. “Harry, do you fancy me?”

The reply came slowly. “I don’t know.”

His eyes flew open, and he glared at the boy opposite. “What kind of answer is that?”

“The truth, obviously,” he shot back. “I can’t say anything else right now.”

“That’s not an answer. Yes. No. A little. Those are answers.”

“Well, I don’t know. This makes no sense. None of it,” he shot to his feet, hands still clenched into fists ready to take his confusion out on whatever was closest. “I like girls. They don’t always like me back, and when they do it doesn’t always go to plan. But the point is that I like girls. Now all of a sudden you’re there laying on me and hanging all over me and I can’t stop thinking of you when I ought to have a girl in my head. Why do you have to be all… you?”

“I can’t change what I am.” He felt insulted even as he smiled. Harry thought about him. “You like girls?”
“Yes!”

“But you like me.”

“Yes,” he groaned.

“But you don’t fancy me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you fancy Alfie fucking Quintain?”

“No,” Harry said with absolute conviction.

“Then why the fuck are you snogging him?” Sirius demanded through clenched teeth. Even knowing he was a staple thought in the other boy’s head did not dull the nausea brought on by Harry dating Quintain.

“I need him to like me so I can get information. He’s not likely to help me if I’m shoving him off and breaking his jaw, now is he?”

“No,” Sirius had to agree. “Not even he’s that twisted.”

“Why do you hate him so much?”

Sickness churned again as the truth was pulled from him. “He tried to molest my brother when we were kids.”

Harry blinked at him for a painfully long moment. “I think that ought to have been part of your warning that he was dangerous, don’t you?”

“If I could prove it, it would have been.” He raked his hands through his hair, annoyed at having to talk about this when they were so close to getting to the crux of Harry’s feelings for him.

“What happened?”

Sirius sighed and decided not to fight the truth, slumping against the wall for the cold support it offered as the story he never told anyone, not even James, poured from him. “It was summer before I started Hogwarts. I was late coming home from Andromeda’s house. Alfie was already there. He always came over in those days, and after a year at school he wanted to tell me all about what to expect. I came in and saw Regulus red-faced and running from my room with his shirt in his hands, Alfie was just sitting there like nothing was wrong, but I could tell he was lying. Reg never told me what happened, was always too afraid of what other people thought, and our mother loved Alfie; he would never have said a word against him.” He smiled ruefully, “I never much cared for what people had to say, so I broke his teeth. Took me five solid punches, and I nearly broke my hand doing it, but I thought it was worth it. Mother grounded me for the rest of the summer and Alfie never came over again. Damn shame. I wanted to break a few more things for him. But that was the moment I decided I would never be like Alfie no matter what mother wanted. I would do everything I could to be exactly opposite. Fat lot of good that did, since apparently I’m as bad as he is.”

“You’re not,” Harry insisted, his anger vanished in the face of such an admission.

“Not what you said in the common room. I’m everything he is.”
“No, you’re not. I was just annoyed that you were ignoring me and trying to warn me off without a decent reason.”

“You’re right, though. I have dated half the school, never took their feelings seriously, broke their hearts and dumped them after a few weeks. I hurt people all the time with pranks just for a laugh. And, obviously, I’m handsome.” He tried to smile but just couldn’t manage it.

“That you are, but I don’t think you’re anything like Alfie. You were right; he does hurt people on purpose. You just do it by accident.”

‘Because that makes it so much better,’ he commented darkly to himself, grinding his teeth a moment before turning to face the boy. “I just hate seeing you two together. You can’t win against him. I broke his teeth trying to get back at him, but his parents just took him to a healer and he ended up with a better, brighter smile to trick people with. You can’t use him. You’ll just end up being used by him. He’s too cunning. Please stay away from him.”

Harry shook his head. “Can’t do that. I need him.”

“What for? What could he do for you that you can’t find in someone else?”

“The Split-Apart.”

“Soul mates?” Sirius questioned. “I didn’t think Quintain even knew what a soul was.”

“Don’t start,” Harry warned. “Not that old story. It’s a curse. It’s what we think sent us here, but it shouldn’t have acted the way it did. I should have been torn limb from limb, but instead I’m here. I need to know why so that I can fix this. Alfie knows. He’s made new spells, changed old ones; he can tell me what happened to make the spell drag me through time.”

“Well, maybe the spell sent you to your soul mate, by which I mean me, obviously. Are you sure you don’t fancy me?” he asked again with a smile he hadn’t worn in weeks. “I am your split-apart, after all.”

“Shut up. I don’t know if I fancy you, and that story is rubbish. It’s just a curse.”

He sighed, more than a little disappointed Harry wouldn’t even consider the idea of fancying him. “So, if you know what the curse is, Dumbledore can just—“

“He can’t explain it. Neither can Morven.”

“Well, fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you like kissing him?”

“Alfie? Better than the last girl I kissed. But I don’t like him, so no. I only get through it thinking he’s someone else.”

“Really?” Sirius grinned. “Who?”

“You, alright! I think of you.” Harry pulled at his hair, scowling and cursing himself.

Sirius knew he shouldn’t be smiling, knew he shouldn’t be enjoying the other boy’s torment quite so much, but he couldn’t help it. “So to summarise: You like girls. And me. You think about me all the time, dream about me or your Sirius every night. You think of me when kissing another
bloke. But you don’t know if you fancy me.”

“Oh, sod o—.” The words died abruptly as Sirius took his mouth.

Sirius knew from seeing him with Alfie that Harry would be a good kisser, but he hadn’t dreamed how good. He was used to pulling mews and moans from his partners with little effort, breaking from them and smirking as they struggled to keep their knees from falling out from under them or as their lips searched out his for more. Now he was the one groaning, knees weakening as Harry’s tongue swept into his mouth. He tore himself away before he embarrassed himself.

“Fancy me now?”

“Still don’t know,” Harry gasped.

“I can do better,” Sirius declared and dove in again, throwing everything he had at the boy, every trick he knew to make toes curl and to bring his partner to a near-orgasmic state. When he finally swallowed a moan, he broke away from Harry.

“Fancy me now?”

“Still don’t know,” Harry replied in a ragged whisper. “Are you just going to keep kissing me until you get the answer you want?”

“That’s my plan.”

“I think I might like this plan.”

As their lips met and they fell into a tangle on the stone floor, neither heard the ‘click’ of the lock as it released. Neither would have cared even if they had heard it.
Chapter Summary

In which a book is found.

James was positively beaming when they walked together into the common room, Sirius’s arm thrown over Harry’s shoulder as if nothing had ever driven a wedge between them. Given his threat to his best mate’s bollocks for flirting, Harry didn’t know why he was smiling quite so broadly.

“So, who caved?” he demanded.

“What?” Harry frowned.

“Which one caved and apologised first. I have five Galleons on Sirius. So who was it?”

Sirius snorted. “Prongs, you’re an absolute prat.”

“Am not,” the boy protested. “I’m pleased my two mates have sorted out their differences, and I can’t help if I am in for a small monetary gain depending on which of you gits finally stopped being obnoxious and apologised. Now who was it?”

“Wasn’t me,” Sirius smiled.

“Ah, bugger,” James groaned and started digging into his pocket. “Five Galleons to Peter. That’s just embarrassing.”

“I said it would be you,” the boy grinned, his cheeks growing even rounder and eyes sparkling as the money was held out for him to take.

“I didn’t apologise,” Harry said.

“What? But one of you had to or the door wouldn’t have unlocked.” James frowned, the crease growing ever deeper between his eyebrows as he fought to understand what had happened. His hazel eyes suddenly grew wide, and he turned to shout across the common room. “MOONY, YOU WANKER, WHAT DID YOU DO?”

He was up and across the room before the prefect even had time to hear him, prying him off Hermione and dragging him away, all the while slapping and shouting at him.

“Knew he would never have agreed to it if that was how the door unlocked,” Sirius smirked. “So you, sir, owe me a kiss.”

“The bet was for a Galleon,” Harry reminded him.

“Yeah, but I’d rather have the kiss.” He pulled the boy closer until their lips were barely touching.

“O! LIPS OFF OF HIM, BLACK!” James cried, abandoning Remus to race back across the room to them. “I told you what would happen if you tried that again.”

“It was all him,” Sirius insisted, pointing his accusations at Harry. “He was all despondent and
lonesome and I couldn’t resist, and then he said he dreamed about me at night and imagined it was me kissing him instead of Alfie fuckin—“

“AUGH!” the boy cried, shoving his fingers into his ears and shouting a rude song at the top of his sizable lungs to drown out whatever else the Beater was going to say.

“Do you mind? Some of us are trying to study!” an aggravated fifth year called. Her complaint was chorused by several more harried-looking students, all of whom, Harry knew, were being overworked in preparation for the coming OWLs.


“Nice,” Sirius grinned. “Any chance we can make that work for anybody’s voice and not just yours and Prongs’?”

“You’d have to talk to Dumbledore about that.”

They stood in silence a moment, before Harry sighed. He didn’t really want to leave the common room or Sirius. Weeks without his company and attention had left him realising just how much the boy meant to him. He still didn’t know if he fancied him, but he knew that he didn’t like not having him around. But with the mention of Dumbledore, he knew there were more important things to be done than sit around pretending to do homework just to feel that arm around his shoulder or the warm weight of the boy’s head on his thigh. “I need to go find that book Alfie was after. I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You can’t. I’m going into the Restricted Section.”

“Ah, well you see, I have this note,” Sirius said slowly as he pulled a folded up bit of parchment from his pocket. “Got it weeks ago via owl. Apparently, someone told a certain headmaster that I knew his grand secret, and said headmaster seemed to feel that I was at once both completely trustworthy and absolutely brilliant enough to offer help in the quest for the spell of spells.” He dangled the parchment in front of Harry’s face.

“Dumbledore gave you unlimited access to the Restricted Section?” he gaped at the looping handwriting. “He didn’t even give that to James or Lily.”

“In case you didn’t notice,” he smiled and slid his arm back around Harry’s shoulder, “I am fucking brilliant.”

“Apparently.”

“Now give us a kiss.”

Harry obliged, though it was barely more than a peck.

“That was disappointing,” Sirius complained but let Harry take them from the common room.

Sirius smiled his winningest smile while handing the note over to the pinch-lipped librarian. The woman was in no way charmed, but the parchment and signature it contained could not be denied. So, scowling, the woman led him to the gate of the Restricted Section, unlocking it for him as she had for Harry so many months ago. His fingers twitched as he reached out and opened the gate,
half expecting it to give him a nasty shock. It just squeaked on intentionally noisy hinges, and he followed Harry in as if this were a perfectly normal and pedestrian doorway.

“I’ve never been in here,” he admitted, his eyes touching on every book that his hands were still too nervous to approach.

Noting his apprehension, Harry laughed. “They won’t bite. Well, most of them won’t anyway.”

He was too full of awe to bother trying to joke about it. He could only offer an open-mouth nod as he walked further into the stacks. Once, ages ago, this had been a dream of his, to have free reign among the books so dangerous that they had to be caged like rabid beasts; he had sat up for hours with the others imagining the sort of spells that might be hiding in here. Of course, being who they were, it quickly descended from brilliant and complicated hexes to spells that would make any girl become a sex kitten and want to do all manner of naughty things to them.

He snorted at their stupidity, but still couldn’t help but wonder if such a spell really existed.

“Yeah, watch out for the dust, I swear there are tiny pixies or something hiding in it to make the sneezing worse,” Harry said absently, mistaking his amused snort for a sneeze.

There wasn’t much dust to sneeze at, Sirius noted. The place was immaculate, every title visible, every shelf free of even the tiniest speck. How many books must Harry and Hermione have read to make this place so clean? He remembered how the pair of Grangers would come to the Great Hall for dinner with great chunks of dust hanging from their hair and stuck to their shoulders like epaulettes. That had been months ago. He couldn’t remember them looking anything but normal for the past month.

“How many of these have you read?”

Harry frowned at all the spines stacked around them. “The better part. Hermione’s read more than me.”

“Learn anything?”

He shrugged as he pulled out some books, searching for the title Alfie had given him. “Wasn’t really what I was aiming for. We’ve been looking for spells that move people about in time or tear them to shreds. If I got caught up trying to learn stuff, I’d never have made it through a tenth of what I did,” he paused, eyes narrowing as Lily’s always did when she was giving a question serious consideration. “But I suppose some things stuck.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I now know of a lovely little charm that can turn a cat inside out for several hours. ‘Ideal for All Hallow’s Eve decorating’,” he said with the cheeky air of a joke, but Sirius suspected he was being perfectly sincere and quoting one of the surrounding books verbatim.

“Git,” he muttered, a little afraid of what else the boy might have picked up along the way. “Where haven’t you looked? If that bastard’s book isn’t on your sister’s list, it must be somewhere you haven’t been yet.”

“Next row over, top shelves,” Harry said.

Sirius went where he was directed, pulling a ladder over and climbing to stand at eye level with the unread books. There was a marked difference in the sections where the pair had searched and this one. The books were barely visible beneath a blanket of grey dust. It was a wonder Madam Pince
allowed such a thing to happen to the books she loved more dearly than anything else on this earth.

Refusing to leave the library looking as Harry or Hermione used to, Sirius took out his wand and cast a spell to blow the vermin-infested dust off the shelf and out through the bars. He couldn’t resist sending it to settle over the table where Alfie fucking Quintain sat, attention fixed hungrily on Harry; the Slytherin’s eyes twitched just before he sneezed so hard he knocked his book over and sent his hair flying into his face. It was childish, but it made Sirius smile.

Grin still fixed firmly on his face, he turned back to the shelf and studied the titles, his eyes landing quickly on the one he sought: *Egilhard’s Opus*.

Fingers itching, he grabbed the book.

Nothing.

No scream.

No alarm.

No paralysing shock.

It was just a book. Old, heavy, but just a book.

Climbing down the ladder, he scowled and brought the tome around to Harry. “Found it.”

“What are you whispering?”

“You’ll never guess who’s watching,” he replied, failing to keep the jealousy from his voice.

Harry shrugged. “He’s always watching.”

“Well, why don’t we give him something to watch? Give us a kiss.” The boy only rolled those impossibly green eyes. “What? Why not? You kissed me in front of the whole common room and your own dad. What’s Alfie fucking Quintain to that?”

“I can’t afford to lose him yet. We still might need him,” Harry explained again in that same slow meter that James brought out when he was annoyed.

“What for?” Sirius pouted. “Anything he can do, I can do. And with far more style.”

“Really?” Harry said, throwing his book back onto the shelf with rather more force than was necessary. “So you’re suddenly an expert in obscure hexes and curses?”

“No, I never said—“

“So you’ve invented a new spell?”

“Well, no, I—“

“Then maybe you’ve managed to alter an old one?”

“Okay, no, but I could if I wanted to,” he folded his arms across his chest, frowning his annoyance that Quintain was still useful and, worse, that he was better at something. He needed to repurpose a spell, create something new. Maybe he could turn Quintain’s Wretched Heart spell into something beautiful. That was sure to win him points.
While Harry began the tedious task of putting one of the shelves back into an order both his sister and Madam Pince would approve of, Sirius moved to the end of the shelf where Quintain couldn’t see him and opened *Egilhard’s Opus*. He expected it would be like being found by his wand, a halo of light would fall onto him and the wild magic would rise up and pull at his clothes like a gale. But it was still just a book. He scowled down at the heavy letters and even heavier language. It was tricky, but after a few minutes he had the Middle English translating through his head as he read. Each page was as bad as the last, spell after repugnant spell. Egilhard was clearly a dark and vindictive sort of wizard, but just as he was ready to throw the book down he came to it. *The Riven Heart.*

The spell was as disgusting as he had imagined. Anything Quintain wanted had to be abominable, but this was so much worse. The woodcut image moved slowly, showing what was meant to happen when the spell was cast correctly. It turned his stomach to think that someone had ever thought to use it on Harry, *his* Harry. What would have happened if the vile prat had succeeded? Azkaban obviously, but what would have happened to Sirius if Harry had never turned up? Another year of dating someone new every fortnight, snogging and fondling in a broom cupboard until it became the same as all the rest and he moved on. More pranks for a quick laugh. It sounded so boring now. He didn’t want that anymore, not when he had something so much more interesting, not when he had Harry with all his scars and secrets left to reveal.

His chest ached to think that this spell might help send him home, but Sirius could have one last shout. He wasn’t sure precisely what he’d do yet, but he would make sure Harry James Potter would never forget him.

“How are we going to get the book to Dumbledore without Alfie seeing?” Harry asked quietly.

“Quintain’s obsessed with you,” Sirius said, forcing the smile into place, refusing to let him see just how fraught he was. “If you distract him, I can hide it in my bag.”

Harry nodded and started to make a show of digging through a teetering pile of books, crying out and cursing when it fell on him. Sirius had enough time to stow the book in his bag before coming around the book case to help the boy up. They laughed about his stupidity as they left the library, not noticing the shadow hunting them until it had struck.

“So, how about w—.” Sirius’s words died abruptly as his lips clamped themselves together with a painful force. He hadn’t been hit by a full body petrification hex in years. He had forgotten how much they could hurt. Sirius tried to see who it was that had bound him, but couldn’t move his eyes, couldn’t turn his head.

“What did you do?” Harry demanded drawing his wand on their unseen attacker.

“I was protecting what’s mine.” The smooth voice that came in reply would have set his teeth to grinding had they not been locked together like stone.

*Alfie fucking* Quintain.
Harry laughed, trying hard to make it sound carefree and light. With all the work he had been putting in to sounding amused and interested in what Alfie was saying, he ought to be able to make his voice do whatever he wished it to, but the laugh sounded tense. “Merlin, Alfie, what do you think you’re doing sneaking around like that?”

“Well, with Sirius you can never be sure how he’ll react,” the boy said with a suave smile as he leaned his forearm against the bound Gryffindor. The grey eyes were frozen by the hex, but Harry was sure his friend was cursing and dying to throw a punch at the Slytherin. “So, have you found my book?”

“Not yet,” he replied. It wasn’t a total lie. He hadn’t found the book, Sirius had. Alfie could drown him in Veritaserum and his reply to that question would be the same.

“Pity, I was so looking forward to finishing what we started.” He slid from Sirius’s shoulder across the corridor to wrap an arm around Harry. “What is all this nonsense of drawing your wand on me? Harry, if I didn’t know any better, I’d think Sirius turned you against me.” The boy’s hand slipped under his shirt as it had the other day, playing across his skin and wilfully avoiding any damaged tissue.

Horrified at what Sirius must be thinking, Harry looked away from his friend and forced another laugh. “Hardly. It’s my natural reaction when someone sneaks up behind me.”

“Let me make it up to you,” Alfie offered and leaned in to kiss him.

For a fortnight, Harry had managed to avoid gagging on the boy’s tongue by imagining him to be Sirius. Now, having experienced the other’s mouth, he thought he would be able to endure it all the better. He was wrong. The real thing only cast the fantasy into dismal shadow and showed Harry just how much he disliked having this boy on any part of his body.

‘Don’t do anything stupid, you need him,’ he reminded himself harshly.

He managed to pry himself away after what he felt was a reasonable amount of time, feigning the enjoyment but not the embarrassment when he said, “Sirius can still see.”

“Then let him watch,” smirked Alfie, pushing Harry back against a wall and taking his mouth again. His hands gripped the front of his shirt and yanked hard, sending buttons flying and exposing his skin to the chilly air. Even with the full range of his torso free for his exploration, those hands kept to the visible skin of his chest and stomach; it seemed Alfie did not want to run the risk of there being more damage where he could not see it. It was insulting, but Harry managed to hold his tongue.

“Where were we yesterday? Do you remember?” the Slytherin questioned.

“Not too far from here,” Harry muttered. “Just round that corner.”
Alfie laughed. “No, I meant where were we? I think we were somewhere around here,” he dipped his hand down the front of Harry’s trousers. “Yes, this is where we were, although you were far more excited about it last time. I’ll have to do something about that.”

Harry bit his lip and thought of horrid things. Voldemort. Dementors. Ron in a bikini holding hands with a naked McGonagall. He fought hard to keep Alfie’s attentions from affecting him, but he could only hold out for so long. It felt like ages, though was probably only a few minutes, before his mind lost focus and his mouth released a groan of want.


“Didn’t find it,” he managed. “Just a bit more.” He didn’t know if he was asking for more time to find the desired book or begging the boy to keep up his ministrations. Regardless, the words brought a smile to Alfie’s mouth.

“I think you did find it.”

“No, didn’t find it.” Harry gasped and groaned as the boy pulled away.

“If you knew where it was, then why make me go through that?” Harry demanded, red-faced and mortified to see Sirius’s wide eyes pointing right at him.

“For Sirius, obviously. He’s always hated when I played with his things.”

Anger burned in him, for his own humiliation and for Sirius. He didn’t care if this boy might still be of value; he just wanted to hurt him, to make him suffer. “You are an absolute rat,” Harry ground out. “If I had your spell, I would be using it right now.”

“Not without a wand, you wouldn’t,” Alfie smiled and held up the holly and phoenix feather wand he had stolen while Harry was so distracted by his attentions. “And, let’s be honest, you just don’t have it in you.” He turned away, flipping almost idly through the pages of his book until he reached the back cover. He turned back to the beginning and flipped through again, a bit more eagerly, and a third time, practically tearing through the book. He turned to Harry, eyes more alive than the boy had ever seen them, nostrils wide in anger and mouth contorted by a snarl. “Where is my spell?”

“Don’t look at me,” Harry said. “Maybe it was never in that book. You said yourself you’ve only ever heard of it. Who said it was even in there to start with?”

The book dropped to the floor with a dull ‘thud’, and Alfie stepped over it as if it were a bit of parchment left in the hall, just another piece of worthless garbage. His hand gripped Harry’s throat and wand came to rest between his eyes. “I know it was in there. You will give it to me.”

“I can’t give you what I don’t have.”

“You’ve given me plenty already,” the boy smirked and stole a kiss.

“Gerroff!” Harry cried and shoved at the boy, but Alfie was unrelenting and strong; he held his grip.

“You said someone tried to curse you once. Perhaps I ought to finish the job. Would that convince
“you?” Alfie said with a smile as he pushed the tip of his wand into the skin of his forehead. “Or are Gryffindors too courageous to give in when their own lives are threatened? Perhaps I should be working on him?” His arm whipped around, the wand in his hand coming to rest on Sirius. “How much pain would he have to be in for you to give me what’s mine?”

Harry said nothing, certain the boy wouldn’t do it.

He had underestimated him, for after a beat Alfie was shouting, “CRUCIO!”

Frozen as he was by the full body bind, Sirius showed no outward signs of being in pain, but Harry knew that beneath the magic holding him still as stone, the boy was writhing and screaming.

“Stop it!” Harry cried.

“You know what to do, Harry.”

The wand came up again. Alfie paused, looking at Harry and waiting for him to surrender the spell. But he had nothing to give. If the spell had been in the book to begin with, he was not the one who had removed it. Even if he had, he didn’t think he could willingly hand it over to the boy, not even to stop him causing Sirius pain. Alfie was one of the worst people he had ever met, manipulative and ruthless. Harry couldn’t imagine the damage he would do with a spell as horrifying as the Riven Heart. What demented alterations would he produce if he got his hands on it? Who would he use it on? How much power would he gain with it?

Power came from perception; that’s what Alfie had said. If enough people perceive something to be true it would become so. The thoughts ran through his mind. It took barely a heartbeat for him to realise how important the boy’s obsession with perception really was. Alfie cared only about appearances. He wanted the pretty things because they appeared better, and therefore made him better. He wanted the most horrifying spells because everyone said they were better, though not a single one of the people saying it had ever seen the spell or the book containing it.

Unlike Alfie, Harry had actually seen the books, read the spells; he might not look it, but he was the more powerful of the two of them. He had the knowledge. He had the skill to channel his magic through a wand he wasn’t even touching, inadvertent as that skill might be.

As the pain of the boy’s hand tightening around his throat grew worse, he remembered one of the spells Alfie so longed to get his hands on. A spell to show others for what they really are; ‘painful and perfect’, the description had read. If it worked, it would be precisely what Alfie deserved. With Alfie’s hand constricting his throat and forcing the dragon’s tooth into his neck, he felt the same prickle of magic that he had experienced just before performing a memory charm on Snape. He pulled on the same feelings and thoughts that had brought on that wandless spell, and focused them on screaming the new restricted spell in his mind.

“CRUCI—ahAHHH!” Alfie doubled over and screamed. His hands clutched at his head, and he screamed again. His screams turned into one, long wail before his voice cracked and became little more than a whimper as he crumpled to the floor, his body shaking from the pain the spell had caused.

Harry stumbled and fell against the wall, suddenly too tired to hold himself up.

“Fucking hell. That was heroic, Harry.” Sirius grinned and knelt down in front of him. “You always go throwing wandless spells at enemies?”

“No,” Harry mumbled. “Just for you. Twice now.”
“Damn heroic,” the boy repeated. “But now it’s my turn.” He hopped up and turned to the heap of Hogwarts robes sprawled on the stone floor. With a sharp kick, they knew the boy was still alive. With another kick, they knew he was conscious. “Up, Quintain!”

The boy rolled over.

“Sweet Circe, what is that thing?” Sirius shouted as he leapt away.

“Harry,” the thing croaked. “What was that, Harry?”

Sirius kept retreating as the thing crawled closer. “Quintain?”

“What did you do to me, Harry?”

“Yeah, what did you do to him?”

Harry’s mouth fell open as he stared at the thing. It couldn’t possibly be Alfie. The Slytherin was tall, handsome, his eyes bright and hair thick and wavy against his head. This thing was grotesque, hunched and rickety, arms pulled in and hands contorted with arthritic knuckles. Its eyes were cloudy beneath heavy, lumpy eyelids, and what hair it had was sparse and thin. The only thing Harry recognised was its teeth. Those two rows of shining little pearls were unmistakable. The thing was Alfie.

He stared, shocked by what the spell had done.

‘The Painful Truth’, the spell was called. Harry had found it in a book like any other behind the gate of the Restricted Section. He had glanced over it, thinking it would be a fine spell to use on Malfoy should they ever find their way home. At the time, he laughed, imagining it would turn the Slytherin into a ferret or some other low, sneaky creature, but seeing Alfie, he knew why that spell had been locked away.

“What is the meaning of this noise?” the crisp voice of their head of house called as she marched stiffly down the corridor. “People heard you clear across the castle!”

“Professor McGonagall, I—we—,” Harry stopped, not at all sure how to explain himself. He settled for pointing. “Alfie.”

The woman gave a startled cry, her hand flying to her heart as she turned to look. “Good heavens, boys, what is it?”

“It’s Alfie,” Harry said. “Alfie Quintain.”

“Impossible.”

“Fix this, Harry,” Alfie begged.

“I don’t know how,” he said truthfully.

“We must see the Headmaster at once,” McGonagall decided, then as an afterthought she asked, “Can you walk, Mr Quintain?” The boy, if he could be called such a thing anymore, took a few shuffling steps and nodded.

Dumbledore was waiting by the door to his office when they finally arrived. Harry didn’t find that particularly strange given Alfie’s slow, ungainly gate; it had taken close to an hour to reach the gargoyle that guarded the stairs to his office. Even the slowest portrait could have ambled along to
inform the old man they were coming and still had time left over to discuss Scotland’s chances for the World Cup next year.

The man’s eye held no twinkle as he ushered them in wordlessly, making a circle around Alfie once, twice, three times before he sighed. “This is much worse than I was told.”

“How can you fix it?” Harry asked, still horrified by what he’d done, even if the Slytherin did kind of deserve it.

He shook his head. “Most of the books housed in the Restricted Section have been put there for a very good reason, Harry. The spells contained in them have no counter charm. The damages caused are irreversible. What would possess you to even think to use such a spell, and, my dear boy, what have you done to your shirt?”

Harry hurried to pull the two halves of his torn shirt together, folding his arms protectively around himself. “Alfie. He kind of molested me.”

“You enjoyed it,” the thing spat in a harsh whisper. “Don’t even lie.”

“Mr Quintain, we do not behave in such a way at Hogwarts,” Professor McGonagall cried. “Fifty points from Slytherin.”

“Now is not the time for points, Minerva,” Dumbledore chided. “However, she is quite correct. Is that why you attacked him, Harry?”

“No, he was using the Crucio on Sirius, trying to make me give him a spell from the Restricted Section.”

“An Unforgivable?” McGonagall breathed, all but fainting into a chair.

Dumbledore was silent for a long moment, his bushy white brows drawn together into a single line across his forehead. Harry imagined the worst in his silence. The headmaster would order the spell cast on him as punishment, expel him into the world as a deformed monstrosity to suffer the derision of the world before finally being thrown before Voldemort and made to tell him everything that would happen in the next twenty years. No less than he deserved.

“Mr Quintain will be taken to the hospital wing, where Madam Pomfrey will do all she can until his parents come to collect him. I am sorry for your misfortune, Mr Quintain, but you cannot be permitted to remain at Hogwarts after using an illegal, Unforgivable curse on another student,” the man said, voice sombre.

“What about him?” Alfie demanded, his melodic voice reduced to guttural grunts. “He turned me into this! He gets to stay?”

The headmaster nodded. “The Painful Truth. I used the spell once on my brother when we were young, before the book had been moved to the Restricted Section. I hated him, thought him everything I wasn’t, a monster or worse. Do you know what the spell did to him?” He paused, giving them time to speculate though no one voiced their ideas. “It straightened his crooked nose.”

“That can’t be right,” Harry protested. “Look what it did to him!”

“What The Painful Truth shows is unique to each person,” Dumbledore said, walking around to place a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You could cast it on one hundred people and it would have little to no effect on most of them, but cast it on someone who is hiding a malicious mind, someone who would assault another student and use Unforgivables to get what he wants, and
you see the results. The spell can only reflect the horrors within, not dictate them. Still, you should have known better, Harry.”

“Is there really nothing you can do for him?”

“There is a chance, but I must see your wand.” He held out his hand.

“I don’t have it,” Harry admitted, pointing to Alfie. “He stole it when he was… you know…”

“Mr Quintain, is this true?” The deformed boy offered what might have been a petulant shrug but did not verbalise a response as he threw Harry’s wand at the floor. Dumbledore looked to Harry again, his pale blue eyes round behind his spectacles. “Harry, how did you cast such a powerful spell without a wand?”

The boy shifted uncomfortably as McGonagall came to stand alongside the intent headmaster, their eyes boring into him. “I—I don’t know.”

“Probably that magic, glowing necklace of yours,” Sirius chimed in from his seat in a comfortable chair.

“Let me see your necklace,” the man demanded sharply.

Harry’s hands flew to his throat, pulling at the necklaces he kept around his neck. He broke the chain that held the keys to his trunk, handing them over to the headmaster with such urgent fingers that he nearly dropped them. The leather thong was not being so cooperative. The more he pulled at it, the more it dug into his skin. “It won’t come loose; Tonks charmed the knot.”

“Ted?” Sirius questioned, sitting up a bit straighter in his chair.

“No, Nymphadora.”

The boy frowned. “She’s three.”

“Not where I’m from,” Harry reminded him, annoyance colouring his tone.

“Oh, yeah. So you know little Nymphie. What’s she like?”

“She’s like Tildy,” he said, growling when he couldn’t make the knot untie. “Is this really the time, Sirius?”

“No, I suppose not,” the boy agreed and fell silent.

Dumbledore easily removed the charm and the knot from the leather, taking it gingerly in his hands and carrying it to the candelabra by his desk. He turned the items around in his hands, examining them in the glow of the candles. His eyes twinkled, though more from the challenge than from any merriment. “This is fascinating. Harry, where did you come by this necklace?”

“It was a birthday present. From Charlie Weasley.”

“Charlie’s three,” Sirius muttered. “Spends all his time throwing clods of mud at me when I go visit Nymphie and ‘Dromeda.”

“Not where I’m from,” Harry said again. “Where I’m from he works on a dragon preserve.”

“Nice,” the boy grinned. “I know what I’m buying him for Christmas.”
“Mr Black, this is hardly the time,” Professor McGonagall chided sharply. “You will accompany Mr Quintain to the hospital wing. If you were struck by a body bind and the Cruciatus curse, Madam Pomfrey will want to examine you as well.”

The boy’s protests landed on deaf ears as the woman took hold of his arm and pulled him from the room. “We will continue this discussion later, Harry!” Sirius called as the door closed tightly.

Harry wanted to smile at his foolishness, but he was too worried. His necklace, the one he had been wearing every day and night for months, had twice managed to turn his deepest need into a reality, saving Sirius but also damning Alfie to a lifetime of deformity. Thinking about it, Harry now knew why Hermione had not remembered Quintain’s name from the list of Voldemort’s known followers. Even the Dark Lord wouldn’t want something so monstrous as a follower, no matter how many spells or hexes he knew.

Dumbledore made a sound low in his throat, bringing Harry back to the present.

“What is it, professor?” Harry asked. “Are the stones amplifiers or something?”

“Very good, Harry,” Dumbledore said with an approving nod. “But no. You are looking to the wrong part of the necklace. The stones, while doubtless meaningful, hold no magic. A dragon’s tooth is nothing, disposable and bearing no magical properties either. This cord, however…”

“It’s leather,” the boy said doubtfully, daring to prod the thick brown cord. It had been against his skin since June; he had no reason to fear it now, but couldn’t help the feeling of dread when he looked at it.

“Yes, but from what animal?”

“A cow. There are cows in Romania.” He didn’t really know that for certain, but there had to be. There were cows everywhere.

“True, but on a preserve, I think it most likely such animals would be food for the dragons, swallowed whole after being cooked in fiery breath. What skin remained would be in no condition for tanning into leather.” The man waited for him to process the words. Ever the teacher he wanted Harry to come to the right conclusion on his own.

Leather that had magical properties. Dragons were magical, but not every bit of them if their teeth held no magic. Was dragon hide magical? Their heartstrings were. Hermione’s wand had a dragon heartstring core.

“No,” Harry said. “Charlie used a dragon heartstring?”

“I would have to consult Mr Ollivander to be absolutely certain, but I would venture to say yes,” he smiled. “Harry, do you know what this means?”

“Charlie’s not as clever as everyone thinks he is.”

“Possibly, but I will try to avoid judgement until I meet him myself,” he said with a slight chuckle as a twinkle took hold in his eye. “What this means, Harry, is that we know why the Split-Apart was so much stronger than it ought to have been. The dragon heartstring of your necklace acted as a second wand, amplifying the spell. We know what happened.”

He swallowed hard as he looked up into the man’s wide and earnest smile. “We can go home?”
Heartstrings

Chapter Summary

In which pangs are felt.

Harry stumbled through the portrait hole, head still reeling from the discovery. His feet took him across the common room to the couch nearest the fire, where he slumped for several long minutes. Thoughts of their discovery flew through his head, colliding and bouncing about in a confusing swarm. This was what they wanted. This was what they had been searching for. This was the reason he had gone out with Alfie. They knew the way home. This was good.

So why did it feel like he had swallowed a stone? Why did his chest ache?

“Merlin, Harry, what happened to you?”

It took him some time to register the question and even longer to respond. When he finally blinked back his stupor, he saw James perched on the edge of the table before him, frown marring his face and worry in his eyes. The ache grew worse to see his young father so concerned. “We’re going home,” he managed in a dull voice.

The boy opposite responded far more quickly, his eyebrows rising even as his frown etched deeper into his face. “You found the book?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t what we needed. I had it on me all along,” Harry replied and relayed the events of the afternoon. He was careful to leave out the parts that might send James into a state or have him clogging his ears with his fingers. Even the edited version had the colour rising in the boy’s face.

“Wait,” James said, hand held up to signal a pause in the tale. “You got off without any punishment?”

A laugh raced from his mouth. “Of all the things you choose to care about, it’s that?”

“Well, you permanently disfigured another student. I think it’s a valid question,” he insisted. “I’ve gotten loads of detentions for stuff nowhere near as horrible at that. I’m just looking for a little justice.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, I got detentions and lost fifty points, but it was in defence of a friend. A little overkill, but justified. At least according to Dumbledore.” He frowned, wondering if the headmaster was right. Even knowing why he did it, there were plenty of other spells he could have used that were far less damaging. Alfie would likely never be seen in public again; he would be spirited from Hogwarts to St Mungo’s or to some hidden annex of his family’s home. He would be dead to the world, all his brilliance and potential locked away, as much behind his hideous visage as behind the doors concealing him.

“So you’re going home? When?” the Chaser asked lightly, apparently unaffected by the ache which filled Harry’s every breath.

“Dumbledore could probably send us there now.”
“Don’t you dare,” James said. His fingers curled into the fabric of the repaired shirt and he gave the boy a jarring shake to punctuate his every demand. “I will not be landed with some rubbish second-string Seeker fourteen days before the final match of the year. You will stay. You will play. You will win us that game. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said quickly.

“Good,” the boy said, his tone lightening in a flash. “So what are you going to do about Padfoot?”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do. He’s a hopeless case,” he replied with a mocking smile.

In truth, Harry did not know what could be done about Sirius. It was easy to rationalise what they had, to insist it was a game; they had been flirting for months but only ever kissed, and that had only happened that very morning. It wasn’t like Remus and Hermione, who had been properly together since before Christmas. But he knew the Veritaserum would not have allowed him to lie or even exaggerate when he admitted how vital the other boy was to him. Thinking about just how much he needed Sirius, the ache in his chest grew stronger.

James nodded his head slowly a few times. He said nothing, but it was clear that he was thinking something, something he did not like judging by the look on his face. When he finally stopped the deliberating movement, his face looked untainted by thoughts. “So,” he said brightly. “Are you going to miss us when we’re gone?”

“What?” Harry asked, his voice too high.

“I don’t know how old I am or what I’m like where you’re from, but I know I won’t be quite the same as I am now. Lily will have made sure I matured or something. Are you going to miss hanging out with us like this?”

The ache grew to a painful throb as he thought of leaving his parents behind. “Yeah. I’m going to miss it.”

“Damn right you will. So I say we make the most of our last few days: Pranks like you have never seen. When people remember Harry James Granger, I want them to remember the fun he brought.” The boy rubbed his hands together with a wicked gleam in his eye.

“I know that look.” Remus grinned as he dropped into a nearby chair. “Are we plotting, Messer Potter?”

“Indeed we are, Messer Lupin. Two weeks of our most ambitious pranks to send Messer Granger off with pride and fond memories.”

“Send him off? Is Messer Granger leaving?” The prefect turned his smile to Harry, where it faltered and fell. “You’re not joking, are you? You’re actually leaving. For good?”

Harry nodded.

“Hermione, too?”

Again he nodded.

“Dammit.” He kicked a table and swore a few more times for good measure. “It was taking so long I thought for sure you would be stuck here forever. The one girl who likes me for me, who doesn’t care that I’m a w—a, uh, prefect.”
“A werewolf,” Harry corrected. “You can say it. I don’t care, either.”

Harry wanted to laugh as Remus struggled to find words, as he paled to a ghastly white while his ears glowed Gryffindor scarlet. A single word found its way from his flapping mouth: “How?”

“I’m not stupid. I do have eyes,” he insisted. It was the truth. His keen eyes had seen his friend change into a terrifying creature beneath a full moon in about seventeen years’ time, but Remus didn’t need to know that.

“And you’re okay with it? With me? I mean I’m dating your sister and I’m a, well, you know,” he trailed off into an uncertain whisper.

“Werewolf,” Harry finished for him. “Yeah. Not like it’s contagious or anything. Well, it sort of is, I suppose, but if you tried to bite her she’d probably hex you into a whimpering mass of gillyweed. So, no, it’s fine.”

The boy groaned and slumped down in his chair. “So unfair. The one girl who likes me even though I’m a werewolf and who has a brother who doesn’t care either and she’s leaving. Who figured out how to send you home? I want to bite him.” Despite his despondent scowl, his friends could only laugh at him.

The ache came again even as he laughed. He would miss this. Yes, he had friends of his own and a life to live in his right time, but it was nothing like this. He wasn’t like Hermione; he didn’t have words enough to be able to describe the relationship he had built with these boys. He just knew that when he went home, Ron, Neville and Seamus just wouldn’t be the same. He wished there was a way to keep part of them alive, to keep this feeling with him when he returned. James and Sirius would be gone, but Remus remained. Remus might be able to hold the torch for the life they had now. He had to make sure the boy would remember. Even if Dumbledore wiped his memory of the details of who Harry was, he had to make certain the boy retained enough that Harry could remind him. And he had a grand idea of how.

“I’ve got something for you lot,” he said, wicked smile pulling at his mouth as he hauled Remus up from his chair and beckoned them to follow him.

They locked the door to their room as Harry dove into his trunk, digging deep into the cavernous space to find the bag Fred and George had given him so many months ago. “Now, you have to solemnly swear that you will not attempt to recreate anything I am about to give you,” he said as he held the bag just beyond their reach.

“I swear it,” James agreed without pause.

“What is—,” Remus began, but got a sharp jab in the ribs, which turned his question into a promise. “I swear it.”

“Pads? You promise, too?” James called, drawing Harry’s attention from the pair before him to the boy sitting silently on his bed. He hadn’t noticed Sirius when he entered; the boy was so still and quiet. Even now that they were all looking his way, he barely moved. His face was drawn and hands tight around a discoloured bit of parchment.

“I swear,” he replied.

“What is it?” James demanded and moved to take the bag.
Pulling it beyond his reach, Harry took from the bag a miniscule box, which grew in his hand at the touch of his wand. He offered the box of treats. “Try one and see.”

The boy’s hazel eyes narrowed in suspicion as he studied the simple box and the sweets contained within. The twins, however, were brilliant. The biscuits appeared perfectly ordinary; the custard centre enticing and sweet-smelling. “What will it do?”

“Try one and see,” he repeated, grin taking over his face.

“You prat,” James grumbled and shoved the whole biscuit in his mouth. He barely had time to swallow before his whole body gave a shudder, and he took off into the air, a massive flash of yellow flitting through their room.

“That is brilliant!” James cried a moment later as he fell onto his bed amidst a shower of moulted feathers.

Remus couldn’t keep from smiling as he asked, “How many have you got?”

“Five boxes.”

“I love Johannesburg! I cannot wait to see what it looks like,” the giddy Chaser laughed. “The pranks you lot must get up to there!”

Harry, determined not to let his good mood fade, dug into the bag and pulled out another box, which he enlarge and offered to the grinning prefect. “For Remus,” he said.

The boy took the box, smile still on his face after watching James turn into a twittering canary. “Skiving Snack Box?” he read and pulled the box and its multiple compartments open to reveal the sweets within. “Puking Pastilles, Fever Fancies, Nosebleed Nougats? What is this?”

“I thought it would help you out on the full moons,” he explained. “Your stomach sickness lie is pretty rubbish. I’m sure people are starting to wonder about it by now. But no one argues with a nosebleed, now do they?”

The boy looked ready to cry as he hugged the box to his chest. “Seriously, who sorted out how to send you home? I want to hex them for taking you away.”

“Me,” Sirius said darkly. “He’d never have sorted it out if I hadn’t mentioned the necklace glowing.”

“Well, you are an arse,” Remus informed him. “I resent your presence and your face and your hair. Your jokes are terrible, and you are a miserable human being. Kindly throw yourself off the North Tower at your earliest convenience.”

“Gladly.”

James took hold of the prefect and pulled him to the door. “Come on, Moony. We need to start plotting the use of those custard biscuits.”

“What?” the boy said stupidly. “We can plot here.”

“No, we can plot much better in the common room.”

“Since when?”

“Since I said so. Move your arse.” He offered the boy a hard look and jerked his head toward Sirius
and Harry.

“Oh, yeah. Common room. Good plan,” Remus agreed and waved. “We’ll see you two later. We’re just going to go plot. In the common room. And not here. With you.” The door closed like an exclamation point, putting an abrupt and certain end to the boy’s awkward and rambling departure.

Harry could only stare at the ancient wood, wondering why they felt the need to leave, but when he turned to comment on their strange behaviour he saw Sirius had barely shifted from when they first entered the room.

“They’re not exactly subtle, are they?” Harry commented.

“Subtle is boring,” Sirius muttered and offered the boy a meaningful look, “and it tends to go over some people’s heads.”

“Like mine?”

“For one,” he agreed.

Silence fell between them while Sirius folded his parchment and set it aside. Harry was reminded of Operation Not-Prongs and the way Sirius always used to hide that parchment from him whenever he came into a room. It was unlikely the boy had any further secret lists on hand, but it was always difficult to say with him.

“So, if you’re giving out your secret stash, you must really be going home,” the boy observed.

Harry nodded his reply, which did nothing for his friend’s mood. “Just like that? One necklace was all that stood between you and the future. All those months searching for spells, searching for an expert and snogging Alfie fucking Quintain, and the answer was literally under your nose.”

“Pretty much.” Harry paused, unsure if he really wanted to ask the question, but afraid that they would spend the last few days avoiding one another as they had spent the previous weeks. “Are you cross with me again?”

“I was never cross with you,” Sirius insisted, shoving himself off the bed. “I was poorly. There’s a difference.”

“Looked an awful lot like being cross to me.”

“Well, you need to get your eyes checked because I was cross with myself. Same as I am now. I should have kept my mouth shut.” He swore under his breath and raked a hand through his hair as he only ever did when he was at a loss for words. “I… I just got you and now you’re leaving.”

“You’ve had me since September, Sirius,” he scoffed.

“No,” he insisted, grabbing Harry’s face and forcing him to look into his plaintive grey eyes. “Not like this. I played with you since September. I wanted you since November. And I finally got you this morning. It’s not fair. I only just got you. You can’t leave. Not now.”

There it was again, that ache in his chest. That slow, dull pain that made him want to cry with every beat of his heart. Why did he have to go and feel it now?
Under the Milky Way

Chapter Summary

In which subtlety, like caution, is thrown to the wind.

The fire was warm and inviting, but Remus turned away and headed toward the portrait hole and out into the corridor. What little heat the stones had absorbed during the day had long since drained, leaving him shivering before he had reached the base of the first set of stairs; he should be back in the common room on such a night.

He told himself he was just doing his prefect rounds, that there was nowhere in particular he was heading. It was a lie. He knew full well where his feet were taking him: To Hermione.

She was leaving. Any day now, any minute, she could be taken from him, sent back to her own time. The thought sent a chill through him more jarring than the freezing wind that whipped through the corridor. He couldn’t let that happen. He knew there was no Remus waiting there for her safe return, so the only way they would be together was to convince her not to go. The cold fear seized him at the thought that she might not be willing to throw away all she knew for him. As he stood petrified by the thought of her refusing him, students began filing past. They hurried by, their cloaks pulled tight against the wind and chill. Professor Sinistra followed, offering the barest of nods she always gave to the students who had dropped her class after it was no longer a requirement.

Hermione had not been among the students scurrying from class and minutes passed without her following the professor. It was unthinkable that the girl would have skived off, which left him with the horrifying thought that Hermione was alone with someone else beneath the romantic blanket of stars.

Spurred by his fears, Remus ran up the remaining steps, bursting out into the clear night.

The wind that had pulled at his clothes and nearly thrown him to the floor was but a gentle breeze on the exposed roof of the Astronomy Tower. Charms kept the brunt of the weather at bay; even the air here was warm and pleasant, allowing him to stand by the door and watch his girlfriend by the light of the red-glass lanterns that bathed the crenelated rooftop. Relief washed over him at the sight of her. She was alone, studying the night skies.

He wondered if she even realised class had been dismissed. She was never one to ignore anything a professor said, even passing comments muttered in undertones of annoyance, but there were moments when she was so caught up in her thoughts that it was like she was alone in the room. It was one of the idiosyncrasies he so loved about her, her ability to tune out everything in the world and focus so single-mindedly on something that she found riveting but which would drive others mad with boredom. He could spend hours just watching her read, and he had.

He watched her now as she looked up at some constellation or star cluster, and as he did a thought began to buzz around his head. ‘Why is she trying so hard?’

There was no denying she was brilliant and had an insatiable curiosity, but why try so hard? He had watched her spend hours researching topics for class, pouring more details into her essays than
the rest of Gryffindor combined. What did it get her? She occasionally was given a few extra points, but she barely seemed to notice those. She was not competitive. Even if she were, there was no one in their year that could hold a candle to her. It made no sense. It was time she could have put into reading in the Restricted Section, into finding a way home. Moreover, once they knew the spell to get back, Dumbledore would likely ensure little time had passed between the moment they left and when they would return. She would have to resit every exam, rewrite each essay, and knowing her she would reread every book just to make certain her facts were absolutely accurate. All this work she was putting in was wasted effort.

‘Unless…’ he thought, a smile pulling at his mouth, as he dared to hope.

Unless she meant to stay. It was a thought he had not considered. Perhaps, knowing what he was, knowing he couldn’t survive for them to meet again, she had already decided to stay with him.

‘No,’ he insisted. ‘She’s probably just too stubborn to do poorly.’

He watched her now, working so hard after even the teacher had retreated back to her warm quarters. The girl’s gaze alternated between her book and the brass telescope. Her hand moved frenetically across her parchment before taking another look at the heavens. She looked displeased, as if the constellations had deliberately shifted for the sole purpose of irritating her. And perhaps they had, though clearly not to annoy her specifically. Some twenty or more years would have passed since she last studied the stars. There might very well be a star or two that existed now that would not where she was from. How long would it take a star to fade, he wondered; the light, he knew, had travelled unimaginable distances to reach their eyes. The pinpricks they saw in the fabric of night were actually images of stars as they had burned hundreds of thousands of years ago, or just a few thousand depending on which theory of the universe one subscribed to. Remus didn’t care either way. He just knew they were beautiful and ancient, which was more than enough for him.

As he watched Hermione, he began to think of her as one of those stars. She was something that ought to have been viewed through a magic lens, an image of something far off, beautiful and untouchable. But she was here, brilliant and beautiful, making him burn with such intensity he felt he might die.

“Remus?”

The boy blinked. “Uh, hullo.”

“What are you doing here?” She smiled, and he was melting.

“I, uh, thought I would keep you company.”

He moved closer despite the sceptical look she was offering him. This visit was rather odd. He had never met her after any of the classes she had without him. There was no point since she nearly always walked directly to the library; he simply waited for her there. She appeared to be thinking the same thing, but was too polite to say anything about it.

“So,” he said slowly, searching for something to talk about. “What are you still doing here? It’s not getting any warmer.”

Her eye had already returned to the stars. “Hm? I’m trying to discern the binary stars.”

Remus studied the small brass telescope, identical to the one he had used when he took Astronomy. They were powerful enough for studying the craters of the moon but hardly capable of seeing twin
stars. “Did you charm it?”

“Yes, it’s much more powerful and so much smaller than all the telescopes Muggles are using.” She beamed at her accomplishment. “I can see things they won’t be discovering for another ten years! If I reported these findings, I could be a household name – like Hubble or Huygens or Sagan.” She offered a small giggle of delight at the idea. Remus could only smile and nod, not recognising any of the names she had listed.

“What constellation are you studying?” he asked as he turned his eyes skyward. Even without a telescope, he had a grand view. The nearest Muggle village was miles off, leaving only dark countryside and nothing to interfere with the creamy line of the Milky Way stretching from horizon to horizon. He wanted to share the beauty of it with Hermione, but her face was back in the textbook again. “Hermione?”

“Oh, Canis Major,” she said distractedly.

Canis Major. The Great Dog. Brightest star: Sirius, the Dog Star. The information ran through his head in the undulating voice of Professor Sinistra. His previously romantic notion of the stars dimmed with the idea of his girlfriend staring at Sirius’ star.

“Why that one?”

“It has a binary star,” she said as if it were obvious. “I’ve been able to see three others, but I can’t differentiate A from B with this one.”

Remus glanced down at the book in her hands. It wasn’t her textbook; that had been abandoned on the low arrow slit nearby. This was yet another book from the library. He doubted Sinistra was even teaching binary star systems to the class, which meant the study of them, and of Sirius, was all her own doing and desire. There hadn’t been a moment since he met the girl that he ever suspected she might potentially fancy Sirius, but he couldn’t help the stab of jealousy.

“You know a lot about the, uh, Dog Star,” he commented.

“A fair bit,” she agreed, not noticing the strange tone he hadn’t quite managed to hide. “It’s hard not to, it appears so often in literature and myth. It’s amazing how many cultures associate it with dogs and the madness of summer, despite it being visible in the winter and spring months. Strange, really. Unless it’s the absence that was supposed to bring about madness.” She looked up and finally saw the sickness touching his face. “What is it?”

“You know an awful lot about Sirius.”

“Wait… Are you jealous? Of a star?”

“No, of Sirius.”

“You do realise they aren’t the same thing,” she replied with a small and condescending smile.

“I don’t have a star. I don’t have any of what he has,” he muttered. He didn’t have the ancient line and the wealth that came with it. He didn’t have the handsome face. He didn’t have a future, not with her, not even on his own.

The girl sighed and pulled his face down so their eyes were level. “Remus is said to have been the first to receive an omen: six vultures appeared to him. The augury had just been announced to Romulus when double the number appeared to him. Each was saluted as a king by his own party. Shall I go on? I have the entire founding of Rome memorised. Livy may be sparing on the details,
but he knows how to tell a good story.”

Remus knew the words were accurate. He had sought out and all but memorised the ancient story after finding it had been the source of his name. “How long have you known that?”

She only shrugged and smiled.

“But w—?”  The question was put to an abrupt end when she pulled him closer still and kissed him, apparently tired of his self-doubt and irrational jealousy. Remus couldn’t say he minded much. There were few things in life that he enjoyed as much as he did kissing Hermione, and it was a passion he fully embraced as she dropped her book and pressed against him.

As his hands wandered, his enjoyment was dulled by the smell rolling off her. There, filling his nostrils, was the acrid stench of fear. It was an aroma he hadn’t smelt in months, not since their first kiss in October when Hermione still refused to admit she liked him out of some worry about her old boyfriend in Johannesburg. Knowing she wasn’t actually from South Africa, he couldn’t quite imagine what she had been afraid of. Whatever it was, it was back on Hermione’s mind and growing in priority if the intensity of the smell was any indication.

She pulled away from him. When she spoke, her voice shook, “Remus.”

‘Fuck, here it comes.’ He cringed. She was going to break up with him. He knew it couldn’t last.

“Remus,” she said again, her voice no more steady than a moment before. “I am going to be blunt, okay?”

Too worried about what would escape his mouth if he tried to speak, he could only nod his acceptance.

“I want you to take off your shirt.”

“What?”

“I can’t stand this anymore. I am tired of being subtle and dropping hints. You are too thick for your own good. Take off your shirt,” she ordered, her hands began to tear at the clasp of his cloak.

The boy could only stand there, dumbfounded, as her nimble fingers released the clasp and set to work on the buttons of his shirt. He had to be hallucinating. The pain of her breaking up with him had to have sent him reeling into a delusional state where the girl wanted to sleep with him. That made much more sense than her actually wanting him. It took the feeling of her cool hands on his bare skin to wake him up. “You want to… with me… Really?”


Still not quite comprehending the situation into which he had stumbled, he stood motionless as she wrenched the hem of her jumper up and over her head, laying bare her torso save the lacy white bra, which somehow managed to be both demure and provocative.

“Don’t just stand there.”

He scrambled to follow her command; his skin erupted in gooseflesh as his shirt fell away and the chill of the night touched him or perhaps it was from seeing so much of her – the scattering of freckles on her bare shoulders, the smooth curve of her waist, the long line of her neck which he had forever wanted to kiss but had always been hindered by her shirts and jumpers. He attacked the soft skin, taking his mouth to it with all the need he had barely been keeping back. Hermione did
Kissing Hermione’s mouth was no longer the greatest thing he could imagine. Kissing her neck, now that was the best, for it left her mouth free to make the most delicious noises, noises that set his blood racing and made him desperate to rid himself of his constricting trousers. He didn’t care if he looked overly eager; he shoved the twill down his legs and kicked his trousers away toward the growing pile of clothes. Hermione’s skirt, shoes and knee socks quickly joined them. After that, Remus was rather slow in adding any more items to the pile, though not for lack of desire. His fingers had gone numb at the sight of his girlfriend in nothing but her underthings; all the blood that kept them functioning had rushed from his hands to a far more demanding extremity.

“Oh, Merlin,” he whimpered, swallowing hard to bring moisture to his suddenly barren throat.

“Remus?”

Her voice was thick with need but still managed to sound concerned. It was the last straw, the one that broke him. He shuddered and groaned and felt the sticky wetness spread across the front of his pants.

“Remus, did you just—?”

He moaned in embarrassment. He had no words. He was humiliated. It was the Naked Great Hall Incident multiplied by his worst nightmares and compounded with his deepest insecurities. If he could shrivel into dust and blow away, he would. Daring to glance at Hermione, he saw her smile and blush prettily. “Why are you smiling?”

She bit her lip in the way that always made him lightheaded. “Just from looking at me,” she smiled and looked pointedly down at his pants. “That is the single greatest compliment I have ever been given. And you’re still ready.”

“I can’t help it with you this close,” he admitted. “Can’t tell you how much it hurts to be near you.”

“Well, I think you’ve suffered long enough. We both have,” she breathed. Her nimble fingers made quick work of removing the last of their garments, throwing them thoughtlessly away and leaving naked skin flush against naked skin.

It was perfect. The most glorious feeling he had ever experienced. He didn’t want to move, but need had them shifting and sliding and sinking down until she lay beneath him on a bed of their discarded cloaks. The sight of her laid out before him, her skin bare and creamy, had feelings churning in him that he had been fighting for longer than he cared to admit. Amorous, yes, but also the basest desires. The wolf was stirring. It growled and urged him forward, demanding he claim the flesh she had offered, take her and thrust until she screamed, break her and make her beg.

“No!” Remus threw himself off her, scrambling back as if she had burned him.

“Remus?” She reached out to comfort him.

He shrunk back against the wall, clutching his knees to himself. “Stay back! I can’t be trusted.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ll hurt you.” He looked into her soft brown eyes and tried to communicate all that he meant, but she kept inching closer. “Please. I want you. I can’t tell you how bad I want you, but I can’t. He’s too strong.”
Kneeling before him, she prised his hands from his knees and took them into her own, stroking the white knuckles against her cheek, nuzzling the clenched fists until they slowly began to relax. She let the skin brush gently across her lips, her warm breath serving to loosen his terror further. As she held his hands, she offered no words of comfort or reassurance and instead let her touch say all that needed to be spoken. It worked. He didn’t want to, but his fingers moved to brush her face, caress her neck, cup her breasts.

A shaky breath escaped his lips as he touched her, his eyes rising to meet hers.

“I’m not afraid of him,” she promised.

“I can’t—,” he started, but she kissed his weak protest into silence.

“Perhaps if you never have control, he can’t steal it from you,” she suggested as she pushed him down onto the bare stones. “Do you mind that I’m bossy?”

He gasped and bucked as her hips rolled against his. “Not one bit!”

“Good,” she smiled and kissed him hard, taking over his mouth and body, and not allowing the wolf any room to subjugate either of them.

Looking up at her, he felt like he was in heaven. Hermione certainly looked like an angel, the wings of the Milky Way jutting out from her smooth shoulders as if she were about to take flight. That image came to him some time later as they lay breathless together on the stones, and a chill ran through him. She was taking flight, though no one had told her yet.

“Hermione,” he said tentatively, hoping she was asleep. The girl hummed a reply, too exhausted to verbalise a real answer. “I, uh, talked to Harry earlier. He and Dumbledore… they… they found the answer.”

“What?”

“He can send you home.” He dug his nails into the mortar of their makeshift bed to keep from slapping himself for mentioning it, for ruining this wonderful moment. He wondered if she had heard him; she was taking so long in answering. Finally, he dared to look at her. She looked desolate, as if he had just told her he didn’t love her. Remus fought a smile. He had never thought he would be happy to have a girl look so disappointed while lying naked beside him.
Despite Your Destination

Chapter Summary

In which Peter is observant, Sirius is smug and Harry doesn't stand a chance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hands danced across his skin, fingers pausing over scars as if worshipping them. A pair of lips joined, dropping kissed lightly at first then with such intensity they seemed to burn. The deeper scars drew more attention, the burn across his side the most. The nerves were dead from the heat of the dragon’s fire, but he knew what was being done and groaned despite not being able to feel it. A low chuckle rose to meet his ears.

The hands and fingers and lips took their veneration farther south, deftly sliding the trousers from his hips to leave him exposed.

“Sure looks like you fancy me,” Sirius said with another chuckle.

“Shut up!” Harry’s urgent whisper came out in a ragged gasp. “I think someone’s coming.”

“Yeah. You.”

His retort died the instant the hand wrapped around him, warm and calloused and perfect. He’d felt this only once before, under duress and shame. Even then it had felt good. Now, alone and with someone he properly liked, it was the most magnificent thing he had ever felt. He lost his voice, lost all conscious thought as the boy worked him.

“Think that’s good, just wait,” Sirius said, though Harry barely heard him. He knew the perfect hands had stopped, and he whined until he saw the boy drop to his knees. Their eyes locked as the Beater licked his lips and drew closer. When those lips closed around him he shot up in bed, gasping.

“What?” Harry panted. His hands flew to his groin, where his fingers ought to have tangled into a head of long, black hair. Instead they met wet duvet and a hardness quickly vanishing.

The boy fell back onto his damp pillow and groaned.

“What’s happening to me?”

No one answered. No one heard the question. The silencing charm still held firm around his bed despite the old nightmares being a rare visitor over the past few weeks. He was suddenly very grateful for the routine of putting the charm up before falling into bed; he did not want to explain to James why he was moaning Sirius’s name in the middle of the night. His father already had it in his head that there was something worth worrying about between them, and Sirius was not doing anything to dissuade him. The boy’s old habits of using him as a pillow and hanging on him for most of the day were back in place, but there was a decidedly different tone to the actions; they had become less casual, more deliberate, and decidedly intimate. Harry knew it wasn’t his imagination that Sirius put his hand on his thigh when they sat together in class; that he brought his arm up
when he had his head in Harry’s lap and let his fingers brush dangerously close to his groin; that
when they walked he let his hand rest on his neck, fingers dipped inside his collar to graze his
throat. No, it wasn’t the same. And apparently neither was Harry.

He hurried from his bed before anyone could throw the curtains open and catch him in the
aftermath of a wet dream. The cleaning charm wasn’t perfect, but it removed the majority of the
evidence from his duvet. After that, it would just be a matter of not letting anyone see his face. He
was sure his thoughts were still plastered there for all to view.

At the first sound of stirring in the nearby beds, he considered jumping into his trunk and hiding
there until the Quidditch game; no one knew just how large the space was, and they wouldn’t think
to look for him there. He was halfway to unlocking it when James stumbled from his bed and
muttered an incoherent greeting as he staggered toward the washroom. James hadn’t noticed.
Neither did Remus some minutes later. Sirius grinned at him, but it was not a grin that spoke to
knowing he had been the subject of the boy’s fantasies; it was just his usual rakish and charming
 grin. A sexy grin.

‘Stop thinking of him like that!’ Harry ordered as he forced his eyes away from the boy.

“What’s with that face?”

The question had not come from Sirius but from Peter. The watery little eyes were looking at him,
studying him across their breakfast. The cherubic face gave nothing away, unlike his own.

“Just deciding what to eat,” Harry muttered and shoved a slice of toast into his mouth.

“That’s not you’re ‘can’t decide between kippers and eggs’ face,” the boy observed. “That’s your
‘thinking thoughts’ face.”

“Didn’t realise I had so many faces,” he commented with a forced smile.

“That’s your ‘trying to make light and distract everyone’ face,” Peter pointed out. “It never works,
by the way.”

Harry’s ‘make light and distract everyone’ smile fell. “How could you possibly notice?”

“When you’re as rubbish as me at most magics, you kind of have to learn to read people,” he
admitted. “Like playing cards, there’s always a tell. I learned right quick when someone really
meant to hex me or when they were all talk.”

He nodded as the boy explained, suddenly impressed by his psychological prowess. As much as he
hated to admit it, there were things about Peter he actually liked. He had made a point of avoiding
the boy as much as possible, but in the tight quarters of their dorm he couldn’t help but get to know
him. He wasn’t the man Harry had met in the Shrieking Shack and wouldn’t be for many years. He
was still just a teenager, awkward and bumbling as McGonagall had described him, desperate for a
place and approval. As with so many other things, Harry wished he could do something to change
this boy’s fate, to keep him as this generally kind-hearted boy he was now. His defection would
come so long from now, he couldn’t even begin to understand what prompted Peter to turn away
from his friend.

“Thinking thoughts again,” Peter commented, gesturing to his face with a forkful of sausage.

“Whatever are you thinking about so intently, Messer Granger?” Sirius inquired as he slid closer on
the bench. “Me, I hope.”
“No, that was earlier,” the blond boy opposite informed him. “He was pinker around the ears, then. Can always tell when he’s thinking about you by how pink his ears get.”

“Oh, sod off,” Harry grumbled and pushed his hair to cover his flaming ears. It didn’t work any better than when he attempted to smooth it flat; the wild black strands fell back into their usual place of wherever-they-felt-like, leaving his ears plain for all to see.

“Nice,” Sirius smiled. “I’ll be keeping an eye on that from now on. Thanks, Wormtail, I owe you.”

Peter grinned with only the slightest hint of malicious delight in his eyes and went back to his breakfast, leaving Harry grumbling and trying to push any and all thoughts of Sirius from his head. It didn’t work. The boy was so close, his thigh pressed tight against his own, that there was nowhere for his mind to go but to Sirius, to the dream of them together, and his ears betrayed him. His companion’s pleased ‘hm’ informed him that he had noted the change in colour.

“I have detention,” Harry said hastily and hurried to free himself of the bench and Sirius. Thankfully, Sirius didn’t follow him, so he was able to take his time meeting Filch and getting his assigned punishment. He was not looking forward to the coming days of detentions. He had already learned the man’s capacity for creative interpretation of school rules regarding punitive sentences after spending his previous detention harvesting guano from the belfry for use in the school greenhouses. With at least four detentions in the coming weeks, he was sure the caretaker was gleefully inventing new and disgusting jobs for him to complete.

“You’re late.” The old man shoved a bucket of water into his hands. “Dungeon walls need scrubbing. Get to it.”

Harry peered down into the soapy water and saw the toothbrush he had been provided for the task. There were three dungeon levels that he knew about. He couldn’t possibly be expected to clean them all with a single bucket and a toothbrush. He opened his mouth to protest, but got a stern glare before he could utter a word.

“Yes, sir,” he muttered and trudged off to the stairs, grumbling to himself the whole way down to the dank, windowless floors that Slughorn and his snakes called home. His mood darkened with every step farther from his friends and family until he was positively seething with annoyance at having to be there labouring alone. He threw the pail down, not caring that half the contents sloshed up and over the rim to soak the floor.

“Not fair,” he complained and cursed as the tears stung his eyes.

It wasn’t fair that he had to spend his few free hours of the few remaining days alone in the dark instead of with all the people he loved and cared about. Hermione was up in the warmth of Gryffindor Tower now, probably sitting on Remus’s lap despite knowing that Lupin was alive and anxiously awaiting her return. The image made his blood boil. Harry was not usually one to resent anyone anything, but right now he resented Hermione. He poured his anger into his work, scrubbing fiercely at the algae until the bristles of the tiny brush bent and green slime began to spray up at him. Still he scrubbed, his every thought focused on the filthy mortar and not on the people he would soon be leaving behind.

“That’s enough,” Filch’s voice called to him from the stairs. “Don’t be late tomorrow or you’ll be in for another detention.”

Harry frowned as the caretaker stalked off down the corridor. He didn’t have a watch to accurately tell him the time, but he was certain he had only just set to work, not that he was foolish enough to
argue with an end to the dirty job. As he moved to stand, he realised just how much time must have passed; his muscles screamed at him, legs all but numb from kneeling, arms barely able to move for all the force he had put into scrubbing.

“Stupid,” he muttered again, this time at himself. He still had another detention to serve the following day. He really ought to have taken it a bit easier. A shower. That’s what he needed. And perhaps a visit to Madam Pomfrey. But definitely a shower before all else.

“What the bloody hell have you been up to?” James demanded. The boy moved to slap him but recoiled when he saw the state Harry was in.

“Scrubbing,” Harry mumbled.

“You missed lunch,” the Chaser informed him coolly. “And dinner.”

“Detention. Sorry.”

“If you wear yourself out for Filch and don’t eat properly, we don’t stand a chance against Slytherin. You might as well say your spell and head home now rather than risk our chances at the Cup.”

“Whatsoever you say, Captain. Just let me shower first.” Harry offered a half-hearted salute and stumbled up the stairs to their room. There was a vaguely human shape on his bed; viewed through the film of green algae on his glasses it looked almost like one of the mermen he had seen in the murky depths of the lake. Really it was Sirius on his bed, laying amid the rest of the Weasley Wizarding Wheezes products he was sure he had locked back into his trunk; there was no denying the obnoxiously colourful packaging.

“Shower first. Hex you for breaking into my trunk later.”

The boy grinned. “Don’t take too long. You know how much I love watching you get all hot and bothered.”

Harry was too filthy and sore to flirt back and just grunted a reply.

The water was painfully hot, but he didn’t care. It was a joy to be able to feel anything in his limbs. He groaned as the water cascaded down his back, easing the tension in his abused muscles.

“Merlin, I love seeing you all hot and bothered.”

Harry started at the voice. “Sirius! What the hell?”

“Can’t a bloke enjoy a show?” he questioned, his voice deep and plucking all the right chords inside him. “Although, I was never one for just sitting back and watching.”

The blurred shape Harry knew to be Sirius, slid inside the curtained shower stall and grew close enough for him to make out the general details of his body – arms, legs, torso, all naked. Just as he had in his dream, the boy’s hands took to examining his scars, sliding across pale skin and caressing the damages as if he might massage them back into his flesh.

“Sirius,” he gasped as the boy’s hands travelled down past the burn on his side.

“If you’re planning to tell me to stop, I wouldn’t bother,” the boy replied, smirk evident in his voice.
“No, don’t stop.”

His head fell back against the tiles and the heat flowed down his body as Sirius dropped to his knees. He knew he shouldn’t want this as much as he did, that it was wrong to be so attached to someone he would be leaving behind, but he didn’t care. He wanted Sirius. He wanted everything he had to offer and as the boy’s mouth closed around him he cried out and nearly down himself in the water still pouring from the showerhead.

“Dammit, not again,” he groaned and let his forehead crash against the tiles as he felt the emptiness around him.

Hurriedly, he finished his shower and what his overactive imagination had started, rushing through the corridor and back to their dorm. Sirius was there, though he had returned to his own bed. The boy smiled when Harry returned, no doubt noticing the flaming cheeks and ears the damp boy was so desperate to hide.

“Pleasant shower?” he asked causally.

Harry didn’t trust himself to reply, and only offered a ‘hm’ before diving behind his curtains and falling onto the mattress. “What is happening to me?” he asked the darkness.

Sirius came to him later, sliding beneath the sheets and pressing his body on top of him. “Good evening.”

“Go away,” Harry groaned and tried to shove him off.

“What? I’m insulted.”

“Good, maybe you’ll stop bothering me when I’m trying to sleep then.”

“And shower?” Sirius added with a laugh in his quiet voice.

“That, too,” he agreed with an annoyed huff. “Why can’t I get through a single minute alone without you popping into my head? I am trying to sleep. If I have another sleepless night, James will have my head.”

“Can I have it instead?”

Harry snorted as the boy made a puppy dog whine. That amused snort turned to a groan as the boy slid down his body. “I thought I told you to stop that!”

“I could,” Sirius agreed. “Or I could wear you out so you’re sure to sleep soundly. Two birds, one stone. Sounds like a fine plan to me.” He dropped below the duvet, but Harry could feel every move he made. Oddly, he didn’t recall there being quite so many awkwardly placed elbows when he last had this dream, but he ignored them as Sirius settled between his legs and his warm hands set to work. These dreams were getting so much better.

He bucked against the hands. “Get on with it!”

“You are spoiling my fun, Harry,” Sirius chided. “But since it’s you…” He sighed and the hands stopped.

“Why—?” The question exploded into a moan as that smirking mouth closed around him. It was so hot, so wet, so perfect. He had never felt anything like it, and he was sure he should be waking up right now. This is where the fantasy always ended. His hands flew to his groin, fingers wrapping
into the long hair and caressing the warm skin of the other boy’s face. “Crap, this isn’t a dream.”

Sirius licked him in reply, and suddenly Harry didn’t care if this was real or imagined so long as he did that again.

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, my original plot never had Sirius and Harry doing anything more than flirt and maybe kiss. I intended it to be a bi-romantic relationship a la Humon Comics.
Side note: I love that comic artist. She does great things. Particularly love her Scandinavia and the World series.
Harry lay in bed staring up at the scarlet canopy as he so often did in the early hours of the morning. Normally, he used this time to think on matters that he couldn’t discuss with the others, fears of things to come and tasks still to be done. Today, he was trying desperately not to think, not to remember what he had done or who he had done it with. He was torn between pleasure and panic.

The source of his dilemma shifted in his sleep, burying his face into his neck and humming with contentment.

‘What is happening to me?’ he questioned, but he knew the answer. Sirius was happening.

From the morning of the first of September when they met in the common room, Sirius had waged a slow, and debatably subtle, campaign against him. He had set about systematically tearing down every barrier and inhibition Harry had put up to protect himself, and now that they were gone he had nothing. He was as unprotected as a crustacean without its exoskeleton, weak and vulnerable to all the predators of the world. What would happen when he went home and there was no one there for him to lean on? What was he supposed to do?

‘Run,’ he ordered himself. ‘Forget the game, forget goodbyes. Just run before it's too late.’

He extricated himself from beneath the boy, feeling a twinge of guilt at the whine of loss that escaped him. Silently as he could, he slid his trousers on and escaped from the warm mattress to the cold, hard stones on the floor beside the bed. He sat, shivering, as he wondered what to do next. Without Sirius laying on him, it was easier to see the reality of the situation he had made for himself, though it was no easier trying to think of a way to escape it.

Harry scowled at the floor. “Stupid.”

“Yames! Want hug! Hug hug hug!” a tiny and exuberant voice cried as Harry found himself thrown onto his back and under attack by what had to be a house-elf. One that seemed to have spent far too much time with Tildy Moorehead; every time he thought he had himself free, it managed to grab hold of him again.

After considerable effort, Harry managed to gain control of the excitable little creature and hold it where he could actually see the thing. What he saw was no house-elf. It was a girl.

“Hug!” she demanded again, her smile as enormous as her dark eyes.

“Okay,” he agreed with uncertainty, and the girl attached herself to his neck.

Harry didn’t understand. Last he checked, Gryffindor Tower did not have a day nursery and none of the professors had children running free among the dormitories. Was this a spell gone wrong? He would have thought the little girl Tildy made tiny, but the rat’s nest of hair was light brown and not Tildy’s deep chestnut. No, he didn’t know who the girl was, or how she came to be in his room.

There was a rustle of bed curtains and the child was pulled from his neck. “How did you get in here?” Sirius asked, smile taking over his face as he spun her around the room.
“Again!” the girl cried, and the boy obeyed, spinning the girl through the air until she squealed.

He pressed his nose against the girl’s. “Now, where should you be?”

“Wiff Sirius!” she answered. “And Yames.”

Sirius followed her little finger to see Harry standing well back. “Ah, that’s not James. That’s Harry.”

“Harry,” the girl repeated. “You sure? He look like Yames.”

The smirk that curled up the corner of his mouth was so obscene it ought to have been censored. No one should be allowed to smirk like that around children. “Trust me, that’s not James.”

“Okay, can I have hug?” She held her arms wide and smiled so adorably no one could have resisted her, not even Sirius. The boy let the girl latch onto his neck in what looked more like a chokehold than a loving embrace. As she hugged him tightly, her hair flashed a vibrant and cheerful pink, and Harry finally recognised the tiny creature for who she was.

“So, Nymphie, how did you get here?” Sirius asked, his tone changing to one that would have made any stern parent proud.

“Magic hat,” she said and ran to the dingy porkpie hat that had gone unnoticed on the floor. She took it up and shoved the thing onto her head, grinning. “Mummy say it a porky and only for ‘mergency, an’ I had such bad dream I had to have hug.”

“Couldn’t ‘Dromeda give you a hug?”

“Hug from Sirius make ev’ryfing better! I wear magic hat an’ wish, wish, wish an’ then I see Yames!”

“Harry,” Sirius corrected. “Does ‘Dromeda know you took her portkey?”

The girl’s smile fell along with her eyes. “No.”

The door to their room opened as a quiet knock sounded on the ancient wood; it would not have been enough to wake them had they been asleep, but standing in the calm quiet of dawn it startled them all and sent little Nymphadora running for cover behind her cousin’s legs. Their head of house peered cautiously around the open door.

“Ah, boys,” she said, somehow managing to sound commanding despite being taken off guard. “We’re looking for a lost child.” She opened the door fully, revealing both her heavy dressing gown that matched the tartan cap on her head and a woman Harry didn’t know. The woman was tall and commanded a stately grace and classic beauty that made Harry certain he would have been terrified to meet her in any circumstance; half-dressed after a night with Sirius, he was practically petrified.

“There you are!” the woman cried. “We’ve been looking everywhere!”

“Mummy!” Nymphadora raced across the room, tripping on the rug and falling with a small ‘thud’ onto the floor. It was apparently a common enough occurrence that neither Sirius nor the girl’s mother bothered to make a fuss, and even little Tonks made no cry; the girl stood and ran the rest of the way to her mother’s waiting arms.

“Sirius, please put something on,” the woman chided, turning her eyes from the boy, who wore
nothing but a sheet. The dark eyes landed on Harry and instantly took in every detail of his appearance from the sleepy eyes and wild hair to the love bites littering his torso. Understanding flashed across her face as she turned back to Sirius, speaking in a tone heavy with meaning, “We have things to discuss. I’ll be down in the common room when you’re more presentable.”

The door hadn’t even closed before Sirius began cursing. “Fuck. Get dressed, you’re coming with me.”

“What? Why me?”

“I’ll not be subjected to family lectures on decorum and duty on my own,” Sirius spat. “You are coming with me. At least then the source of disgust will have a face and maybe she won’t be quite so vicious. Now put some bloody clothes on!” He threw a jumper at him and scrambled to get dressed. “Do I look noble and ancient and all that rot?”

“Yeah, hickies are real noble,” Harry scoffed and poked at the mark he had left on the boy’s neck.

“Bloody buggery hell. It’ll have to do,” he groaned and pulled Harry down to the common room to face the ire of his family.

Harry didn’t quite understand the boy’s concerns, but his attempts to question him were cut off by orders to ‘shut it’. Once they reached the common room, he felt no further need to question the boy’s agitated state. The woman who was waiting for them was not the relieved and smiling mother who they had met minutes before. This woman was something different. She stood as they approached, towering over them in presence if not in actual height. She couldn’t have been more than twenty-six years old but it was clear she knew the meaning of obligation and bore the burden of it as she stepped closer to them. Her dark eyes missed nothing as they passed first over Sirius, then Harry; as she looked, Harry was all but convinced the woman knew his every thought.

“Andromeda, I—.”

The woman ended Sirius’s attempt at explanation with barely a gesture. “Please, Sirius, I don’t want to hear it. You might not care about the family, but you must still have some pride. Take a moment to consider what this sort of liaison will do to your reputation and future marriage prospects. What sort of parents would allow their daughter to be bound to a boy who has been—I don’t even want to say it.”

“Sleeping with other boys,” Sirius ground out. “I sleep with boys. And I don’t give a damn who knows or what they think.”

Andromeda’s eyes flashed a harsh warning. “Have a care how you speak to me. I am one of the few people you have on your side, right now.”

“Clearly not.”

“Andromeda,” she said, her tone stern but less demanding. “I just want you to think what will happen to you, to your inheritance and prospects if your parents deem you unworthy of being their heir. Your mother hasn’t struck you from the family tree yet. There’s still hope of maintaining a place in the family even if you don’t return home.”

Harry could feel the tingle of magic in the air as the woman spoke, as Sirius’s grasp on control grew thin. It crackled around them and made the hair rise on his arms. He had never seen the boy so close to breaking, not when he fought with Snape in either decade, not even when he confronted Pettigrew in the Shrieking Shack.
“Think for a moment about what you are and what you could hope to accomplish without the family prestige holding you up,” she said, smiling as if providing a compliment.

The boy remained silent, jaw tightening and hands clenching into white-knuckled fists at his sides.

“I’m just asking you—” Her words erupted into an involuntary scream as a lamp exploded across the room.

“Fuck you,” Sirius said, his voice terrifyingly calm.

Without a word or backward glance, he turned and left the room.

Harry glared his accusations at the woman before following. His self-righteous stomp quickly transformed into a panicked run the moment the portrait closed behind him. He had anticipated finding Sirius just outside the dorm, calming himself in the corridor and waiting for him; he ought to have known better, for the boy was rarely as predictable as that. The corridor was empty, the moving stairs were making their return journey from any number of floors below. It was tempting to return to the dorm to collect his Marauder’s Map, but it would mean having to confront that woman.

‘If I were Sirius, where would I go?’ he wondered.

As he descended the stairs at a run, he thought hard about the words that woman had said. She was not offering a choice. The thing she offered was a chain, one that would bind Sirius to his family and their ideals while denying him all the things that made him who he was. If presented with such a thing, he – he, Harry – would be desperate for the feeling of freedom. For him that meant the Quidditch pitch, but Sirius had another option.

Turning from the path that would lead him toward the, doubtless empty, Great Hall, he ran through the entrance hall and out the open porter’s door. The frigid air hit him like a fist, but he refused to slow as he raced down the hill to the lake.

He skidded to a stop beneath the great beech tree, catching his breath and trying to find Sirius. He could find the miniscule Snitch in a hurricane; he ought to be able to find a dog several hundred times its size. His eyes narrowed against the blinding light reflected by the snow and the smooth surface of the lake. As his breathing finally quieted, he heard the distant chatter of birds scattering from their perches. A murder of crows took to the air, their clattering and clacking beaks filling the sky with their disapproval of being shifted from their homes at such an hour. Harry ran toward the commotion, knowing what had forced the birds to fly.

The dog, massive beyond possibility and black as midnight, ran full blast chasing every crow foolish enough to land and, when that failed, simply running in mad circles after nothing at all. Harry had seen dogs running free around Little Whinging when their owner’s lost hold of their leads; the canines had looked elated, tongues hanging out and smiles pulling at their mouths as they ran after cars and cats alike. This dog showed no such joy. Its mouth was pulled down, eyes narrowed and teeth bared as if it were bristling for a fight. Even as a dog, Sirius could find no peace. Lacking anywhere else to turn, the Animagus raced toward the lake and leapt into the water.

He came up with a clump of weeds in his mouth, thrashing it with such uninhibited violence that Harry feared he might break his own neck.

Unsure what he was going to say or do, Harry ran to the lake’s edge and shouted. “SIRIUS!”

The dog turned at the sound, dropping the poor proxy back into the water before leaping into the depths. Harry waited for the furry black head to appear on the surface, but it didn’t. The ripples of
the dog’s violence spread and calmed until the surface held barely an undulation. He had no idea how long a dog might be capable of holding its breath, but he was sure Sirius ought to have come up for air by now.

As he wrestled his shoes off to dive in, the surface broke. What emerged was not the sodden dog that had leapt in. It was the boy who climbed up the bank, hair dripping and clothes soaked through.

“What?” Sirius demanded.

Harry tried to focus on the question, but he couldn’t manage it. He was too busy following the water as it ran in rivers from the ends of the boy’s hair, down the shirt clinging to his chest and trousers stuck fast to his thighs. Never had he imagined that he would be ogling another boy so blatantly.

He swallowed the lump in his throat that might well have been his heart and dragged his eyes back up to the boy’s face. “I didn’t think you’d want to be alone.”

“Thought wrong,” Sirius replied darkly, taking no notice of Harry’s interest in his form.

“You want me to go?” He couldn’t keep the disappointment from his voice.

“No, I’ll go. I have something I need to work on,” the boy replied and started back toward the castle. “There are no makeup assignments for this project.”

“Oh,” Harry said a bit stupidly as he watched the boy go.

His heart ached again as the distance grew between them. Wasn’t he supposed to be the one walking away?

Chapter End Notes

Up Next! Chapter 58: Paper Tigers. Begin speculation... NOW!
Harry stood on the banks of the lake until Sirius vanished over a rise. He stood until his muscles quaked and teeth chattered. He stood until the sun rose fully over the eastern hill and cast long shadows across the grounds. He stood waiting, but the ache never dissipated.

This was wrong.

They may not have been a couple or even lovers, but he and Sirius were, if nothing else, friends. Sirius should have wanted him near. He ought to have confided in him. He ought to have screamed and cursed at his family and demanded that Harry join him in the process. What Sirius should not have done was leave him standing shivering and alone.

It was that woman and her lecture, her threat. Sirius couldn’t possibly have been swayed by just those few disparaging words she offered, could he? Others spoke ill of him all the time, students of every age in every house, even their own, but the boy never seemed to take notice. Thinking about it, he realised the reproachful comments from students always came with a grudging amount of respect, not for him but for the family to which he belonged; those who spent any amount of time in the Wizarding world knew the name of Black and all those who wore it. Possessing that name was a writ to do wrong.

What had that woman said?

Think for a moment about what you are without the family prestige holding you up.

Harry shivered again with the realisation that she hadn’t just threatened the boy’s inheritance. She threatened his entire world. If people knew he had been disowned and did not have the weight of that ancient line behind him, he would lose that reverence, the awe with which they looked at him. Sirius loved the spotlight; Harry had seen that first hand. He knew from talking to him at Grimmauld Place that Sirius could and would survive without the Black family, but that choice was made for him when Walburga struck him from the family tree. It hadn’t been his decision. Harry didn’t know if the boy could willingly choose to leave that life behind.

Harry shoved his shoes back onto his feet and took off across the late-March snows toward the castle. His pace only increased once he had solid stones under him. He charged up the stairs and threw the door to the McGonagall’s office wide.

“Mr Granger!”

“What are you playing at?” Harry demanded of the woman sitting opposite the affronted professor.

That woman set her teacup back in its saucer before speaking. “Minerva, would you mind terribly if I asked for some privacy?”
McGonagall rose stiffly. “Never heard of such behaviour,” she muttered. “Fifteen points from Gryffindor, Mr Granger, and I have serious thoughts of adding another detention.”

“Another detention?” Andromeda repeated with something of an amused chuckle when the door had closed to McGonagall’s personal quarters. “Sirius does know how to inspire trouble.”

“Don’t,” Harry warned.

“What?”

“Don’t try to be nice to me after what you’ve done.”

“And what is it that I’ve done?” she inquired as she took up her teacup once more. “Offered you both a dose of reality. There aren’t many who will celebrate the heir to the Noble and Ancient House of Black taking up with a boy of questionable breeding and lineage. If you were a girl that would be bad enough, but without any chance for producing children, you can’t hope to be accepted by the wider Wizarding world.”

Harry bristled. “The only people I care about don’t give a damn about things like breeding and lineage, nor do they care if I produce noble and ancient children.”

“Wonderful to live in such a world, isn’t it?” She smiled as she refreshed her cup and began pouring a serving for him. “I can’t tell you what a relief it was when I married Ted.”

Harry blinked stupidly at the woman.

“Edward Tonks, my husband,” she prompted, her tone implying it to be a fact the boy ought to have known.

After a beat, he realised it was a fact he knew. He remembered Sirius talking him through the Black family tree his mother had kept with fanatical devotion, pointing out the blackened spots where those family members Walburga disapproved of had been removed with extreme prejudice. Andromeda Black had been among those spots.

“You married a Muggle-born,” he recalled.

“I did.” She passed the cup to him, perhaps as a peace offering or simply because he looked like he could do with something warm and nourishing in him.

He drank the strong Oolong down, returning the cup to its saucer with a little more force than he intended. “Then you of all people shouldn’t be lecturing Sirius on duty and loyalty to the family. Why would you do that to him?”

She sighed and some of the rigidity seemed to leave her. “Because I know precisely what they’ll say to him. These people, our family, are some of the most horrid and manipulative you will ever encounter. They know precisely what insecurities to draw on to get what they want. It’s better Sirius gets the first taste from me when the threat has no real consequence.”

“It seems to have had some consequences,” Harry muttered into his empty cup.

“Call it a test of sincerity, a trial to see just how much he is invested in the idea of you and him together,” she said, the smile dropping off her face as she spoke. “It would have happened eventually anyway. It’s easy to live the blissful world of Hogwarts, far from family and disapproving eyes, but it’s quite another to have to take such a relationship public.”
“I already said the people I care about aren’t like your family,” he reminded her baldly.

She did not answer immediately, but instead took her daughter onto her lap. The girl’s hair flashed a delighted pink to be in her mother’s embrace but shifted closer to red as the woman began to comb the painful knots from it. “My daughter,” the woman said quietly, “is a Metamorphmagus. It’s a rare and unique trait among our kind. So rare she’ll be labelled a freak by many.”

Harry knew by her tone just which people would be calling Tonks such names. “By your family, you mean.”

Andromeda nodded. “They already have. I ran into my sister, Narcissa, just a fortnight past at Diagon Alley,” she paused to keep the heartache from creeping any further into her voice, composing herself before she continued. “The people we expect to be most open-minded rarely are.”

“You think Sirius is like that?”

“No, not Sirius, and I wouldn’t presume to make assumptions about the true opinions of your family or friends, but, the rest of the world, they will never allow you to steal away someone as valuable as Sirius Black. My aunt, especially.”

“What does it matter what she thinks? She’s already scrubbed him from the family tree.”

“She hasn’t,” the woman contradicted. “Not from what I’ve been told. She’s allowing Sirius until summer to ‘re-evaluate his priorities’. He has a history of being difficult on purpose, making waves just to make them, and never thinking about the consequences until they’ve hit him. Running away was drastic, but nothing new for him. However, if his mother finds he’s taken up with another boy… That would not be so easily overlooked.”

“So you’re testing him now to make sure he really means it. Maybe if he thinks about the costs beforehand, he might decide to act a differently? To leave me?” Harry scoffed at the idea.

Sirius may be brash but knew his mind and heart and was not about to be swayed after such empty threats. At least that’s what he would have said until the boy left him alone at the lake’s edge. Perhaps after spending the night together, he found that it really was the chase that mattered; now that Sirius had his quarry, he no longer wanted it, no longer wanted him. Perhaps Sirius wasn’t about to risk the status that came with the family name for something as inconsequential as a sixth year fling that lasted no longer than any of his other relationships.

“I’m thinking of you as much as I am him, Harry,” Andromeda assured him earnestly. “If Walburga believes Sirius is sincere in his affections, she will make it her mission to change his mind by any means within her power. And I assure you, her reach is long and her morals wanting. If it means killing you to keep Sirius under her thumb, she will do it.”

“She can join the queue.”

He wanted to say it didn’t matter if Sirius chose his family over him. He wanted to say it would be for the best. He would be leaving soon. It was better to end their relationship, whatever it was, before it grew any stronger. But even as he thought it, the ache in his chest made it nearly impossible to breathe.

“Do you ever regret it?”

“My decision to leave the family for Ted?” she clarified. When he nodded, she frowned slightly in thought. He had expected a resounding ‘no’ to come without hesitation, but he found some comfort
in her deliberation, as if she were reviewing every moment of her life since the choice to leave
behind her ancient and noble heritage to see if she had ever had a single millisecond of doubt.

“No,” she said finally. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more confident in a decision. Hardships and
fights are inevitable, misunderstandings happen daily, but on the whole I’ve never had any
misgivings. I’ve never looked back and wondered ‘what if’.

“Now I put it to you, Harry,” she said, eyes boring into him once more. “Would you regret it?”

Regret what? Letting him leave? Or leaving Sirius in the past and returning to a world where the
boy was dead? Whatever face he made as he considered it must have passed for an answer, because
she nodded her acceptance.

“Well, then I will make your apologies to Minerva,” she said as she stood, her spine seeming to
stiffen and height to grow as she took on the role of matriarch once more.

“Oh, yeah, thanks,” Harry replied and stood, moving uncertainly to leave.

As the door closed behind him, the boy was at a loss for what to do. It wasn’t as if he could stay.
There were too many people relying on him in his right time; he was the Chosen One after all. He
couldn’t take Sirius back with him, either. The boy had to stay, fulfil his role in history. That’s
what Hermione and Dumbledore would tell him. Harry, however, thought there was some room for
alteration there. If Sirius vanished to the future things wouldn’t be so very different; Remus would
still be suspected as the spy, so the Potters likely would choose Peter as their secret keeper and all
would be the same save the man’s presumed death. It would be as if nothing had happened.

‘No,’ Harry chided himself sharply. ‘You cannot know that.’

He was looking only at the big events, but there was more to life than that. The small decisions
made in a day were equally as important. The compounded decisions of a lifetime, those could
alter the whole world, too. There were countless things Sirius was meant to do, tiny and seemingly
insignificant things that would change the course of another’s day or life, and they would then go
on to change the lives of those around them with their tiny decisions. He couldn’t carry the boy
back with him, not without altering innumerable lives. Things had to stay the way they were.

It was all rather a moot decision given that he wasn’t even certain the boy would want to go with
him.

Chapter End Notes

So DragonCon was AWESOME! I got a fist-bump from a Power Ranger -- A REAL
ONE! -- and saw some fabulous costumes. I managed to make it to the Center for
Puppetry Arts to see the new Labyrinth exhibit. I highly recommend visiting. It's
small, but makes you want to crawl inside and live there.

I might well disappear into a Labyrinth writing binge... it was where I started
fanfiction, so it wouldn't be all that surprising.

As it is, I'm helping a friend write her Power Ranger story Once A Ranger. A goodly
amount of the words are mine, so go read it! :D
In which rounds are performed and confusion is had.

The day had been going so well.

Remus had woken at a leisurely pace, quickly deciding that breakfast wasn’t worth giving up the girl he had managed to smuggle up into his bed the previous night. There was definitely something to be said for having roommates completely wrapped up in their own lives; not one of them noticed the extra set of shoes outside his curtains. Following two exhilarating yet heavenly hours memorising one another, Remus was certain he could draw the constellation of Hermione’s moles and freckles with absolute accuracy, especially if he were creating said work with his tongue.

That had been the morning.

Lunch destroyed his bliss.

What was the old saying? *Et in Arcadia ego*. Even in paradise, I. The Romans intended it to mean death, but loss was loss regardless of where the person went. Into the ground or into the future, Hermione was leaving.

The letter, that hateful letter, arrived with the rest of the post as the students ate their midday meal. A tawny owl swooped low and dropped the scroll neatly beside Hermione’s plate, startling the girl into dropping her sandwich. In the six months she had been attending Hogwarts with them, she had never gotten a letter. Not even one. Her face showed just how concerned she was to be receiving one now.

“Go on,” he had prodded her. A stupid thing to do, he now knew. He ought to have torn it to bits, then lit the bits on fire, swept up the ashes and scattered them to the four winds so the contents might never be viewed by human eyes. But he had urged her on, and so she took the paper up, loosed the ribbon and unrolled it. He could tell how grave the news was just by watching her, and then he read the words for himself and saw it was even worse.

“‘We’re leaving,’” she said as he set the scroll back on the table, her voice mournful.

“Knew that already,” he replied with equal despair.

“But now it’s official.” She slid closer on the bench, pressing herself against him and hugging him tightly. “It won’t be the same.”

“No, it won’t.”

Remus glared his anger at the man who had invaded his paradise. Dumbledore. He loved the man, he really did; without him he never would have been accepted at Hogwarts, but a growing part of him despised the man every breath he took for daring to take Hermione from him.

A figure moved to block his view. He didn’t need to look past the meticulously polished prefect badge on an obviously puffed chest to know who it was looking down on him. Roger McAlpin,
Ravenclaw. Possibly the single most pompous and irritating person to ever have been given authority in the history of the school, and the one person he was always assigned to rounds with on Sunday afternoons.

The boy cleared his throat to be sure his voice would carry. “Would you kindly keep your inappropriate displays of affection for more private locales? We are Prefects.” He paused to polish his badge. “We set the tone for the entire school.”

“Oi, Roger,” James called before Remus could get his own badge revoked. “With a name like yours, I’m really surprised you haven’t managed a girlfriend yet.” It was an old and worn out joke, but it never failed in getting the boy to flush and bluster in a most entertaining way.

“Funny,” the pretentious boy replied, the colour rising up his neck. “If you’re quite through being puerile.”

The Chaser swooned into Lily’s arms. “Oh, the prefect voice! He’s Rogered me!”

“Honestly, Lily, I don’t see how you can put up with him,” the Ravenclaw said, his dry and belittling tone severely dulled by the pink cheeks.

“Oi! Don’t you go Rogering my girlfriend!”

Roger flushed further, fighting a stammer as he turned away. “Lup-p-pin, r-rounds.”

Now that he knew just how little time was left, Remus was even more reluctant to detach himself from Hermione. He wanted to steal the girl away, lock her in the North Tower and refuse to leave. He wanted to cast the most powerful memory charm he knew on everyone to make them forget the girl ever existed, so he could hide her in his bed for the rest of their lives. He wanted to do all the charming and romantic things people ever did in Old Witches’ Tales, but he knew he couldn’t. Even if he could physically manage it, Hermione would never have agreed to miss classes.

He sighed and hoisted himself off the bench. “I’ll finish as quickly as I can.”

“That’s not the kind of thing a girl likes to hear,” James scolded. He looked earnestly at Hermione and said, “He just likes to hide his light under a bushel. The boy could ‘do rounds’ for hours and hours. You wouldn’t believe the stamina—”

“Enough of that,” Lily interrupted before the boy could drag the eyebrow waggling euphemism on. “And since when am I your girlfriend?”

The cheeky grin dropped off his face. “Ah… oh… Wishful thinking?”

“Presumptuous, more like,” the girl corrected with a flip of her hair and a barely concealed smile.

Remus was fighting a smile of his own as he watched the pair argue the semantics of their relationship. The title of ‘girlfriend’ was Lily’s and had been for three years at least. All the girl had to do was accept it, something no one thought imaginable before the start of this year and the arrival of Harry and Hermione; the Marauders plotted to help James win the comely redhead for his own, but secretly not one of them believed the girl would have ever changed her opinion of him. They placed bets on each of his attempts to woo her, wagering on how long she would put up with him each time. Considering the hand he had been dealt in life, Remus was never one for believing in fate or destiny, but he really did believe that the Potters’ son was meant to come back to help bring his parents together. Why Harry had to drag Hermione along to tear his heart out, though, was the question that would plague Remus for the rest of his unnaturally short life.
Rounds were painful. Admittedly, they always were when Roger McAlpin was involved. What could easily have been a three hours trip around the castle turned into a torturous six, with the boy doling out advice that he likely thought sage to anyone they caught breaking a school rule. Come dinner time, Remus was tempted to break about thirty school rules and a Commandment or two just to be rid of the conceited windbag once and for all.

“Now,” McAlpin said, taking the tone of one about to begin a long overdue sermon. “About you and Hermione.”

“Say one more word and Filch will be mopping you off the flags,” Remus said, hoping he would take the bold-faced hint and shut his stupid, self-righteous gob.

“It’s really a matter of decorum—Oi!” The boy wheezed as he fell to the flagstone floor, clutching his stomach.

“I gave you fair warning.”

“Deten—“

“Try it and see what happens. You’ll beg for the days when all we did was set everyone to giggling about your name.” He towered over the boy, letting every ounce of anger flow through him to his eyes, knowing what would happen when he did.

Once, years ago, Sirius had made the mistake of incurring his wrath; brave and foolhardy as he was, even the Beater had pissed himself when Remus’s eyes actually turned saffron as the wolf tried to take over. It was a fluke of his condition that he had always feared until today. McAlpin stammered inarticulately and scrambled to distance himself from his fellow prefect. Normally, Remus would have been concerned the boy would use the flash of yellow to decipher the true nature of his monthly illnesses, but now he was just glad to be rid of him. He watched the boy run, feeling the wolf return back to the cage where he kept it and regretting his actions only slightly. McAlpin was a git and deserved all the abuse rained upon him, so even that tiny twinge of guilt did not last long.

Pausing outside the Great Hall, Remus considered the warmth and laughter spilling through the open doors. Sunday supper had begun and his friends were doubtless there with a seat reserved for him. By now the news of the Grangers’ coming departure would have spread, and their mood was likely sorrowful from the impending loss. His own disposition would add little to the party he decided, as he turned away to find solace in solitude. He might as well get used to being alone again.

His long, lonely route took him the better part of three hours and carried him through more of the castle than he had visited on his rounds. On the fourth floor, opposite the tapestry of Catherine the Contrary poking trolls in the eye just because she could, he saw a boy pacing and dragging his hands through his long, black hair. From a distance, the boy looked like Sirius, but he was so uncharacteristically agitated Remus knew he must be mistaken.

“Hello?” he said cautiously as he approached. “Is something the matter?”

“It’s wrong,” the boy said as he turned.

Remus stopped at the sight of him. It was Sirius, but somehow it wasn’t. Physically, he was every inch the boy he knew, yet, for all his height and handsome features, was not himself. The spark of brilliance was gone. His grey eyes were dim and eyebrows drawn as if mere act of breathing required too much mental strain.
“What’s wrong?”

“The stairs,” Sirius said, pointing. “Every time I try, they take me to the wrong floor. I wait and try again, but the floor is still wrong.”

Remus studied the boy and the marble staircase to which he was gesturing. “Yes,” he replied slowly. “That’s not a moving staircase, Sirius. It will always take you to the wrong floor.”

“Then how do I get home?” Sirius looked to his friend, his face taking on a guileless innocence he had never before managed to make convincing. Today, it seemed like a look he wore every day of his life. The boy’s face contorted as if he were about to cry, and he left down the corridor. Sirius, he knew, was a first-rate actor, always the one chosen to instigate a prank among a crowd for his ability to show no signs of his devious intent, but even he could not have pulled off so drastic a change in his demeanour.

The boy was long gone by the time Remus decided to follow him, disappeared down a secret passage or he had simply taken a route the prefect had not predicted. He elected to wait for him in the common room rather than attempt to track him down through countless corridors and secret passages. If worse came to worse, he could always hunt for him on the Marauder’s Map. He hurried the rest of the way to the dorm, basking in the warmth of the fire and students after being alone for so long. Most of Gryffindor had returned to the tower, cramming themselves into to common room, filling every table, chair and cushion available.

Over the unbearably loud chatter, he heard a booming bark of a laugh. Sirius had made it back after all. Following the sound of the boy’s indomitable laughter, he found the boy laying across the couch and looking in no way innocent or dim. He looked quite the opposite, actually; his eyes bright and mischievous, speaking of a wicked intelligence and all the villainous ways he might use it.

“Problem, Messer Moony?” he said with a grin.

“Just surprised.”

“Understandable. I am full of surprises, as you well know.”

“Clearly. I never heard of anyone recovering from a Confundus as quickly as you,” Remus agreed as he settled himself down on the hearth rug. “Wish I had a camera. I’d have loved to catch a shot of you trying to make the stationary staircase move to a new floor.”

“Confundus?” James questioned.

“Yeah, Confundus,” the Animagus said, leaping to his feet. “Snivellus again. Best he could come up with in retaliation for that blue hair prank we pulled ages ago. Out of curiosity, which staircase was that?”


The boy gave a bored shrug as he turned toward the portrait hole. “No reason.”

“You always have a reason.”

“Perhaps I want to go hunt Snivelly down and take my revenge on his feeble attempt at vengeance. He had to be nearby watching me as an idiot and is probably still there reliving his fleeting moment of glory,” he offered.

The boy replied with a pair of forked fingers over his shoulder.

“You really think he’s after Severus?” Lily questioned, frowning as the boy disappeared through a crush of students.

“No, Sirius likes his pranks elaborate and public,” James assured her. “I’m sure he’ll get back at him, but not tonight. No idea what he’s really playing at, though.”

“When did he make it back? The state he was in, I didn’t expect him to find the way until midnight.”

“Dunno,” he frowned. “He was here when we got back from dinner.”

It was Remus’s turn to frown his confusion as he considered that statement. “Well, that makes no sense.”
Lacklustre

Chapter Summary

In which Sirius is odd, and Harry is confused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

60: Lacklustre

“Wait for it.” Morven’s voice echoed and re-echoed off the stone walls as he shouted out the direction.

The man stood above them on the small landing outside his private quarters. Harry remembered Lockhart using the same landing to make a grand entrance his first day of teaching. Unlike that strutting oaf, Morven was not aiming to astound and awe or even to impress; he simply needed something tall to stand on. From his elevated position, he could better gauge their ability in the task at hand. Practicality, not pomp.

All at once the fourteen pillows the man had been holding aloft with his wand dropped, plummeting toward their heads. Most of the pillows froze in mid-air, halted by the silent spells sent to arrest their movement. Harry grinned up at his pillow, a ghastly green- and orange-striped thing with tattered purple fringe around the edges. It was floating like one of the candles in the Great Hall some ten or more feet above him. His eyes travelled across the other pillows, each one equally as hideous and most far closer to the floor than his, save Hermione’s which still hung exactly where it was before Morven released them.

With his eyes pointed elsewhere, he failed to notice the fuzzy baby blue mass until it fell square in his face.

“Oi!” he cried, throwing the pillow at its owner. He expected the boy to laugh and throw it back, to smirk or otherwise show that he had allowed the cushion to hit him intentionally. Instead, he watched as Sirius’s eyebrows welded themselves together in a look of absolute confusion.

“Damn it,” Sirius muttered.

“I thought you already knew how to do non-verbal spells,” commented Harry, failing to hide his unease.

“I dunno,” the boy said in a humourless voice. “I just can’t. Too distracted I guess.”

Harry watched as he tried again, throwing the pillow high, his face contorting as he put more effort into the spell than seemed necessary, certainly more than someone possessing his effortless talent should have needed. Still the little cushion fell to the floor.

Morven’s voice came from on high, interrupting Sirius’s next failed attempt. “The assignment is on the board. Twelve inches means twelve inches. No cheating, Rutherford, I’m on to you and your ‘misspellings’! Mr Granger, collect the cushions. The rest of you may go.”
Harry took the pillow from Sirius, watching his handsome face fold and crease into something painfully similar to the man he would become. Frustration turned to anxiety and then desperation before the boy finally fled the room.

“That friend of yours should have been able to get it first try,” Morven observed. “Something the matter with him?” The question sounded as if it had been tossed into the air as lightly as the pillow he now threw onto the pile near the wall, but Harry knew there was honest concern behind it.

“He has a lot on his mind,” Harry said. “He’s got to make a choice that will change his whole life.”

“All decisions seem as if they’ll do that at sixteen,” the man replied, not unkindly.

Normally, Harry would have corrected him, informed him that the choices Sirius was wrestling with would have consequences the man could never fathom. Yes, Morven’s life had been turned upside down when he had been sacked from his job, but Sirius would lose the adoration of an entire world; he wouldn’t just be stripped of a title, but of his identity. Such a loss would hardly be insignificant. He wanted to make him understand, but he was in no mood to talk about Sirius. The boy had barely spoken to him since leaving him by the lake eleven days earlier. He had thought that in those eleven days Sirius might spare him some time, but he disappeared for hours on end, returning to the dormitory too exhausted to do anything more than fall into bed and snore. There had been no repeat of their night together; the only time they spent in one another’s company was in a classroom.

“Well, you’ll be heading home soon,” Morven said. “Whatever decision that boy makes can’t bother you too much, now can it? He can tell you all about it once you’re back home.”

Harry was quite fond of the incongruous Aloysius Morven, but he couldn’t keep the cold severity from his voice when he retorted. “He’s dead there, Professor.”

The man’s face took on the look of someone sceptical of what he had just been told. “Harry,” he spoke slowly as if to ensure his student would grasp each word, “you have to understand that being here for as long as you have, interacting with these people – your family, Sirius – will have had an effect. You can’t know the long-reaching influence your presence might have had.”

Morven’s voice echoed in his head the same way they did around the walls during class, repeating and growing in magnitude until he heard nothing else. Changes. Family. Sirius.

Hope stirred in him. He had felt it before, inflating like a balloon in his chest. He felt it when he first met Hagrid, when he made his first-ever friend in Ron, when Sirius suggested he leave the Dursleys to live with him, when he imagined telling his parents about the future; though in those latter moments the hopefulness was tempered by a sharp pang of guilt. Now that balloon swelled as he imagined finding his parents. It grew to point of bursting at the idea of Sirius alive.

He clenched his eyes and forced the picture from his mind. “Don’t,” he warned.

“It’s not entirely without precedence, Harry. There have been—“

“No! I’ve already lost him once. I’m about to lose him a second time. I will not mourn him three times when I get there and see that nothing has changed,” he all but shouted. Refusing to listen to any further arguments the man might make, he stole from the classroom, running as fast as he could away from the excruciating false hope he was being offered. He raced through the corridors, not caring who he was shoving out of his way, until he reached the one person he knew would talk sense: Hermione. He latched onto her, pulled her from Remus and into a dim corner as far from the other students as possible.
“Harry, what’s the matter?” Hermione demanded, her eyes darting over every inch of him. “Are you hurt?”

“Hermione,” he gasped, pushing at the stitch in his side, “have we really mucked it all up?”

“What?”

“Being here, talking to them, being with them – has it mucked everything up?”

She did not offer assurances or damnation, not overtly anyway. Her mouth pulled into a pout as she studied him. “Harry,” she sighed. “There are bound to be some consequences. We knew that. I can’t even being to calculate what they might be, but I am hopeful that once we’re gone Dumbledore will work to ensure the damage is minimal.”

Harry braced himself against the wall, too exhausted to hold himself up any longer. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Why afraid? That’s a good thing.”

“Not for Sirius,” he answered dully.

“Dammit, Harry! Sirius was a grown man. A brilliant man. One clever enough to choose his own path,” she hissed. “We cannot intentionally alter anything as significant as that.”

“No, I wasn’t going to, but I thought,” he groaned and tore at his hair. “I thought that if he really did care… he would stay alive to see me again.”

“Oh.” The girl seemed to soften as understanding took over her anger. She moved closer, wrapping him in her arms and pulling him close.

“It’s daft, I know, but I just—Never mind. I was being childi—”

She hugged him tighter, cutting off his reply. “No, it’s good to have hope. I want him to be alive for you, too, but I don’t want you be hurt if nothing has changed.”

Harry had wanted the girl to tell him with absolute conviction that their presence had altered things enough that Sirius would still be alive in their right time. He wanted her to say that Dumbledore would wipe the memories of every student so all traces of Hermione and Harry Granger would be gone. He wanted her to give him a solid answer one way or the other, but he knew she couldn’t know the future any more than he could. They just had to muddle through and hope for the best, just like everyone else.

“Are you okay now?”

“No, but what choice do we have?” Harry asked with a sorrowful smile.

Hermione took his hand and pulled him to the Gryffindor table. He had no appetite for food, but knew that James would not allow him to skip an entire meal this close to the final match of the year.

“Fashionably late, Messer Granger. I approve!” Peter cried dramatically as the pair sat down. “Never be the first to arrive, it gives the impression of being overly eager.”

“I cannot abide an eager eater,” James added in a tone of equal absurdity.

“Well, then, you’ll love me, I’m in no mood for food,” Harry said, hint of a smile on his face once
more. “Shall I go?”

The boy’s hands were on his shoulder instantly, pushing him down onto the bench with a bruising force. “Don’t you dare! Two days, Granger. Two days until we face Slytherin.”

“Is it just two days?” Sirius asked from Harry’s other side. Harry smiled at the question, expecting him to play at not having known, to poke fun at James for waking them up with a countdown each morning and keeping the T-Minus posted above the fire in the common room. His smile fell when he realised that the question had been an honest one. Sirius truly had not known.

“Shut it,” James snapped. “You’re likely going to warm the bench you’ve been such rubbish this week. Honestly, Pads, I don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

“Me neither,” the boy muttered and turned back to his plate.

Harry watched as he ate, scowling at how little life was left in him since his cousin had made her empty threats. The effort of deciding whether to fully break from his family seemed to be using up all his brilliance. He had never known Sirius to be so cautious in his decisions before; he leapt first and looked later, if at all. Why was he being so damned wary now?

“Practice after Herbology,” James informed them. “Be ready.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry muttered without taking his eyes off Sirius.

“Yeah. Hm. What?” Sirius looked up from his plate.

“Quidditch practice. You do remember what Quidditch is, right?” the Chaser demanded with biting sarcasm.

The boy nodded. “Course I do.”

Sirius may have remembered what the game was, but he certainly did not remember how to play it. His aim was terrible, his bat missing the bludger more often than it made contact. Not that it mattered since his arm was so weak he couldn’t hit the ball more than two broom lengths. If he played half this bad in the real game, he might as well personally hand the trophy over to the Slytherins.

“SIRIUS! I SWEAR ON MY FUTURE SON’S LIFE, IF YOU DON’T GET YOUR ARSE INTO THIS GAME I WILL MAKE YOU WISH THAT COW OF A MOTHER NEVER GAVE BIRTH TO YOU!” James bellowed across the pitch.

The boy nodded his understanding but continued to play appallingly. It took a further fifteen excruciating minutes before James finally saw fit to intervene.

“BREAK!” the boy shouted.

The players flew their brooms down to the ground, touching down and muttering their annoyance at the way the game would likely end if a certain beater did not start doing his job properly. Sirius, seemingly oblivious to their hard glares and barely veiled threats, put his broom on his shoulder and walked off to the locker room.

“Sirius, where are you going?” Fenton called after him. “It’s just a breather, you twat!”

“Let him go,” Silvia said. “He’s so rubbish lately, we’re better off without him.”
James, the boy’s dearest and oldest friend, offered no argument or defence. Instead, he turned to each player and analysed their performance, told each one in turn what they had been doing wrong in each of the plays.

“All right, let’s try it again,” he said. “Formation B, take it from Chaos in a C-Cup.”

“What? I don’t get a pep talk?” Sirius questioned, startling his teammates, who had not heard his return to the pitch.

The Captain recovered his composure and glared. “You haven’t earned one. You’re rubbish. If we were allowed to bet on the games, I’d be putting money on Slytherin after seeing you play today.”

Sirius nodded his understanding just as he had at lunch, but the gesture was somehow not the same. “That good, eh?”

“Worse. Now get up there and try not to make me regret being your friend,” James ordered, kicking off and flying to centre pitch.

From his place overlooking the players, Harry could see the stark contrast between Sirius before the break and after. He was playing to win now, hitting each bludger hard and fast, never missing a ball or his target. Even his broom work had changed; it was not the lazy drift he had shown in earlier practices of the week or just ten minutes ago, but a seemingly haphazard way of flying that was at once both elegant and completely wild. In short, he was playing like himself again. Harry was so distracted watching Sirius, he forgot to look for the Snitch and lost it to Lewis, the second string Seeker.

“What the hell are you playing at being so rubbish?” the Captain demanded, marching toward him the moment they landed.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered.

“Not you! Although, I ought to shout at you for letting her win, you git,” James said, pushing him away and continuing on to Sirius. “I’m talking to you. You have been absolute shite for a week and after a ten minute breather you’re fine again. Why?”

Sirius shrugged. “Thinking deep thoughts on important matters. It uses a surprising amount of grey matter.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

“An uncharacteristically truthful one,” the boy replied. He paused and let an impish smile take over his face. “Would you rather I lied, said I was befuddled by a hex or had a dim-witted doppelgänger running about the place?”

“Shut it,” James ordered, offering the boy a forceful shove that belied the grin fighting to take over his face. “Are you done thinking deep thoughts? Can you turn that overworked grey matter to more important things? Like Quidditch.”

Sirius’s mouth pulled down into a frown as he considered the question. The look might have been identical to the one he had been wearing in recent days were it not for the brilliant twinkle in his eyes. “I believe I can put a bit of thought toward the match,” he replied, that twinkle turning devious as his eyes turned toward Harry. “Among other things.”

“Git,” James muttered, glaring his annoyance at his friend before disappearing into the changing room, leaving Harry and Sirius alone on the pitch.
Silence reigned for several agonising minutes as Harry tried to decide what to say, and Sirius ogled and smirked. The longer and more blatantly the boy eyed him, the harder it became to find words that said all he thought needed saying. Sirius spoke before he managed to find anything even close to sufficient.

“So,” he said casually, “I’ve been a pretty terrible boyfriend these last few days, haven’t I?”

Once, when Harry was six, he had stumbled on Uncle Vernon changing a plug in the sitting room. While his uncle went to retrieve the gaffer tape and turn off the electricity, Harry stupidly put his finger to the exposed wire. The shock on his fingertip had quickly turned to burning then to numbness, but the tingle that ran through his whole body was almost pleasant. It was the closest thing he could find to how he felt on hearing Sirius call himself his boyfriend; it was shocking and painful to think he was officially involved with another boy, but the rush of delight more than compensated for the initial discomfort.

“I was thinking I would whisk you away after dinner to make it up to you,” Sirius smiled, sliding close.

“Can’t,” Harry groaned. “I have detention every night this week. It’s the only way I could get Saturday off for the match.”

“After the match—“

“Sirius, we’re leaving after the match. Don’t you remember?”

The boy’s face, even in the low light of the distant torches, showed clearly that he did not remember. As he watched, Harry swore he could see the boy’s mental state shift, not back to moronic or angry, but into a calm consideration that bordered on stony. “I thought I’d have more time,” he said quietly, so quietly Harry was certain he was talking to himself.

“What?”

Sirius cleared his throat and replied with a detached determination. “Listen, Harry, I don’t want you to get shouted at on account of me. You go on. I’ll catch you up later.”

“Are you all right?” Harry questioned.

He nodded solemnly. “Yeah, just realised there’s something I have to do.”

“Can I help?”

“You already have,” the boy assured him, leaning in close and kissing him.

Given his desire to make up for lost time, he expected Sirius to keep him close, stay with him in the changing room and through dinner until he had to leave for his detention, but he was wrong. The boy pulled away and left him outside the locker room. Harry watched the other boy move purposefully up the hill toward the castle, completely lost for understanding when it came to the many moods of Sirius Black.

Despite his confusion, one thing did stand out to Harry as he stared at the vacant grounds: Sirius had once again left him standing shivering and alone.

“Strike two,” he told the empty night.
Did you know that baseball was invented in Surrey? As such, I imagine Uncle Vernon was secretly a fan of the sport, and Harry learned many of the rules and terms of the game.
Second Thoughts

Chapter Summary

In which Harry attempts to take control of his emotions and heart (yeah, good luck with that one, kid).

A person could only take so much disappointment.

Harry Potter could take more than most. His lacklustre childhood running from his cousin’s gang, living in baggy hand-me-downs and sleeping in a cupboard had both lowered his expectations of life and raised his threshold for accepting horrible situations. Or so he had thought.

As he stared down at his uneaten roast and jacket potatoes, Harry realised that his threshold for misery had finally been crossed. He was absolutely, bitterly disappointed. Not in life or himself. He was disappointed in Sirius.

After all he had seen and been told about the boy, he had expected more from him. He had expected unparalleled bravado and a pig-headed determination to do, if not what was right, at least what he thought best. But the boy had left him. Twice. One time he could accept given the blow the boy had just been dealt by his cousin, but to do it two times showed a cowardice Harry had never thought Sirius capable of possessing. He was allowing his family to make his decisions for him. He had walked away with some vague and, frankly, weak excuse about some class assignment or something, and now he wasn’t even at dinner.

His gut twisted as he looked to the empty space where Sirius ought to be sitting.

“He’ll come ‘round,” Peter promised.

“You know that for fact?”

“Sirius always does the right thing by his friends,” the boy insisted. “Especially if it means a pair of forked fingers at that family of his.”

Harry looked across the table at the cherubic face smiling encouragingly, if a little too sympathetically, at him. He wasn’t sure when it happened but somewhere along the way he had started to kind of like Peter. He still hated him for what he would do and for landing him in detention for the Red Handed Harry prank, but he could be genuinely kind when he wanted to be. Somehow, having Peter be so much more than he had anticipated made Sirius’s behaviour seem all the worse.

“Shouldn’t you be discouraging me from starting a relationship two days before I leave for another country?” he questioned.

Peter snorted. “You two have been a couple for months, Granger. It’s just you that’s been too stupid to see it.”

“And now that I do, Sirius is running away from me every chance he gets,” he replied darkly.

“Sirius doesn’t run from anything. Certainly not you.”
Harry couldn’t keep the smile from his face. “What? And here I thought I was perfectly terrifying in every way.”

“Quit your moping,” James said as he threw a roll at him. “And quit trying to get into Padfoot’s trousers. I’m placing all the blame for his rubbish performance on you.”

“How could that possibly be my fault? He’s not even talking to me.”

“Precisely,” he said, easily dodging the roll Harry had sent flying at his head. “He’s too busy ‘thinking’ and all that rot to focus on what really matters. Five years we’ve been on the team, Harry – four of which Sirius has spent snogging his way through this school – and in all that time he has never been as crap as he has been this week. As far as I’m concerned, this is all your doing.”

“It’s not my fault if he’s being a coward.”

“I think Pads is fully justified after you spring all this Johannesburg stuff on him. It’s not as if the poor sod had insight into such things, now is it?” Beneath the smug smile, there was a sharp barb of anger, which James had every right to direct it at him. Harry really had known better the entire time he had flirted with Sirius. Knowing what he did, he should not have let anything come of it.

“Little late now,” he muttered and pushed himself up off the bench.

“Not too late to fix it. I will not have you running off to Johannesburg and leaving me with a broken-hearted beater too busy crying to do his job properly.”

Harry wasn’t sure if he ought to laugh or frown as he imagined Sirius as one of the women from Aunt Petunia’s telly dramas, sobbing into a bowl of ice cream and laying about the house in fuzzy slippers. It was wholly unrealistic. “In case you didn’t notice, Sirius has left me. Not the other way round.”

“Because you’ve never walked away from something you want,” James commented, hazel eyes boring into him over the tops of his glasses.

Harry could not tamp down the knowledge that he was being scolded by his father. The conditions were convoluted, but he knew the tone and look being thrown at him were those of a disappointed parent and not those of a friend. He shifted uncomfortably on the bench. “I have detention.”

“And I couldn’t be prouder,” James said. Harry couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic.

The boy’s words haunted him all the way to Filch’s office. For as long as he had known the truth about the Potters, Harry had wanted to make his parents proud, to show them how good he was at being a Wizard. He might have done as much, but he felt as if he were proving nothing but a disappointment as a human being.

“Hurry it up,” Filch called.

The man was actually smiling when Harry met him outside his door.

“Dungeons” was all the man said as he handed over a pail. Apparently, he quite enjoyed seeing him coated head to toe in green muck, for he hadn’t bothered inventing any new or more disgusting punishments for the final week of detentions. It was just as well. The task was harmless and mindless enough to allow him to think on all the things that needed thinking on. Namely how to fix the mess he had made with Sirius.

“You’ll have company tonight,” the caretaker informed him, his gravelly voice positively gleeful.
“Joy,” he said as he started down the stairs to the dungeons. Counter intuitively, the sconces were spread farther apart the lower he travelled, making visibility something of an issue. Whoever was down here with him probably wouldn’t even know he was there, which suited him just fine. He wasn’t in the mood to listen to someone whinge about how unfair the punishment was.

“Harry? Is that you?” a voice called from the darkness.

He knew that voice. It had filled his dreams for months, whispered in his ear and hummed against his skin. “Sirius? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Got detention, didn’t I?” he replied as he found his way into the light of a torch, displaying his own pail and a brush green with algae. His shirt showed that he had been at the task for some time.

“I thought you had an assignment to work on. That’s the excuse you gave when you left me. Again,” Harry replied. “Got caught reading a book, did you?” He sounded petulant, and he knew it. He also knew that he didn’t care.

Sirius, to his credit, looked suitably chastised. “Actually, that was my excuse for leaving you at the lake. Last time it was that I had something to do. I wasn’t paying attention, didn’t see that bloody cat. James is going to kill me for losing the map to Filch.”

“He’ll kill you worse if you lose the match,” Harry informed him flatly. “So what were you doing that had you so distracted?”

The boy hesitated. “Things,” he finally said. “Important things. I wouldn’t have been so distracted, but I didn’t have a lot of time to think about it, now did it? You only just found the spell that brought you here a fortnight ago. Next thing I know you’re leaving on Saturday!”

“We got the letter a week ago, Sirius. You probably didn’t know about it because you were off having a strop.”

“It wasn’t a strop. I was off thinking about important things. For you.” He was across the corridor in an instant, towering over Harry as if he might bully him into accepting his explanations.

Harry had faced far more intimidating opponents than him. He gave the boy a hard shove, sending him stumbling back a pace. “You want to do something for me? Try being with me. I’m leaving in two days, going away to a place I’ll never see you again, and instead of spending the rest of my time with you, I’m trying to sort out what the hell game you’re playing!”

“Harry, I—“

All the hours of frustration and worry found an outlet as Harry balled up a fist and swung hard at the boy’s face, connected with painful accuracy. “No! I don’t care about your bollocks excuses. I am tired of everyone abandoning me. If you had planned on leaving me from the beginning, you should have just left me alone. I warned you not to make promises you couldn’t keep.”

“I want to keep this one,” Sirius said, catching his hands before he could strike again. “I want to.”

“Then why haven’t you?”

Even in the dim light, Harry could see his grey eyes look away evasively. “There… There were things—“

“Important things you had to think about. Heard it before,” Harry scoffed. “Let me go.”
“Why? So you can hit me again?”

“So I can be the one to walk away for a change,” he spat, jerking his hands free as Sirius went limp in shock. “I’m doing what I should have done months ago, Sirius. I’m not playing your game.”

“It’s not a game.”

“Like it wasn’t a game with that Ravenclaw second year? You treat people like it’s a prank. It’s all just fun and fucking with people.”

“It’s not a game or a prank. I love you.”

“No, you don’t. You just want what you can’t have.” Harry took up his pail and stalked into the darkness, too angry to care which way he was going so long as it was far from Sirius. He had spent too much time trying to figure out a mystery that did not need solving. He was returning to a world without Sirius Black. All this fussing and fighting was pointless, a melodrama long since over in twenty years.

Still, his chest was on fire as the echo of those three short words rang in his ears.

Yes, he loved Sirius. His Sirius, the one dead and gone in another time. And, yes, his Sirius had loved him. He had loved him as a friend, maybe even as a son, before his stupidity got the man killed. That’s all this was, he insisted, guilt making him too attached to a boy that was not the man he knew. He wasn’t even supposed to know this boy. It was a mistake. Just a mistake. He repeated it over and over as he scrubbed at the walls.

“No, you don’t. You just want what you can’t have.” Sirius said. “You’ve not exactly been innocent in all this. You flirted with me as much as I did you. You didn’t tell me to piss off when I came to your bed that night. You want me. You love me.”

Harry had not bothered to turn as the boy spoke. They were in darkness and wouldn’t have been able to see each other even if he had, but to turn would have meant he was accepting in some way, that he wanted what the boy had to offer; he couldn’t let Sirius think that. He leaned his forehead against the stones, feeling the slick algae against his hot skin. Beneath that clinging slime, the wall was cold and hard and everything he needed Sirius to hear in his voice. He forced himself to sound detached as he replied.

“That was a mistake. You were a mistake. I’m only staying for James, then we’re going home.”
Friday night shifted seamlessly into Saturday morning, turning Remus from the luckiest boy in school to the single most despondent. There was no clock to indicate the time, no calendar to tell him the date. He needed neither, for he could feel the pull of the moon as it rose and fell across the sky; he knew by that terrible, primal tug that the moon was past its apex and had already started its descent. They were into the wee hours of Saturday. Not just any Saturday. The last Saturday he would ever spend with Hermione.

He rolled onto his side to see the girl next to him. Her face was partially obscured by a mass of curls, but he could just make out the shape of her mouth and jaw. While he had memorised every bit of her, he could not keep himself from admiring what was before him.

“You shoul’be ‘sleep,” the girl mumbled, drowsiness slurring her words. “S’almost the full moon.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead. Until then, I want to be with you.”

“M’bout to fall asleep.”

“Some tea?” he offered, eager to keep her awake for as long as he could.

“Don’ have any.”

“We’re near enough to the kitchens,” he said. “The house-elves could make you some.”

If she were fully conscious, he would have been subjected to a severe talking-to about using the poor, overworked house-elves for his own gain and pleasure. Thankfully, the girl was so far gone she just nodded and began a languorous search for her clothes. It took the better part of an hour to make the short journey from their empty classroom to the kitchens. Normally, it would have been their cautiousness that made the trip so long, but on this particular morning they were simply moving too lazily to make good time.

Hermione was barely able to lift her feet. She leaned on him most of the way, her face pressed against his jumper, arm under his cloak and fingers in the back pocket of his trousers. He ached knowing that he would never feel such a touch again; more than mere physical intimacy, it spoke of the comfort she felt in his presence. It spoke of trust.

He shook his head and forced himself to think of something else before the word ‘love’ entered his mind. Knowing he loved her was painful enough, but he refused to lose a girl who loved him back.

“Tea?” he asked as they settled down on the bench in the kitchen.

Her reply was interrupted by a yawn but sounded enough like a ‘yes’ to send a house-elf scurrying
off to boil some water. With their natural magic, a steaming mug of tea was before them within seconds. Even that was too slow. Hermione was already asleep.

“Damn,” Remus cursed softly, brushing the curls from her face and hating himself for wanting to wake her.

“Really ought to give that girl a break, Moony,” Sirius chided dully from the doorway. The boy crossed to the table and dropped onto the bench opposite with none of his usual gusto.

“She’s not the only one who needs some rest,” the prefect commented. “You look like hell.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not joking,” Remus insisted as he studied his friend. His hair was a mass of tangles. His eyes shot through with tiny red vessels. With the heavy shadows weighing those eyes down, Remus could guess than the boy hadn’t slept for a week. Generally, that would mean very little when it came to Sirius, who often went days without sleep when someone caught his full attention or, more likely, when a mad prank had taken root in his brain. However, his manner was all wrong. The casual and effortless elegance he normally exuded were gone, making his appearance something worth worrying about.

“What the hell have you been doing?”

“Thinking mostly,” Sirius replied. Those bloodshot eyes fell from Remus to the girl at his side. “You think she would tell me about the future if I asked? It’s not as if she’d be breaking any rules. I’m dead there.”

“You and me both,” he muttered, but shook his head. “No, she’s refused to tell me anything specific.”

“Thought as much,” the boy sighed, his hands running through his hair as well as the knots would allow.

“Why? What do you want to know?” Remus questioned. He knew the things he would want to ask her if he dared. He wondered about precisely when he would die, how long after teaching at Hogwarts. He wondered how well he and Hermione knew one another, knowing the answer would be painfully platonic. How old would he be when they met? Would he still be jealous watching her interact with the boys her age? So many questions, but he refused to voice any of them. She wouldn’t tell him even if he pressed her, so it was best to keep to himself his petty jealousy of boys not yet born.

“Harry said I died,” Sirius replied slowly, as he considered what it was he really wanted to know. “He gave me all the details down to the date.”

“You want to know if you can stop it happening?”

The answer came quickly and with a consternation Remus hadn’t expected. “No,” the boy said, as if it was the stupidest thing Remus might have said. “I want to know how different I was then, what I was like.”

“Foolhardy, same as now.”

“Git.”

“Maybe, but it’s still true. From what little Hermione’s been willing to share, you— he ran
headlong into danger and died.” Remus watched his friend’s face as he considered his future death. Sirius had always been the one among them least likely to give a damn about consequences, which made his dwelling on so distant an event all the more troubling.

“That’s what Harry said,” Sirius nodded as a frown pulled across his already strained face. It was clearly not the answer he wanted.

“So what are you going to do about it, if you’ve no plans to stop yourself dying?”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head, Moony,” the boy offered a pale shade of his usual smirk. “I won’t do anything too daft.”

Worried as he was for his friend, Remus couldn’t help but snort. “I’ll believe that the day you sprout a second head.”

The boy across the table quaked with silent laughter.

“What?”

Sirius could only shake his head as he fought the merriment that only he understood. He was clearly off his nut. Lovesickness did not suit him.

“Do you think Dumbledore will wipe our memories once they’ve gone?” Remus asked.

“Merlin, I hope so. I don’t think I can bare another day of this,” the boy answered, his mad mirth ebbing with the reminder of the ache tearing at them both. “He’ll have to,” he said, but after a pause added, “Won’t he?”

The uncertainty in his voice was painful to hear. Not just because it was so unnatural a sound coming from Sirius, but because it was a doubt Remus, too, had felt ever since learning the truth. Knowing even a hint of those future events would be dangerous enough, so he was certain the headmaster wouldn’t allow them to retain any memories that might be deemed hazardous. Yet, there was a niggling worry, a sly little voice that spoke to him in the darkness, which made him ask why Dumbledore would have allowed any of this to happen to begin with. Why, if it was so dangerous, would he allow either Harry or Hermione to get involved with anyone in this time; why would he permit them the opportunity to divulge anything? Surely, prevention would have been the wiser course. That man was deceptively outlandish; his eccentricities belied a cunning mind. To so strange and wily a man, perhaps a little knowledge was not a dangerous thing.

Struck by the horrifying thought that Dumbledore might leave them to suffer, Remus suggested, “If he doesn’t, maybe we ought to do it ourselves.”

“Good plan.”

“M’not asleep,” Hermione muttered.

Remus wanted to smile, but hearing even that sleepy declaration made his heart clench painfully. “Tonight, after they’ve gone, we start studying memory charms.”

“No arguments from me,” Sirius replied, slapping his hands down on the table and hoisting himself to his feet. “Let’s go. Prongs will murder me most foully if I’m not halfway decent during the match.”

“From what I hear, he’s planning to murder you slowly regardless of how well you play. You deflowered his son, Pads. Such things cannot go unpunished.”
For a moment the old Sirius was there in the kitchen, radiating confidence and charm. “Worth it.”

“Git.”

Sirius offered no retort as he walked away, leaving Remus to carry the twin burdens of a sleeping Hermione and the worry for his friend. Weighed down as he was, the trip from the common room to his bed was simply too much; he dropped the girl onto the couch and fell asleep where he stood, too exhausted to care where he landed.

“Oi! Moony!”

“Fuck off,” the boy said into the hearth rug.

A determined foot prodded his backside, irritating him enough to make him roll over. “You seen Padfoot?”

“What time’s it?” Remus groaned.

“Nearly seven,” James informed him. “The game starts in a few hours, and no one’s seen Sirius.”

“You check Harry’s bed?”

He swore he could hear the boy’s teeth grinding down to the gums. “Paid Wormtail ten Galleons to look for me.”

“If he’s not there, then I dunno.”

“Useless as always, Moony,” James muttered. “Don’t miss the game. I’ll not have you miss the glory of watching my son and me take home the trophy.” He gave the boy’s ribs a gentle kick before leaving.

Remus groaned and sat up, staring unseeing at the ashes in the grate as his exhausted brain thought over what James had said.

Saturday. Game day. Sirius missing. Where might the boy be hiding? He remembered their conversation and considered the possibility that the heartbroken boy might have tried to cast a memory charm on himself. Brilliant as he was, not even Sirius could manage something so precise and delicate on his first try, not as preoccupied as he was. There was a real possibility that he had lobotomised himself and was currently drooling on one of Madam Pince’s precious books.

He had done something daft, Remus just knew it.

He cursed as he stood, blinking away the sleep still clinging tenaciously to his eyes. Of all the things he wanted to do on his last morning with Hermione, hunting down a moronic Beater and freezing his bollocks off in the Quidditch stands were each very far from his first choice.

His first choice was still asleep on the couch.

“Hermione,” he said gently. The girl offered a groan and rolled over in her sleep. “Hermione.”

“Too early.”

“It’s Saturday,” he reminded her. “Game day.”

“I don’t doubt it, but James is fairly insistent.”

The girl squinted over her shoulder at him, sleepy frown on her face. “You going?”

“Not without you.” He thought that would give her incentive enough to get up, but she smiled and rolled back over.

“Then you’re not going.”

He sighed. “Hermione, you may not have to deal with James after today, but I do. He will never let me forget it if I miss his last game with Harry.” He found her arms and pulled her upright. “We can go sleep in my bed for a while, but I can’t miss the game.”

“Fine,” she grumbled. “But do we have to sleep in your bed?”

“I can’t carry you up to yours,” he reasoned.

“No, I mean can we do something else in your bed beside sleep?”

Remus froze where he stood, his body on fire with her suggestion; he didn’t have enough blood left to be capable of forming words. Several seconds passed while he thought of the most unpleasant things he had ever experienced. Even then, it was too much to look at her. “Dammit, Hermione. Why are you leaving me?”

She offered a knowing giggle in reply.

Dammit, his life was unfair. Why had he been offered a girl like Hermione when he wouldn’t be allowed to keep her?

“Come on,” she said as her fingers entwined his. “They left while you stood there gaping. Room is all ours now. The game won’t start for another three hours. Plenty of time to make sure you remember me for the rest of your life.”

He muttered a curse under his breath, but made no effort to stop her taking him up to his room.

Chapter End Notes

So I just got word that on Monday a state representative (as in Washington DC House of Representatives) will be visiting our school and reading my kids a story.

Being me, I'm totally going to wear one of my not-quite-Rock-a-Billy casual cosplay outfits. But which one... Captain America (blue skirt with the simplified shield embroidered on the side) or Winter Soldier (black skirt with the red star and jagged lines of silver emulating the metal plates on his arm embroidered on it)?

The sheets were rough against his skin, the air glacial, but Harry barely noticed as he rocked in his bed, knees pulled tight into his chest, hands tugging at his hair, gasping for breath.

It was a dream. He couldn’t quite remember it, not like the ones that had haunted him since June. This had been different, no sneering, angry young Sirius lashing out at him and abandoning him. Sirius had been there, always just out of reach; his voice called to him from down a dark corridor, demanding answers he was incapable of giving. The questions were lost to his waking mind, but the feelings the questions stirred were still with him. The panic and the desperate desire to flee, to escape. He wasn’t sure what it was he was fleeing from, but he knew where he wanted to be.

“Home.”

There had been a time when he thought Hogwarts would always be his home, but this place was not his Hogwarts. It was every bit as alien and forbidding as he had thought it to be. As he fought to put air into his lungs, the boy wanted nothing more than to run from this strange bed and room, find the headmaster and demand he be sent back to where he belonged. A pang of guilt hit him at the idea of deserting James the morning of the game. Filial loyalty was the only thing keeping him in 1977. His only other reason to stay had been left in the dungeons.

Sirius had made little effort to speak to him since the night of their shared detention. Dejected glances across the common room and notes easily ignored during class had been his sole attempts at rekindling their short-lived relationship. Harry had never been so grateful for Filch and detentions, for they kept him far from the boy who was nothing like the man he missed.

He clenched his eyes shut and tried to push all thoughts of Sirius from his mind. There had been a time during the summer when such a thing had come easily. Weeks of meditation practice at Privet Drive had allowed him to sit in semi-consciousness with thoughts of absolutely nothing in his brain, but it had been ages since he had attempted it. He was out of practice, and all he saw when he shut his eyes were the two faces that had dogged his dreams since June. Angry tears threatened to spill down his face. He wiped them away and opened his eyes in time to see the curtain move.

It was a slight shake of the fabric, as if someone on the other side grasped and then released the curtain. It came again a moment later. Then again. Finally, the curtain pulled aside just long enough for a face to push in. Peter’s face, his round cheeks flushed red and eyes clamped shut.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“Eh?” the boy squeaked, watery blue eyes flying open. “James made me do it!”

“Is he there?” The Chaser’s voice demanded, at once commanding and slightly queasy.

“No.”

“Yes, I am,” Harry said.
“Oh, thank Merlin! I thought I’d have to castrate my best mate.” James threw the curtain aside and stared down at Harry. “You look like hell.”

“Thank you, but I’m here. Why say I’m not?” He looked between the two boys, not sure what sort of game they were playing.

“Padfoot’s gone missing. The git.”

“But it’s game day,” Harry said with a frown. He unfolded his body and marched across the room to Sirius’s bed. He needn’t have bothered; the curtains were tied to the bedposts, the blankets as neat as the house-elves had left them the previous day. He hadn’t even slept there. “Where is he?”

“No idea.” Peter shrugged.

“Last I saw him, he was in the common room writing out an essay or something,” James recalled. “That was near midnight. He said he was coming straight up once he was done.”

“Did he fall asleep down there?” Harry suggested.

“Nah,” the boy shook his head. “I looked there first. Also checked the kitchen and the library. He’s nowhere. And that bloody stupid git lost our map to Filch.”

“I’ve got—” Harry began but snapped his mouth shut as Peter turned to look at him with hopeful eyes. The boy still didn’t know the truth. How would he explain owning an exact duplicate of their Marauder’s Map, down to title and spells used to unlock it?

“I’ve got to go to the loo,” he declared hastily and ran from the room.

“Prat,” James called after him.

The boy took his time in the washroom, not at all keen to be involved in a discussion on where the missing Beater might possibly be hiding. He knew that if it came to offering up suggestions, he would be left with nothing to say. Despite being in the boy’s confidence for months, he had to confess that he still knew very little about Sirius. It pained him to have to admit it.

“You look like hell,” he told his reflection. It made no reply.

He returned to their room, where James was still pacing and muttering curses under his breath.

“Where’s Peter?”

“Gone to check the kitchen again,” James said. “Really, I think he just wants a custard pie, but he might have a bit of luck and stumble on the git. I thought he might have gone to set up a prank or something, but he would have clued me in to where it would be. Git’s been weird since you turned up.” The boy offered an accusatory glare at him.

“Whatever,” Harry said. “I’ve got a copy of the map.”

“You have? Brilliant! Give it here,” his young father demanded.

Harry unlocked his trunk, digging through the contents—quills, ink, notebooks and parchment. “I thought I left it up top…” He pulled the brass handles, lifting the topmost compartment up and aside to reveal the compartment below. It held shirts trousers and the album Hagrid had given him first year. Still no map. “Merlin, I hope it isn’t in the bottom.”

“Why?”
“It’s huge,” Harry insisted. “I could fit my whole cupboard in there and still have room to fly around it on my broom!” There was nothing for it; he would have to dig through that cavernous compartment if he wanted to find the map and Sirius with it.

He took hold of the brass handles and tugged. “Oi!”

“What now?”

“It’s jammed.”

“Shove over,” James ordered and gave the handles a hard pull. He grunted and cursed, but the compartment refused to be moved.

The Chaser glared at the trunk. “You take that one,” he said, drying the palms of his hands on his trousers.

They each grasped a single handle, braced their feet on the trunk and pulled hard. James’s fingers slipped, and he clattered to the floor in a jumble of robes and curses. Harry fared little better.

“What is wrong with this thing?” Harry offered the trunk a kick before trying the handle again.

“We don’t have time to find out,” James said. “The game is barely three hours away. We still need to warm up and go over the plays one last time.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, not taking his eyes off the recalcitrant trunk. “What about Sirius?”

“Let him have his strop. We’ll win without him.” The Chaser collected his broom and headed for the door. “Come on!”

Harry hurried to change into his Quidditch robes, throwing his clothes into the trunk along with his books and half-finished potions essay. Dumbledore had said they would leave after the match, but hadn’t said precisely when. For all he knew, they would be whisked away immediately after the final whistle was blown. He took one final glance around the room. There was nothing left but the trunk and his broom.

His broom.

He frowned as he looked at it. He was certain the Firebolt had been in his trunk, locked safely away from covetous little fingers after having caught a second year trying to borrow it one day in January. Yet there it was, leaning up against his bedside table.

His eyes turned back to the trunk. Then to the broom.

“James,” he called as he marched down to the common room. “You’ve pranked me, haven’t you? Left a little present in my trunk for me to find when I get back home?”

“I don’t know what you’re on about,” the boy said with a look on his face too innocent to be believed.

“Sure, you don’t.”

“No time for being suspicious. Breakfast, warm up, run through and win,” he declared. “Let’s go!”

The boy grabbed his arm and hauled him from the common room. The rest of the team followed on stumbling, sleepy feet. Harry wondered how James had managed to get them all up at such an hour on a Saturday, and if he would ever have such a talent when he became Captain. He
remembered the terror that swept over him when he unwrapped the Captain’s badge, the dread and absolute conviction that he had no right to wear it, that he would bollocks it up. That anxiety no longer plagued him. After watching his father in action, he knew he could live up to his standards and make him proud on the pitch.

James interrupted his thoughts with a hard slap on the head. “Pay attention!”

Any further thoughts on his own captaincy or suspicions of what his father may have done to his possessions were forced to the back of his mind as James started reviewing the plays they needed to work on. He arranged rolls and goblets on the Gryffindor table, moving them around with his wand so they could all see how the plays were meant to be performed.

“See that feint, Silvia?”

“Yes, I know about the feint. And the dive. And the U-turn,” the girl groaned and rolled her eyes. “James, we’ve been over this enough.”

“No, we haven’t! This game has to be perfect!” The boy slammed his fist down on the table, rattling the goblets.

“What’s so bleeding special about it?” Fenton yawned.

“It’s the last game we’ll play with Harry.”

Harry stared at him, fighting a stupid smile and more than a few tears. He had thought James’s fanaticism was all to do with wanting the Cup. He had no idea it was for him. More than ever, he hated having allowed himself to be distracted by Sirius and his games. James and Lily should have been the central focus of his time here. They were his parents. They died to save him, and he hadn’t spent nearly enough time with them.

“Oh, quit staring at me,” James huffed.

“Yes, sir,” Harry grinned and turned his attention to the roll that was meant to be him. “Why isn’t it moving?”

“Because you actually know what you’re doing up there,” Silvia nudged him with a surprisingly sharp elbow.

Again, it took all his effort not to grin like a fool.

“Enough,” James cried. “You’re going to give him a bigger head than he’s already got. Let’s take this to the pitch.”

Harry had to wonder how James was allowed near-constant access to the Quidditch pitch. Surely, the other teams needed to practice as well. Which professor had he bribed for admittance? Or did he have blackmail on someone?

“Oi! What about Sirius?” Marsh called as he raced to catch up, a roll falling from his sleeve as he jogged after them.

“What about him?” Fenton snorted.

“I resent that.”

Harry had to fight to keep from snapping his head toward the voice. It was one he knew too well
and wished he didn’t. Sirius’s voice had all but fused to his cells. Just hearing it made his skin prickle and blood run a little faster in his veins.

Thankfully, no one paid him any attention as the Keeper retorted, “You’ve no right to. You’ve been rubbish all week. And you’re late.”

“Shut it!” James ordered as he shoved past everyone to reach his best mate. “Are you actually going to play properly? I’ll not have you embarrassing me.”

Sirius just grinned. It was answer enough.

“Git.”

With his final comment on the matter, James started moving, and everyone else had no choice but to follow. Harry tried to keep up with his father, but the boy kept shouting for others to come close so he could give them more details on the plays. Harry was left to the back along with Sirius.

He tried to pretend the boy wasn’t there, but Sirius wasn’t having it.

“Last game of the season,” the boy said, smile on his face. “It’s no wonder he’s so wound up.”

Harry couldn’t understand how he could speak so calmly. This boy had said that he loved him and then been rejected. How could he possibly be this normal? No one had seen much of him over the past two days. Perhaps he had found someone new to throw his attentions at. Or perhaps it had been an act all along.

“Where’ve you been the last two days? You missed half your classes,” Harry asked. He tried to sound cavalier but instead sounded cross.

A frown pulled at his mouth. “Bit fuzzy actually. Was thinking rather a lot, and then I was playing around with some spells to take my mind off things.”

“Take your mind off things…” Harry repeated dully. “So that’s all it takes?”

“Apparently,” Sirius shrugged.

He stopped, watching the boy as he continued down the hill toward the pitch. Something struck him as off. Not as off as the previous week when the boy was barely capable of stringing two words together after being hit by Snape’s Confundus, but there was still something not right.

“You coming?” Sirius called.

It had to be his imagination. He was just annoyed that Sirius wasn’t curled up in a ball crying and trying to put together the rent pieces of his heart after Harry walked away from him.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” he muttered.

Harry watched the boy as they took flight, studied his broom work and how well he executed James’s intricate plays; he kept his eyes trained solely on the black-haired Beater. He was desperate to find something the matter with him. He found nothing. His arm seemed weaker than it ought to be, but that was the only thing Harry managed to find amiss. Throughout their final practice and even the game, Sirius showed no signs of returning to the distraught and distracted boy he had been in previous days.

“Harry, stop staring as Sirius and look for the bloody Snitch!” James shouted as he flew past.
He was right. It was pointless looking for some defect in the boy. He was leaving. What did it matter how broken-hearted Sirius was?

Narrowing his eyes, he glared his frustration at the boy and the shimmering ball trailing his broom.

The Snitch.

He had been so lost in studying Sirius, he had no idea what the score was. If he caught the Snitch too soon, James would be furious. But he knew Cartwright was a decent Seeker. He was sure to see the ball if it continued to hover around so prominent a player, and if Slytherin took it they might manage a win.

Gritting his teeth, Harry dove for the ball. He shot across the pitch, flying so close to Silvia that she practically fell from her broom. He would have shouted an apology, but he was already gone, racing ever nearer his goal. Sirius was drawing closer, the tiny golden ball circling the tail of his broom. As if knowing it had been spotted, the Snitch dropped into its own dive. Harry followed. He plummeted down, watching the ball and ground as they grew steadily nearer. If he didn’t catch it soon, he would have to give up on it or risk crashing.

He reached out, urging his broom faster.

As his fingers closed around the Snitch, his eardrums practically exploded from the noise; the stands erupted in screams of delight and dismay as he fought to come out of the dive. His Firebolt quaked with the effort of changing directions at speed. It was too much, he was sure it was too much. He gave the broom one final tug and felt the tail sweep across the grass and last of the March snows as the Firebolt abruptly shifted direction and shot skyward.

As he flew up, he saw the terrified face of Cartwright as he continued to plummet toward the pitch. The other boy’s efforts to change direction were too late, and his dive ended in a strangled scream and a bone-rattling crash as he hit the ground.

“Madam Pomfrey is on her way!” the announcer called. It was the first Harry had noticed the voice all game. “And he’s on his feet!”

The stands exploded again with cheers, this time for Cartwright. He lost the Snitch, but his death-defying drop made him the unofficial hero of the game. He and Harry were each hoisted onto the shoulders of their teammates and paraded back to their respective dormitories for post-game parties unlike any ever seen at Hogwarts.

Only twice before had Harry seen the Gryffindor common room festooned in gold and scarlet. In his time, the celebrations after winning the Cup were tremendous, but this was even grander. The entire common room had been taken over; the walls strung with banners; the ceilings draped in more flags than Aunt Petunia hung about the house for the Queen’s Jubilee. He laughed even as he ducked to keep from being entangled in a lion banner.

Harry had been certain Gryffindor dominated the Quidditch Cup competition since James became Captain, but they were acting as if this was their first win in ages.

“To the best game of Quidditch ever seen!” someone shouted. Everyone cheered in reply.

“To the best Captain in history!”

“To the best Seeker!”

The toasts continued until every player on the team had been celebrated. Twice. His hand once
again became public property, as Gryffindor after Gryffindor offered him private congratulations and attempted to pull him into a discussion of his fantastic catch.

As he extricated himself from another small pride of well-wishers, Harry backed into an enormous trumpet.

“Careful!” Tildy cried.

The girl checked the trumpet, dusting the dingy brass with a thick cloth and ensuring it was both immaculate and securely connected to the sleek, black, state-of-the-art record player to which it had been attached.

“Nice, right?” she grinned, mistaking his confusion for admiration. “Took me forever to sort out how to make it run on magic instead of electricity.”

Tildy, it seemed, had been planning for this party all her life. Her entire record collection was on display in the common room, arranged in groups according to a system that would only make sense to her. She slapped his hand when he tried to pick up an LP. “That one is for later,” she insisted in a stern tone he had never before heard from her. When it came to music, Tildy Moorehead was all business.

She stood atop an ottoman to shout, “Let’s start with one for the Slytherin side!”

The needle barely made a scratch when she set it down on the rotating vinyl. The trumpet filled the room with a discordant guitar and bass that might arguably be called a rhythm; the drummer joined, followed by the rasp of a singer, whose shouting Harry couldn’t actually understand.

“’Born to Lose’,” Tildy grinned. “Get it?”

Hating to disappoint her, he nodded. “I get it.”

“I knew you’d like it!” She wrapped him in a hug. “You’ll dance with me later, right?”

“Maybe he’d dance with you now if you’d play something else,” Mary shouted. “Enough of this underground nonsense. We want to dance and celebrate!”

“Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers are going to be HUGE!” Tildy insisted. “You’ll be dancing to them just fine when they’re on the Wizarding Wireless next year. You’ll see,” Tildy insisted loudly, but her confidence dropped along with her voice as she turned back to him. “They will, won’t they?”

He had never heard of Johnny Thunders or this song, but, again, Harry hated to disappoint her. Maybe the group was a household name and the only reason he hadn’t heard of them was because Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia wouldn’t tolerate such music. “Yeah,” he assured her. “Huge.”

“Oh, good,” she smiled. “Let’s dance!”

She took his hands and dragged him into the centre of the room, leading him in a dance that was little more than jumping up and down in time to the music. He had been terrified she would expect him to put his hand on her waist and lead her around in a waltz as Professor McGonagall had tried to teach them fourth year. That was beyond his ability, but this he could do.

He grinned and bounced along with her. He bounced in a circle, taking in the revelry in the common room. He saw James and Lily in a corner. On another jump, he spied Remus and Hermione sneaking down from the boys’ dormitories and slipping in with the crowd as if they had
been there all along.

He jumped again, and his grin fell.

He saw Sirius. He was amid a cluster of girls. He saw that familiar smirk on his face. He saw the boy’s arm draped around a girl he thought might be named Julie. He saw his hand reaching out to brush the cheek of another. Each jump showed him more things he hadn’t wanted to see, but he kept bouncing until he was ready to vomit. Finally, his body stopped without him telling it to. He stood, the crowd pogoing up and down around him, the music clattering around his head, the shouted chorus of the song echoing in his ears.

Born to lose.

Yeah, he got it now.
In which Hermione does not meddle, a party is had and actions are disapproved of.

There was a noise.

It was quiet. Or, rather, it was muffled as if it was being made in another room and he was hearing it through a closed door or a wall. He trained his ear on it, brows pulling together and frown tugging at his mouth as he listened hard. It was an odd sort of noise, like the scurrying of mice, if mice were eighty times their normal size and moving house loudly in the next room.

“What’s the matter?” Hermione asked, lips smoothing the washboard uncertainty had made of his forehead.

“Just a noise,” Remus said, though it wasn’t just a noise. It was a strange and off-putting noise. If it were any other day, he would be up and hunting it down as surely as he would an odd smell; the wolf hated things it couldn’t explain, bristled at it and took it as a threat to his territory, and Remus was forced to investigate just to quell the disquiet in his brain. Unfortunately for the wolf, this was not an ordinary day. This was Hermione’s last day with him, and he was not going to waste it searching out the source of that noise.

“Yes, it is rather loud,” she commented, hand not quite managing to distract him from her words as she traced the scars on his chest.

“You hear it?”

“Mm-hm,” she nodded, propping herself up on her elbows and craning her neck to look out the gap in his curtains. “Looks like Gryffindor is winning.”

He blinked back his confusion and set his ears listening to more than just that noise. He could hear the game, a massive cry of dismay as the ball changed hands or a Bludger connected with a favourite player followed by an equally loud shout as someone scored a goal. He could barely make out Gaffín’s voice announcing the score. “James just scored. We’re up by one-fifty.”

“How should we celebrate?” Hermione asked, batting her lashes at him.

“Don’t you ever get tired?” he groaned.

“Not of you,” she grinned and threw herself at him, taking his mouth and making it very difficult for him to focus on anything else. With each goal scored on their side, Hermione found a new and more wonderful way to mark the occasion, until he was certain there was not a part of him her lips, tongue and fingers had not touched.

“Merlin, it’s not fair,” he gasped. “Why are you leaving?”

She took her time in answering a question that he had not expected a response to. As she slid up his body, pulling yet another moan from him, she said, “Evil to defeat. Elves to free. NEWTS to pass.”
He could only nod his agreement, too lost in the sensation of her skin on his to grasp what she was saying.

“Remus, I was thinking,” she said, pushing herself up to straddle his hips. “Have you been reading the news lately?”

It took everything in him to focus on her words and not the feel of her legs and sex pressing against him. “News? Yes.”

“Do you think maybe you ought to do something about it?”

“About what?” His attention now fully on what it was she wanted of him. She knew things, important things, things that he was meant to do. She had been very careful to avoid specifically telling him what would happen, but occasionally she would offer hints, imply via glances and subtle word choices what choices he ought to make.

“The Death Eaters. Voldemort. Don’t you think you ought to do something?” she said, looking down at him very pointedly.

He blinked a bit stupidly. “Am I supposed to do something?”

The events he read about in the Prophet were awful. He wasn’t denying that, but they seemed like things barely connected to him. Despite his condition, he was pureblood as were the majority of his friends. He had Muggle-born and half-blood friends; he had worried terribly about them when reading stories of Death Eater attacks with underaged victims. But, as a rule, he avoided poking his nose where it didn’t belong. It was a self-preservation technique that he had honed since being bitten to avoid drawing unnecessary and unwanted attention to himself. But here was Hermione all but telling him to get involved, to poke his nose in, to get noticed.

“What am I meant to do?”

She just shrugged.

“Hermione, enough. You’ve got to give me more than that.”

“Well, if it were me, and I were the one trying to get involved and make a difference,” she paused as if considering, her face pulled into an angelic mask that didn’t fool him for a minute. “I would ask around. Talk to the Muggle-borns. Talk to the professors. I’m certain there would be likeminded individuals out there who are equally as concerned.”

“You could have just said that in the first place,” he grumbled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I have not made any suggestions to influence your future choices. I would never suggest that you go to Professor Dumbledore and tell him how worried you are about the events happening outside of Hogwarts. I would never suggest that you join a secret organization under his command to help defeat Voldemort and imprison his followers. I wouldn’t do that. It would be tampering.” She looked at him meaningfully. “I don’t tamper.”

“No, of course you don’t. That would be against the rules... like sleeping with someone from the past. Not something you would do.”

“Exactly!” The smile she offered was enormous and so full of cheek he could easily believe her related to Harry.

“Fine, I’ll do what you have not suggested.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she commented and looked away. “Oh, Harry’s diving.”

“That’s the end of the game, then,” he sighed. “We best get cleaned up so we can join whatever party they’ve set up down in the common room.” He wondered if that’s what the noise had been, but doubted that anyone would have missed the match to throw a few decorations at the walls. Besides, they were six floors above the common room. Even the largest of mice moving the most obstinate of furniture couldn’t make noises loud enough for him to hear at such a distance. No, whatever that noise was, it was considerably closer.

Hermione disappeared into the washroom, leaving him to listen to the cheers and songs echoing up from the grounds and growing closer as the celebration left the pitch and made its way to the castle. He was also left alone with that noise. He pushed himself to the edge of the bed and waited, tilting his head until his ear caught its direction. Head on sideways, his ear guiding the way, he walked the short distance to Harry’s trunk. The noise was no louder, but there was no doubt that this was the source.

Curiosity getting the better of him, he gave the lid a tug.

“What’s the matter?”

Remus turned and saw Hermione framed in the doorway, her body wrapped in his dressing gown, and his mouth went dry. “Uh, just a noise.”

He offered the trunk one final glance before heading to the shower. He was out and dressed as the last Gryffindor pushed himself in through the portrait hole. If they were very lucky, James would be too busy to notice them entering the common room from the wrong door.

“Remus!” Peter cried and threw himself at the boy before he had even finished descending the stairs. “I looked everywhere for you? What have you been doing all this time?”

“One day, when you’re older, maybe you’ll find out for yourself,” the boy replied with a mischievous grin.

“Oh, I long for that day,” he sighed and fell back into his friend’s arms with melodramatic sigh. “To be loved!”

Remus snorted and shoved him off, glancing around the common room and smiling. “I take it we won.”

“We didn’t just win,” Peter insisted. “We throttled them! They never stood a chance! Not against the best Gryffindor line-up in the history of the sport. We are THE BEST!” His voice had grown into a bellow, overpowering even Tildy’s raucous, clattering excuse for music. Half the common room cheered with his declarations. “You should have seen Sirius out there, mate. Hit that bludger so hard, I swear he must have splintered his bat!”

“He turned up?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah,” he waved away the boy’s concern.

Remus frowned at the casual dismissal. Sirius had been in no state to play so much as a pennywhistle the last he saw the boy; he couldn’t see him playing as well as described.

Normally, Remus would happily celebrate a win with the rest of his house, but he could not shake the concern that Sirius had performed some kind of charm on himself. He had been so strange all week, vanishing for hours on end, blundering around the castle, performing poorly in class and on
the pitch. Remus could not think of another reason for the boy’s inconsistent and uncharacteristic behavior. Sirius had done something, and he could guarantee it was something daft.

“I’ll be right back,” he shouted to Hermione, and pushed his way through the common room. Sirius was there somewhere, and he wanted to see just what the daft idiot had managed to do to himself.

He found the boy easily enough. He was leaning in to talk to a pretty blonde. Remus knew the pose well, had watched the boy perfect it over three years and with countless girls throughout the school and village. It was a pose that never failed to win him a kiss, and it was clearly going to work on this girl, as it had on innumerable others.

“Sirius,” he shouted.

“Ah, Moony!” he smirked and leaned in to whisper something to his catch. “Have you met, Julia?”

“No. Hello, Julia,” Remus said, holding and arm out toward the rest of the room. “Goodbye, Julia.”

The girl huffed and looked to Sirius, but the boy only shrugged.

“What’s the matter?” he asked as his quarry stomped away.

“You,” he replied, eyebrow rising in challenge. “Or have you forgotten our talk from last night?”

He studied the boy’s face, watching for some sign of recognition. There was none. There was no hint of the crumpled and forlorn boy who had all but cried on his shoulder the previous night.

“I’m not sure what you’re on about, Moony, but if you want me to find you a girl, you just have to ask. I’m sure Julia has a friend.”

“I don’t want—Sirius, I have Hermione. I don’t want anyone else. Not tonight. Not ever. I love her,” Remus practically shouted. He had wanted the removal of Hermione from his mind and heart, just as Sirius had Harry. He wanted to cut the memories out so the pain wouldn’t cripple him. He had wanted it. He had planned for it. When faced with the impending agony of her departure, it had seemed perfectly natural, but, looking at Sirius, it seemed anything but. Sirius had been a wreck, crying and broken just ten hours earlier. Now, he was as careless and self-centred as he had been for years. This wasn’t right.

Sirius blinked a moment, frowning. “Who is Hermione?”

“Dammit, Sirius, what the hell did you do?” he groaned and offered the boy a hard shove.

“You tw—“

The boy’s insults were cut short by a very disapproving meow. Sirius frowned his confusion and disapproval down at the silver tabby sitting by his feet.

“What do you want?” he asked none too politely.

The cat leapt onto a table and stared at him, eyes narrowing and mouth turning down before turning and offering Remus the same look. He had never seen a cat look so disapproving in his life. The tabby broke from him and looked around at the party, frown dropping further as it watched a seventh year run through the common room with a bottle of fire whiskey in his hands. Its eyes narrowed to slits as it followed a couple as they groped their way toward the boys’ dormitory. If that cat could speak, he knew what it would be saying: Detention.

When it turned back to him, he nodded. “I’ll go get them.”
He left Sirius to reconnoitre the available girls and pushed his way through the crush of revellers. He found Hermione and Peter dancing where he had left them. Well, dancing wasn’t exactly what he’d call it, flailing wildly more or less in time with the music would be more accurate. Peter never did have much skill in the way of dancing.

The girl grabbed his hand and pulled him into their spasmodic dance. He hated for her to leave without having gotten to dance together, but if he took too long McGonagall might transform and put an end to the entire celebration. So he leaned into her hair and shouted, “McGonagall is here!”

Her smile fell along with her arms. “Now?”

He nodded and gestured to the rest of the room, “Have to find the others.”

She trailed along behind him as they hunted. James and Lily they found in a relatively quiet corner, apparently making up for the three years Lily wouldn’t allow James to lay a hand on her. It took Remus physically removing the girl from the Chaser’s face before they even acknowledged anyone was speaking to them.

“What the hell!” James cried.

“It’s time to go,” Hermione said in a tone that left absolutely no room for argument. “McGonagall is waiting.”

“She couldn’t have waited until after the party?” he grumbled. Lily looked equally as displeased, but she made no complaint.

“Where’s Harry?” Remus asked.

James offered a shrug. “Was dancing with Tidly last I looked.”

Tildy was easily spotted jumping head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd, but any of the boys pogoing nearby were clearly not Harry. Still, they made their way to the exuberant DJ.

“Tildy, have you seen Harry?” Lily shouted.

Without missing a beat, the girl pointed to a chair by the fire and kept on jumping in time to the music.

The chair held not only Harry but McGonagall. The silver tabby sat on the boy’s thigh, batting at his sullen face with one paw and mewing both sternly and sympathetically. Behind him, the others muttered their suppositions about what had the boy looking so crestfallen. Only Remus understood the real reason for his loss of spirits.
McGonagall’s arrival had not come soon enough in Harry’s opinion. The woman ought to have collected him directly from the locker room and saved him the devastation of seeing Sirius with those girls. He couldn’t understand how he could have moved on so quickly after saying what he said, doing what he did.

“It’s not you,” Remus assured him quietly as they followed the stern professor through the corridors.

“You sure about that?”

“It’s Sirius. I talked to him last night,” the boy said. “He was a mess, hated the idea of you leaving and being left broken-hearted.”

He scoffed. What he had just seen was not a broken and heartsick boy. It was a determined flirt doing what he did best. It’s what he had done before Harry arrived. It’s what he would keep doing after he was gone. Pretty soon he would hook up with Tildy, who would give him the Sex Pistols album that had made Tonks swoon. Nothing had changed. Everything was exactly as it had been before.

“I swear it’s true,” Remus barrelled through Harry’s despondence. “I think he used a memory charm on himself. I wanted to as well, but seeing him now... that’s just wrong. I wouldn’t want to live without Hermione in my heart. I think if he had the chance to see himself acting that way, Sirius would agree. He was better when he was with you.”

Harry breathed a sharp sigh of annoyance. “Remus, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but don’t. It doesn’t make it easier. It makes it worse. He’s dead where I’m going – died months ago after barely getting to know me. Now I know it’s because he chose to be that instead of keeping me in his head.”

Remus nodded and kept silent for a few more corridors. “Although, I’m kind of glad he did it.”

“What?” Harry turned and stared at him.

“Think about it. You’re leaving us behind. James is with Lily now, so he’ll be off frolicking through the clover with her. Peter’s determined to win Hooper back at all costs, so he’ll be likely be in Madam Pomfrey’s expert care until the end of seventh year or until he realises it’s hopeless. That leaves only me. You think I want to be stuck listening to Sirius turn every conversation into one about you? And can you imagine how awkward that would get once you’re born? All those lovesick sighs as he changes your nappies.” He gave Harry a gentle nudge in the ribs.

“You twat.” Despite it all, Harry managed a smile. “I will miss you.”

“Damn right you will,” the boy grinned. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to spend the rest of this
walk with my girlfriend.” He marched ahead to join Hermione, leaving Harry alone at the back of their little procession.

He watched Hermione link her hand with Remus’, simultaneously hating her and feeling absolutely overjoyed for her. Ahead of them, James and Lily walked side-by-side. They were not holding hands. Instead they let their arms sway as they moved, allowed their fingers to brush one another’s hand or thigh. At least in the respect, Harry wasn’t doomed.

Professor McGonagall saw them onto the stairs to the headmaster’s office with curt goodbye to the Grangers then left, most likely to put an end to the Gryffindor party.

“How many points do you think she’ll take?” Lily questioned.

“If she doesn’t take all the points we just won in the match, I’d be surprised,” replied James. “Luckily, someone was doing their homework and earned more points with assignments than we did for all four games put together. We’re a shoo-in for the House Cup.” He wrapped Hermione in a tight hug. “Best fake daughter I’ve ever had!”

Hermione blushed with pride and pleasure even as she pushed him away with a huff of “Honestly.”

The door was open, and Dumbledore was waiting for them just inside his office.

“Once again, I must offer congratulations for one of the finest games of Quidditch I have ever seen, and I have seen quite a few,” the man said with a smile and a brief round of applause. The noise seemed hollow in the expanse of his office, offering none of the joy felt in the common room.

“Harry, if you would put this back on, we can send you home.” He lifted the dragon’s tooth necklace from his desk and offered it to him.

His fingers were slightly numb as he took hold of it. Even knowing what the leather was, it felt no different than it had before. It didn’t tingle against his skin in the same way his wand did; Hermione likely had loads of knowledge about wandlore and what turned wood and a feather or a bit of leather into a magic amplifier, what made one wand right and another disastrous. Maybe it didn’t tingle because it didn’t choose him. Maybe without a wooden casing as its partner, the heartstring was simply incomplete. Shoving aside his lack of understanding, he secured the leather around his neck.

“Very good,” the headmaster said. “Now we can begin.”

“Just like that?” Lily questioned.

“I assumed you said your goodbyes over the course of this past week. But if you require a few moments more...” The man stepped around his desk and began busying himself with a stack of scrolls, acting as if no one else was in the room.

“We need a lifetime,” James muttered. The boy turned to Harry, his face pulling into confusion. “Not really sure what I’m meant to say. I mean, I know you’re my kid and all, but it’s just... you’re just... I mean, you’re just Harry. You are a git, but you play good.”

He couldn’t hold his snort in check.

“Oi! Shut it!”

Harry laughed even as his heart ached. “I should’ve been spending more time with you,” he said, unable to hide the sadness. “Shouldn’t have let Sirius distract me.”
“Much as I hate to admit it,” Lily sighed. “He’s a charmer. There was no way you could have held out against him for long once he started on you. Doesn’t mean I won’t hex him into next week, but there it is.”

“And the git’s not even here to give you a proper send off,” James grumbled.

“We already said all that we were going to,” Harry assured him, the ache in his chest redoubling as he remembered the hateful way he had pushed the boy away in the dungeons. He had thought it would make the leaving easier, dull the heartache if he controlled their separation. How wrong he had been. It hurt worse knowing Sirius thought he didn’t care, knowing that Sirius cut him out of his heart and memory thinking that his love was one-sided. It wasn’t. Harry loved him. Not as a friend. Not as a father or brother or any of the ways he had clung to so persistently. He was in love with Sirius.

He wanted to make a mad dash through the castle to tell him the truth, to make sure he knew, but there was no point. Sirius didn’t remember him.

“I’ll sort him out, don’t you worry,” James assured him. “Even if he did do something daft like Moony thinks.”

There was little point in trying to talk him out of it, so Harry just offered a slight nod of acceptance. “Well, I guess this is goodbye.”

“For now,” Lily agreed, wrapping her arms around him. “I’m sorry I fancied you, but think of it as a compliment. You’re a very handsome bloke.”

He laughed wetly. “Ta.”

“Stop that, you’ll give him a bigger swagger than he’s already got,” James cried, swatting her hands away. He offered his son a brief hug. “Remember everything I’ve taught you. I expect great things from you, son. Bigger pranks than anything I could have ever dreamt of. And remember to write. You know how your mother worries.”

“Yes, Dad,” he said, trying very hard not to cry. He rubbed his skin, feeling the warmth where they had wrapped themselves around him. It wasn’t the same as being hugged by a real parent. These were still teenagers. The talk they offered was little more than a game to them. It would be years before they truly understood what Harry was to them, but still he clung to the memory of their love encircling him. He’d never feel it again.

The step they took from him must have been the signal Dumbledore had been waiting for. He cleared his throat delicately. “Are we ready?”

“I suppose,” Harry said. Really, he would have liked to wait just a few more years until he was born so that when his parents hugged him they would really be hugging him as their son and not the vague idea of who he would be to them.

“Miss Granger,” the headmaster said, drawing Hermione’s attention from Remus.

The girl offered one last kiss before turning away. Unlike Harry, her eyes were clear and untainted by tears. She had a Remus to go home to. Hurriedly, Harry wiped the water from his eyes, determined that the last thing he saw would be his parents.

“If you would stand by the trunk,” the man directed as he readied his wand.

“Will it hurt?” Lily questioned.
“I would dearly love to answer that, Miss Evans. However, I truly do not know. Let’s err on the side of caution and say it might sting a bit,” he said with the barest of twinkles in his eye. “Wand out and hands clasped if you please, Harry.”

Harry obeyed, taking Hermione’s hand and squeezing it tightly in his left hand while his right pulled the wand from his pocket.

“Oi, Harry, find a better place to keep that before you accidently curse something off that you’ll wish you hadn’t,” James called.

“Maybe I want a manly scar on my right buttock,” he retorted, remembering Tonks’s advice to him so many months earlier as she stood with him in the bathroom of the Burrow trying to put the contact lenses on his eyes. How different he had been. Skinny, to be sure, but also so broken and alone. This trip had changed that, changed him.

As he considered all the ways Malfoy’s spell had backfired, Dumbledore shouted out the countercharm and a blinding red light began to fly at him. Hermione’s grip on his hand tightened, forcing him to look away from his parents. She was staring across the room at Remus, her mouth forming three words: See you soon.

Quickly, before the spell struck, his eyes darted to the boy, whose face contorted in sickness and horror. Poor sod.

He looked back to his parents and hurriedly tried to form a message of his own: I love you, I’ll miss you, Peter is dangerous. They all flew through his head, warring for importance, and then the spell struck. And it didn’t sting a bit. It was excruciating.
In which no one is particularly happy.

The first time he travelled across the decades, Harry had been flung backwards and lost consciousness when his head collided with Hermione’s. That was preferable to being fully awake and aware of what was happening. If he had any sort of expectations about what the spell to return them home would be like, he would have anticipated it being rather like travelling via Portkey, since that’s essentially what they were doing; only they were jumping through time instead of space.

How wrong he would have been.

A white-hot pain coursed through him, worse than any of the times his scar had pained him and more wide-spread. Every cell in his body burned as if he were being consumed by dragon’s fire; he could feel each one trying to rend itself apart as the spell hit. Then, all at once, it stopped.

He lay in darkness, face pressed against frigid stone, fingernails digging into the ancient mortar as the echoes of the pain rippled through him, dim versions of the scorching agony but still enough to dredge bile up his throat. He was desperate to know if it worked, if they were in their right time, but it hurt too much to open his eyes. It hurt to breathe.

“Harry?” he heard Hermione gasp, and he could hear how much effort it took to speak. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. You okay?”

“I don’t know.”

It felt like his eyelids might tear as he dared to open his eyes. White spots flit across his vision, making it virtually impossible for him to see where they were. Some minutes passed before the spots cleared. He recognised the solid grey walls and wide flagstones of the entrance hall. Their location was different, but there was no way to know if any time had passed.

“Think it worked?” he asked in a thin whine as he attempted to move.

“Can we wait to find out?” she asked. “It hurts too much.”

“Good plan.”

The entrance hall held no clocks to mark the time or paintings where figures might pass through and be asked for the hour. It was impossible to know how long they stayed on the cool stones, but Harry was fairly certain an hour or more passed before he dared a second attempt at sitting up. It hurt, but the pain was bearable, more an ache than a sharp stab.

With a groan, he forced himself to his feet.
“Already?” Hermione complained but sat up with a groan of her own. She studied the hall, hunting down what clues she could in the inky blackness before observing, “It’s early. Around three, maybe.”

Harry had long ago given up trying to figure out how she knew the things she knew, but that didn’t stop him making his own cursory glance around the entrance hall. He saw nothing to indicate the time of night, just darkness.

“Think Dumbledore will be awake?”

“Only one was to find out.” The girl offered a slow shrug that left her cringing. Her first step was unsteady. Her second was no better. She swayed unsteadily on her feet before looking back at him. “A little help, Harry?”

“Right,” he mumbled and made his way to her side. She slid her arm over his shoulder, squeezing him tightly. The physical contact helped; knowing he was solid enough for her to cling to reminded him that his cells had not been rent apart, that he was whole and stable. His arm went to her waist, offering her the same reminder.

“Let’s go,” she said, her voice stronger than it had sounded moments earlier.

Step by arduous step, they made their way from the entrance hall into the right hand corridor and on toward the headmaster’s office. Harry had never before been aware of just how far the man’s quarters were from the more common areas of the castle. Even when he had been thin and weak following his summer holiday mourning Sirius, he had not found the walk so difficult.

His brain stumbled as he remembered Sirius. The ache in his heart making the lingering pain in his muscles seem nothing at all. Months they had lived together, played and flirted. Veritaserum had pulled the truth from him, and he had told Sirius precisely when and how he would die. Surely, he had been clever enough to leave that information intact and in his brain. Surely, he had found a way to cut around it, to use it to his advantage. He must still be alive.

Without realising, Harry’s feet began to move a bit faster, pulling his body and Hermione through the corridors and up staircases at a pace that only increased the closer they came to the headmaster’s office. By the time the gargoyle was in sight, the boy was practically running.

He skidded to a stop with the awareness that he didn’t know the current password.

“You’re late,” the gargoyle griped as it leapt aside. “Two weeks we’ve been waiting for you.”

“Oh, uh, sorry?” Harry offered.

“Two weeks? That’s going to be difficult to explain. I do hope they’ve thought of something.” Hermione continued to mutter to herself as she climbed up the rotating stairs. Harry followed, silent in his certainty that Sirius had found a way to evade death this time around. He was clever, a genius even. If anyone could manage, it was him.

“Ah, Miss Granger, Mr Potter, I was beginning to worry.” Dumbledore smiled at them from behind his half-moon spectacles, his eyes no less bright than they had been last they saw one another, though the rest of his body was markedly older. Harry found it difficult to believe he hadn’t noted the differences immediately upon seeing that younger version of the man; Hermione had. “I trust the counter spell has not left any lingering damage.”

“It doesn’t appear so, professor.” Hermione replied, though it was clear she was still experiencing some aches from the journey back.
“Some time with Madam Pomfrey should sort out any of the more unpleasant after-effects,” he assured her.

“About the after-effects,” Harry said, uncertain he wanted to hear the man’s reply. “Have we—Has anything—Did we—“ He stopped as he realised that Dumbledore had lived the past twenty years with the results of their meddling; he couldn’t possibly know what might have changed. Finally, he asked the question he was so desperate to have answered. “Is Sirius dead?”

The man took a moment to step around his desk. He laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, and Harry knew the answer. “He passed this summer.”

“Department of Mysteries, Bellatrix LeStrange,” he said, his voice distant.

“I’m afraid so, Harry. Your parents, too, some years ago.”

“Didn’t change a damn thing,” he muttered, turning from the man and stumbling from the office.

How could it be the same? How could he still be dead? Harry had told him everything, the date and time and place down to the exact door he had stepped through to reach that ghostly veil. He had left nothing out. The Veritaserum wouldn’t have let him edit events even if he had wanted to, and he hadn’t wanted to. He had wanted Sirius to know all there was to know so that he might change things, survive. He knew by the sick working its way up his throat and the icy chill taking over his body that he had convinced himself that his meddling had been a success. It was a stupid, childish thing to do.

He ought to have learned by now that he never got the happy ending he wanted.

His parents were still dead so was his godfather and boyfriend. He was alone in a cold world without that armour he had once had to protect himself; Sirius had removed it piece by piece and left him with nothing. When he left, he had been sickly, alone and broken. Turns out very little had changed, despite what he had previously thought.

He threw himself down on the floor under the Fat Lady’s empty frame, uncertain exactly how he had managed to find the way when his eyes hadn’t noticed a single way marker. He let the cold of the stones seep through his clothes, unwilling to move. Even if the Fat Lady had been where she belonged, he didn’t know the words to get in, and the warmth of the common room was the last thing he wanted right now.

“Harry.”

The boy didn’t stir at the voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Rotating guard duty down in the entrance hall. You managed to slip in between shifts,” Lupin explained, his voice quiet enough that he almost couldn’t hear the difference age and time had had on the man. Then he sighed, and any hopes he had of Remus still being Remus were lost. “Harry, I’m sorry.”

“You should have stopped him,” Harry said, glaring his anger at the man folding his long legs to sit beside him.

Lupin sighed and nodded his understanding. “I’m sorry, Harry. Even knowing what would happen, I couldn’t stop him. He loved you. You know that. He would have done anything for you, no matter how dangerous or daft.”

Even knowing the words were kindly meant, Harry couldn’t keep the bitter bile from rising in his
throat. “It’s my fault.”

“Let’s not start that again,” the man warned. “Sirius made his choices. He was a brilliant man, but we both know how bloody pigheaded he could be. If it meant saving you, he’d gladly have jumped before any number of curses.”

“But he forgot me on purpose.” He sounded like a lost child and hated it.

“It doesn’t mean he didn’t love you. He just loved you differently.”

Regardless of what Lupin said, the old guilt was twisting in his stomach again, painting the world in dismal shades of black.

“And what about me, Remus?” Hermione questioned, making the man jump. He had apparently been focused so intently on Harry he hadn’t heard the girl’s approach. “Do you love me any different?”

The man kept his eyes locked on the stone floor as he answered. “What do you want me to say, Hermione? We were teenagers. I loved you like I’d never loved anything.” His shoulders slumped as the weight of truth fell on him. Harry had never seen his former professor look so worn down. The twin traumas of Sirius’s passing and the summer full moons had not had him looking as tired and defeated as he did now.

Hermione may have noticed but that did not stop her from pressing the man further. “Loved?”

“I’ve had twenty years to settle that passion and come to terms with the reality of us. You were right when you said we shouldn’t have gotten involved; I shouldn’t have pushed you. I knew my kind don’t live long. I never thought I would live past thirty-five. I never thought you’d be forced to come back to this.” His hand gestured to the hair thick with grey, the worn clothes, the face interrupted by scars and creases.

“So, you thought…”

“I thought you would be coming back to a grave, not a tired man too old and poor to be of any use to you. I’m sorry, Hermione. I wasn’t thinking.”

Hermione’s face gave nothing away as she stepped closer. “You weren’t thinking,” she repeated slowly. “No, you clearly weren’t if you thought it was better for me to come home to find you dead, if you wanted to leave me to mourn alone. I love you, and all you can say is you’re sorry? You stupid, selfish little boy!” Her hand flew out and slapped him hard across the face.

She spun around and stomped back down the stairs, tears running down her cheeks and jaw clenched tight in anger.

“That could have gone a bit better,” Remus admitted as he rubbed his reddening cheek. “Could have gone a lot worse, too.” His attempt at humour fell as did his sad smile when look up and found Harry looming over him.

“Fix it,” he warned darkly. “Or I will break your legs.”

“Weren’t you meant to say that back when I started dating her?”

“I’m not playing around. Do you know how many spells I picked up in the Restricted Section? What I did to Alfie Quintain will look like heaven if you don’t fix this.”
Harry glared at him once more before he left to find Hermione.
Harry woke with a shout, throwing himself to his feet as he searched the room frantically for Sirius.

He was gone.

Worse, he had never really been there at all. It was just a dream.

Sirius had wasted no time returning to haunt his dreams. However, where he had been angry and sneering over the summer, he was now anything from angelic perfection to heartbroken and crying, though more often than not he was exactly as Harry had seen him last – smiling, leaning into some girl’s ear, his arm draped over her shoulder. The worst nights were the ones where he couldn’t look away, where he had to watch as the girl turned, and Sirius took her mouth and more. Only three nights they had been back, and he had woken up screaming or vomiting every single one of them.

He cursed his brain, dropped to the floor, closed his eyes and shifted his legs around until they were folded before him. He counted and breathed as his book had instructed. He counted and breathed as he had done over the summer. He counted and breathed until he heard his heart, steady and loud like a fist knocking on wood. He counted those beats, breathed with their steady rhythm until his body cooled. In months past, he had been able to quell his mind as well as his body, but not now. Now he just had to settle for the slow beat and the deep breath.

After a time, he stood and considered returning to bed. Experience cautioned him against it. Even with the calming affects of meditation, his brain would travel straight back to the party the moment he closed his eyes, and he would be back to sweating, screaming and sick. Better to just stay awake, no matter how early it was.

He unlocked his trunk and lifted the lid and first compartment before reaching into the deepest section only far enough to collect what he needed without releasing whatever prank James had set to spring on him. That third and largest compartment had been released from its sticking charm sometime after they arrived home, but he was in no mood to contend with a prank. Pranks, as Sirius had once said were for fun and fucking with people. Clearly, he wasn’t up for any fun, and he was tired of being fucked with. Until he ran out of clean socks and pants, he would let that sleeping beast lie.

Somewhere in his brain, likely the bit at the very back that had yet to be traumatised, he knew that whatever James had sent back with him was meant to bring joy and happiness, that it came from love, but he wasn’t ready for that. Not yet. Not when it still hurt just to draw breath.

Alone, he made his way to the Great Hall, falling onto a bench and waiting for food to appear before him. He had no appetite, but his father’s fanaticism had worked its way under his skin. He couldn’t skip a meal even if he wanted to.

“You all right, Harry?”
The boy looked up from his kippers to see Ron watching him, frown on his face and brows folded together. He had no idea when his friend had sat down, nor any of the other people sitting around him for that matter.

He was far from all right. His stomach was tight and churning, his head ached and eyes burned. Every moment he was awake he wanted to cry. Every time he closed his eyes, he wanted to scream. No, he was not all right.

“Yeah,” he lied.

Without ever intending it to happen, he had built up the expectation that not just Sirius but maybe even his parents would somehow have managed to cheat fate and live to see Harry through Hogwarts and into adulthood. It was never something he consciously thought about, certainly nothing he would have dared voice. He had run from Morven’s suggestion that things might have changed for the better, knowing that if that hope were seized and held tight then he was certain to be disappointed.

Fate wasn’t to be cheated. James and Lily Potter died at the hands of Voldemort, just as they had before. Sirius was hit by Bellatrix’s curse, just as before. Remus had grown into a clever but disappointed man, just as before. And Harry was alone, just as before.

“So what about tryouts then?” Ron questioned.

Quidditch. It seemed so stupid now. Just a game. Hardly worth playing. What good was a cup? He put on a thoughtful face and nodded. “Saturday.”

“Oh good,” his friend said, smile lighting up his face. “I was worried you’d be too poorly. That curse Malfoy used was a nasty one if you’re still feeling sick from it.” He stopped, studying his friend. “Harry, I been meaning to ask you... What hex was it? ‘Cause, I mean, you left looking like one of Madam Pomfrey’s demonstration skeletons, but you came back fitter than Wood. I’m no expert, but that doesn’t strike me as normal.”

“Just a side effect of the counter-charm,” Harry said, his voice empty as he spoke the lie. Without offering an explanation or so much as a ‘goodbye’, he pushed himself off the bench and started making his way to class.

“Hi, Harry.”

The boy stopped, staring vacantly down at the girl blocking his path. Her name was Louisa; he was pretty sure that was her name, though he barely remembered her. She was pretty enough, long blond hair forced into unnatural curls and large, dark eyes. Her mouth was a perfect bow, curled up into a nervous smile.

“Hullo,” he offered.

“Um, Harry, I was wondering if you’d like to go to Hogsmeade with me,” she said in a rush, her words practically blurring together.

Well, this was different. He couldn’t recall a single instance in this decade when a girl had asked him out. It had been a struggle to find a date for the Yule Ball, but suddenly girls were pursuing him? He wanted to be pleased, to be elated that he could get back to the normal rites boys his age were meant to be performing – dates with girls, kissing girls, having feelings for girls. It’s what was normal and expected of him, but he couldn’t do it. He looked at the girl again and felt nothing.

“Sorry, no, I have detention,” he said, stepping around her and walking away. He didn’t know how
she responded, nor did he much care. To him, she wasn’t even there.

He moved through the throng of students making their way through the entrance hall, barely aware of any of them. All their noises – the shouting and laughing – it echoed in his ears, meaningless sounds. He barely registered his name being called. It wasn’t until someone barrelled into him, knocking him to the flagstones, that he bothered paying any attention. The tall woman lying on top of him was grinning a wide, toothy grin. He nearly thought it was Tildy, but then she spoke.

“Harry Potter, you are one sexy beast!” Her hands dove under his jumper, playing across his abdomen and chest, sliding down his ribs.

He managed to hide the flinch of being tickled beneath a smile. “I do try, Tonks.”

Memories of her lying on his chest flashed before him, those dark eyes huge in her young face, her hair more tangles than curls. She smiled at him in just the same way again, this time from beneath sharp pink spikes.

“You planning on getting up any time soon?” he questioned.

“Do I have to?” pouted the woman even as she pushed herself up to her feet. Her hands grabbed his, and she hauled him up.

Brushing the dust of the floor off his trousers, he was aware of Tonks watching him with a carefully blank face, though her eyes were somehow even larger than normal and her cheeks stained pink.

“Tonks—“

“I wasn’t checking out your arse just now, I swear!” she insisted far too quickly, her skin turning even pinker.

He laughed for the first time since leaving his parents in 1977. The few days since their parting hadn’t offered much worth laughing about; three days of moving like a ghost through the castle. Not even seeing Malfoy’s face fall into disbelief had been enough to stir any feeling in him. Tonks could always make him smile. She winks and flirted and disregarded any notion of personal space. Hermione had once commented that she never did that with anyone else, not with Ron or any of the older Weasley boys. Only with Harry. Hermione's intention had been to demonstrate just how oblivious Harry truly was to the nature of Sirius and his flirting, but did that mean Tonks had been flirting with him properly since summer, as well?

Harry considered the woman, her flirtation and touching so like Sirius it made his heart ache to think about it. Just as with the girl who might have been named Louisa, Harry felt nothing for Tonks; he liked her well enough as a person, but when he considered her in any way other than a friend, he felt empty. Still, he knew all the tricks to pull her in, to turn her flirtation into something more than just play, to make her properly like him. Everything he loved in Sirius, he liked first in Tonks. It could be a way to hold on to the boy he had loved and lost.

Almost as soon as the thought entered his brain, he threw it away. Tonks wasn’t Sirius. Making her into a cheap substitute would lessen her and reduce what he and Sirius had to little more than nothing.

He forced a smile onto his face, “Of course you weren’t. So why are you accosting me in the entrance hall?”

She blushed again. “Remus said you were back. I wanted to see for myself.”
“Do I pass inspection?”

“Most certainly,” she agreed with an enthusiastic nod that transferred to her entire body. “Better than when you left the Burrow, that’s for sure.”

“Mostly,” he agreed. No need mentioning that the muscles belied a broken and hollow centre, now was there?

“Where you heading?”

He had to think before replying. The schedule he kept in 1977 wasn’t the same. Tuesdays he used to have Transfiguration in the morning, but now it was Potions. Tonks walked with him through the corridors and down to the dungeon levels, chatting away and not quite keeping his mind from wandering down one more level to where he had shoved Sirius away, to where the boy had said he loved him.

“Harry?”

He blinked.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” he said without pause. “Worried about Potions.”

“Don’t be. Slug’s a pussycat.”

Harry blinked again, this time in confusion. “Slug?”

“Slughorn. He was my Potions prof. A bit long-winded, but always made sure we knew how to brew,” she said, dropping her voice low as she added, “Not like Snape, from what I heard.”

Harry nodded. So that’s why they’d put him down for Potions. He knew he hadn’t managed the grades Snape required.

“Well, I’m off. Just came to check on you, Hot Harry,” she grinned.

He offered a smile that only barely manage to reach his eyes. In the dim light, she didn’t notice. As she left, the corridor seemed that much darker for her absence. The world went back to the dull echoes of before, like the sounds of a television playing in another room. He sighed and followed the students, sitting at a bench and waiting for class to start. His hand took notes, though his brain failed to register any of what was being said. He sliced and chopped, simmered and stirred until he had a potion as good as any other, though if asked he wouldn’t have been able to say what he had made or what he had done to make it. His body performed actions by rote while his head remained blessedly, wretchedly hollow.
Two more days trudged past, each as unremarkable as the previous, and it became obvious to Harry that this makeshift life was the best he was going to get. Every moment he dared let himself think, he thought of Sirius, of what could have been if he’d just been brave enough to say the right thing, to speak the truth, to admit that he loved him, too. He had been such a coward to push him away. That pain pierced his chest whenever he dared think about it, so he tried his best not to think. He moved through his days unfocused, his eyes trained on nothing, his brain empty, his body moving and functioning without any input from him.

Two days before someone finally noticed.

“Mr Potter, Miss Granger, a word,” McGonagall called as the students gathered their books and parchments.

Harry made his way up to the woman’s desk, Hermione beside him. The girl looked every bit as empty as he felt, eyes unfocused and red-rimmed, mouth pulled into a seemingly perpetual grimace. He knew that expression well. He wore it every moment he was alone. Logically, he knew they needed to move past grief, but he failed to see how such a thing was possible. In an instant, they had stepped from the glorious, kaleidoscopic world of love and family into this harsh black reality of Dark Lords and Death Eater. He remembered thinking his father’s Hogwarts was something alien and forbidding. Perhaps it had been, but this one was so much worse.

“Professor?”

The woman took a moment before speaking. “I’m worried about the pair of you,” she said, her generally crisp and stern voice softened by concern. “It’s been some time since you last set foot in
my classroom. Some twenty years, but I remember you both being far more stable than you’ve been these past few days.”

“We’re fine,” Hermione said.

“You are not,” the woman insisted. “I know what’s troubling you, and, believe me, I am not one to get involved in the love lives of my students. However, you must move on. It isn’t healthy to dwell on things so long past.”

Harry felt his nails biting into his palms as he fought to keep his tongue. Long past? One week ago Sirius had told him that he loved him. One week. It had only been seven short but excruciating days since he had walked away from him like the fool he was. He wanted to shout this painful truth at the old woman, to make her understand that he wasn’t being stubborn or childish, that it was a pain still fresh and new to him. He wanted to, but he didn’t. Hermione beat him to it.

“It’s been five days, Professor,” the girl said through gritted teeth. “Five days ago, Remus said he loved me. Now, he’s too old?”

“Ah, well, but you see,” the woman hedge and stammered. “It’s been such a long time for us.”

“Lucky you,” she practically spat.

“Miss Granger…” she began but could find no words to coax the girl, and Hermione, perhaps for the first time in her life, spun on her heels and stomped away from a teacher. Harry watched her leave, unsure if he should follow.

“Mr Potter,” the woman sighed. “Time really does heal all wounds.”

Time heals all wounds. He frowned as the phrase repeated itself in his head. Time. How much time? How long would it take before he could breathe again? What about the time in between? What was he supposed to do until the hole in his chest closed? Just walk around empty and hollow? Was he just meant to wait around for this utter desolation to end?

“I doubt it,” was all he dared say rather than overwhelm her with the questions flooding his head. His feet carried him from her classroom, out into the hall, where Hermione stood fuming.

“She’s had twenty years to prepare, and that’s all she managed to come up with?” Hermione grumbled.

Her arms were around him before he could offer a reply, not that he knew what to say. His own mind was still too filled with his own pain and the questions brought on by McGonagall’s trite platitude. It was easier to let his brain empty and his body do what needed to be done. His arms moved without him telling them, his hands balled in her shirt, face buried in her shoulder. He could feel her heart beating a hard and strained rhythm as she cried against him.

“I didn’t think it would hurt this much,” she said into his jumper.

“Nor did I,” he admitted.

When Sirius died, he had cried and screamed and fought against the truth. The man haunted his dreams as if he were still alive, shoving Harry away when he attempted to apologise. That had been nothing but childish guilt more than any real love keeping the man in his mind. He had thought it would be more of the same this time around, but he truly did not expect the constant ache in his chest as if there were a real, physical object imbedded in his heart. At least if that were the case, he could remove the problem and let the wound heal.
There was no remedy for this, save the removal of all memories of Sirius from his head.

He was loathed to even consider the idea. Sirius as he had known him was lost to the world. The only Sirius left was a moving mug shot of a mass murderer. He refused to let that be the only idea he had of such a brilliant and beautiful boy or such a loyal friend. The pain was worth it if it let him remember what his Sirius was truly like.

“Are you all right?” she asked, her voice muffled against his shirt.

He laughed, not a proper laugh, something bitter and painful to the ears. “Yeah, of course.”

“No, really, Harry. You’ve been walking around like an inferi, alive but not really.”

He hesitated, terrified of putting anything into words. “It hurts to think.”

“I know,” she said.

“I’m... You were right. I love him, and now he’s gone. I’m left with nothing but memories haunting me everywhere I go. I can’t look at a classroom without thinking of him sitting in it beside me. I can’t sit in the Great Hall or the common room without him next to me. I’m in love with a memory, Hermione, with nothing but an echo. I can’t help thinking about him being alive in another time, happy and completely ignorant that I even exist. I’m nothing to him, but he’s everything to me.”

Her arms were around him again. “Oh, Harry, I never even thought of it that way.”

He wiped at his nose and sniffed roughly. “You’re going to be late for class.”

She rubbed the tears from her face. “How do I look?”

“Bloody awful,” he said with the best smile he could manage, which he knew wasn’t a particularly good one.

“You are hardly one to talk,” she informed him flatly.

Harry wanted to laugh in reply, but couldn’t manage it. He couldn’t manage much of anything lately. It took all his energy to trudge the long route up to Gryffindor Tower and throw himself down on his bed. He wondered, and not for the first time, if this was the same bed he had back then, if this was the same set of curtains that had sheltered him and Sirius that night.

‘Just stop thinking of that!’ He pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars instead of Sirius.

“Harry.”

“What?” he replied dully.

“What’d McGonagall want?”

He turned and saw Ron sitting across the room, concern hiding in the tightness around his eyes and the strain holding the forced smile in place. Lying to Ron had been hardest. The boy was his best mate. Dumbledore had told them not to say anything until they were certain nothing had been irreparably altered from what they had known. More secrets to keep, more lies to tell.

“Just making sure we’re okay.”
“And are you?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, sounding almost convincing.

Ron said nothing. He sat and watched Harry as he lost awareness of his surroundings again, remembered something that had happened in this room – mundane things like Remus writing an essay; James and Peter playing Wizard Chess; Sirius reading a book, winking at him over the top; Sirius sitting next to him on his bed so they could share his Potions book, their thighs pressed against one another’s; Sirius—

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” the boy mumbled.

Harry let him grow irritated, let him walk away. Everyone left in the end. Why not let them do it early and save the trouble of caring too much?

He stood, trudged over to the window and threw it open. He thought it was just after noon, but the sun was setting over the Forbidden Forest. He stared at the brilliant sky, the golds and fiery reds so much more vibrant than anything he had seen lately. Merlin, he missed Sirius; he brought life and colour to his world. Without him, everything was just black.

He pushed a fist into his chest, rubbing at the ache he felt there, forcing it away.

Turning from the setting sun, Harry considered unpacking his trunk. Unbidden, a memory came to him of sitting beside Sirius as he stared at the plaque, puzzling out the mystery of Harry James Granger. He felt the sting of tears and tore his eyes away, dropping down to the floor with his back to trunk. Out of sight, out of mind, or so they say.

He needed to take control of his mind, box up the memories of Sirius and stop being so affected by them.

‘One, two, three,’ he counted each breath as he drew it in and released it. He counted until he lost track of the numbers and just let the air flow in and out of him. He closed his eyes and the images of Sirius in all his many forms and moods passed before him. During the summer, he had so few memories of his Godfather that it was easy to push him aside. Now, the boy filled every corner of his mind as he remembered each moment they had spent together.

“Stupid,” he cursed himself, slamming his head back against the trunk. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.” He punctuated each word with a painful blow against the leather-encased wood.

He threw his head back, letting it lay there as he finally said aloud the thought that had plagued him for the past five days. “Shouldn’t have left it like that.”

A knock came, reverberating in his bruised skull.

“Go away!”

The knock came again, harder, more insistent. Harry lifted his head and glared at the door,
scowling when the knock came again.

“What did I just say?!” he demanded in a harsh shout, but the door did not open. The knock sounded again.

Harry leapt to his feet, stomped across the room to throw the door wide. “I said ‘go away’!” he shouted at the empty landing. He scowled and slammed the door closed, growling his displeasure.

The knock came once more. It was not as loud as it had seemed before; the sound did not pulse in his head as it had when leaning against the trunk. It was dull and low as if muffled by a barrier. For all its quietness, that sound was still demanding.

“What?” he said, confusion fast replacing his aggravation.

As the knock came again, a persistent stream of raps commanding his attention, he followed the noise, chasing it across the room until he located the source. His trunk. He set a palm on the lid, felt the solid surface, felt the percussive blow accompanying the hard rap. He jerked his hand away as if the trunk had bit him.

It was James’s little surprise. It had to be.

Equally cautious and curious, Harry fished the keys from beneath his shirt, fitting them into the coordinating holes and turning them until he heard the click of each mechanism release. He stood back, using his wand to lift the lid. He waited and listened. The knock came again, louder than before, strong enough to make the topmost compartment jump with the impact.

He stood back and waited.

Whatever the prank was, it would have to let itself free.

Breath held in his lungs, he waited.

He tried to imagine what James might have done, but the boy was creative in a way Harry would never be. The compartment shifted, spilling books and scrolls onto the floor as it jerked upward. Harry strained his ears for a hint of what this new trick might be.

He needn’t have worked so hard. The answer came in an explosive shout from the depths of his trunk:

“YOU LAZY PRAT!”
"YOU LAZY PRAT!"

His body quaked with the shout, legs falling out from under him as his knees buckled. That voice, familiar and impossible, had dogged his every dream since June – angry or angelic, suggestive or surly, he would know that voice until his dying day. It was a voice he should never have heard again. It wasn’t possible for that voice to be shouting up from the depths of his trunk.

Open-mouthed and bewildered, Harry watched the figure emerge from the trunk. Hair long and black, face painfully handsome with sparkling grey eyes, straight nose, a smirking mouth begging to be kissed and a jaw overdo for a shave; his robes were rumpled and shirt partially unbuttoned; long arms and even longer legs followed until he was standing on the solid and very real floor of the dormitory.

Sirius Black.

The smirk pulled into something decidedly smug as he studied Harry hyperventilating on the floor. Then he spoke again:

“Sirius rises late in the dark, liquid sky
On summer nights, star of stars,
Orion's Dog they call it, brightest
Of all, bringing heat
And fevers to suffering humanity…

“Or suffering Harry in this particular case.” He grinned that sexy, confident grin, which he seemed born to wear. “Are you just going to sit there staring at me and gaping like a mullet? I know I’m handsome, but some kind of welcome would be nice after waiting five bloody days for you to finally unpack that thing.”

“Impossible,” Harry breathed.

“No, this isn’t possible. I’m imagining this.” He leapt to his feet, scrambling away from the mockery. “You aren’t real. You are dead.”
“I’m quite talented, you know,” the impossible boy replied as he moved closer. “Know all kinds of clever spells, including one I made up all by myself. Well, I had a little help getting it started.” His smile only grew more confident as he pulled a folded bit of parchment from his pocket, holding it for Harry to take. “Care to have a look?”

Certain he had lost his mind from grief, Harry reached for the parchment, amazed when he was able to touch it, to feel the irregularities of it, the softness of it as if it were really there in his hand. Tearing his eyes off the boy, he studied the parchment, old and yellowed, hand-written in heavy black letters that spelled out words in an ancient form of English he had become rather adept at deciphering. The block print at the top was unmistakable. “The Riven Heart,” he read aloud.

“Sound familiar?” Sirius whispered from behind him, making Harry jump at the feeling of the boy’s breath against his neck, the heat of his body through his clothes.

“No,” Harry said, as much to his flirtation as to the spell in his hands. “This wasn’t in the book.”

“You honestly think I would risk that twisted bastard getting his hands on something like that?” the boy replied, his voice as harsh as it ever was when talking about Alfie. “That spell was far too important to let Alfie fucking Quintain get his sadistic hands on it. I tore it out before I put the book in my bag.”

“Why would you have kept it secret?” he demanded. He knew the spell had not been in the book. He had been with Sirius in the Restricted Section when the boy discovered it. If the spell had been in there, wouldn’t Sirius have shown it to him instead of ripping the page out and hiding it, never telling him about it?

“It was too important,” the hallucination repeated, his voice dropping to almost a whisper as he continued. “That spell brought you to me.”

“No, it was a fluke of magic that did that.”

“That spell sent you back for a reason. I talked to Morven. No one ever travelled as far back as you did. Two hours. That was all. But you went back twenty years. Why?”

Harry scowled that his subconscious mind was demanding so much of him. “There isn’t a reason. It’s just magic.”

“Bullocks. I grew up with magic. It’s not as arbitrary as that. There’s always a reason.”

“Yeah? And what reason could it possibly have to send me back that far?”

“Me.” He said it simply without the slightest hint of arrogance or pride. “I’m the reason. I’m your soulmate. Split-Aparts—”

“Are romantic nonsense,” Harry spoke over him, not wanting to hear whatever else his mind might have to say on the subject.

Sirius stepped closer. “Before you went back, what did you dream of every night? It was Sirius. You said so yourself.”

“That was guilt.”

“Why would you feel so guilty? He was a grown man, who made his own choices. No one made him do it. Certainly not you. Why feel so guilty for something you didn’t do?”
“Sirius was my family. I loved him,” he shouted.

“Yes, you did,” the boy replied, smile in his voice as if Harry had just admitted defeat. “That spell could have sent you to any point in his life. It could have sent you back to the very night, the very moment he died so you could save him. Instead it sent you to me.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that when the spell hit.” Harry’s snarl died as he spoke. “I wasn’t thinking about that at all.”

“What were you thinking of?”

His brows knit together as the memory of Malfoy and his goons came back to him. He remembered the boy’s taunts. “He said ‘that dog was first’ and I knew he was talking about Sirius. I stepped up and was ready to hex him, but in the back of my mind I just kept wondering how he knew that Sirius was an Animagus. Sirius had learned it when he was fifteen, and I was thinking about him at school when that curse hit.” He frowned and stared up at the illusion standing opposite. “Sirius learned it the year before we arrived. We ought to have been sent there.”

“Magic has a logic all its own,” Sirius replied with a knowing smile.

“Or is has no sense of time. So it was off by a year, so what?” He tried to shrug off the minor error, but he couldn’t. Not when there was a Sirius standing far too close, making it difficult to think and to breathe. Not when there was a Sirius forcing him to rethink his entire journey.

“I think,” he said softly, stepping closer still, “that the spell sent you where you needed to be. If you had come the previous year, we never would have spent all that time together. That’s what you needed. You were broken when you came to me, and I was incomplete. We fixed each other.”

“Last I checked, I’m still broken,” Harry insisted, stepping away and colliding with the wall.

Sirius closed in, blocking his escape and deflecting his poor argument. “Which is exactly why I’m here now. I have to keep my promise and finish what I started.”

Harry tore his eyes from the boy to frown down at the parchment still locked in his fingers. It all sounded so logical and right. He hated his mind for playing such a trick on him. “No, you died same as before. Please go away.”

“And after all I did to get here,” he sighed, turning and falling onto the nearest bed with a slight wince as he landed on a book. “I don’t even get to look around before I go?”

“No, because you aren’t real.”

“I am so.”

“Are not.”

“Nice retort,” the boy snorted.

“Fine, you want a retort,” Harry growled. “Sirius moved on. I broke it off, and not two days later he was hanging on some girl in the common room. Why would you be in my trunk if he moved on?”

The impossible boy scowled in annoyance; Harry was certain he had made an irrefutable point and that this mirage would vanish, but the boy cursed under his breath. “I told that idiot to wait until you’d left,”
“Who?”

The illusion blinked as if surprised Harry had heard him, but after a moment he answered, “The other me.”

“What are you on about? There’s only one you, and he’s dead.”

“I made another one,” the boy said matter-of-factly.

Harry was beginning to understand just how mad he might have gone. Even his hallucinations were talking nonsense. “You can’t invent a whole person.”

“Never said I’d invented an entire person, just sort of split a bit of me off. Hurt like hell and left very manly and impressive scars, too, in case you cared.” He took hold of the open collar of his shirt, pulling the fabric aside to show three angry red scars running down his chest. “Took me three tries before I managed a Split-Apart that wasn’t completely useless.”

Harry’s hand reached out without his permission, drawn by the livid lines marring that glorious white skin. They felt hot under his fingers, as if the skin were still healing a fresh wound.

“Kiss it and make it better?”

He tore his hand away, turned and clamped his eyes shut, willing the painful hallucination away. This was not some memory dredged up by his lonely subconscious; this was new and unfamiliar. Surely, James had not created this illusion; his pranks had never seemed so intentionally cutting and malicious.

“No, because you aren’t real.”

Even with his eyes closed, he knew the damn thing was still there. He could hear the fabric of its robes rustling and the clatter of metal against the wood of a bedside table as it inspected the nearest object at hand. His ears told him it was real. His skin was still a tingling mess of gooseflesh from where the boy had breathed his words on him. His hand still felt the warmth of the scars. This had to be what madness felt like.

“Sorry, Harry,” a quiet voice called as the door opened with a sigh of the ancient hinges. “I know you want to be left alone, but I need my Herbology books.”

“Go on, Neville,” Harry muttered, face determinately pointed at the wall. No need to go advertising his lunacy just yet.

“Thanks, Harry.” The boy encouraged as he shuffled about the room. “‘scuse me, could I just...”

“Yeah, no worries,” the impossible Sirius replied.

Harry spun around in time to watch the exchange. He saw Neville eyeing the boy with curiosity, nodding his appreciation when the seemingly imagined boy sat up and allowed him to collect the book he had been lying on. “Neville,” Harry cried hastily, “Do you— Do you see— Do you know him?”

The boy looked at Sirius and shook his head. “Should I?”

“No,” he said an octave too high. “No, you shouldn’t.”
“Harry, are feeling all right?”

“Poor lad hit his head, I’m afraid,” Sirius cooed and gave the wild black strands a gentle pat. “Matron said he just needed a good night’s rest.” The boy’s large hands took hold of his arms and steered him toward his bed, where a blanket was thrown at him.

“You’ll be wanting an infusion of Feverfew. Madam Sprout said that works best for head pains,” Neville offered helpfully. “I can see about getting you some.”

“Cheers,” the improbable boy replied with a grin that sent Neville scurrying off on the errand.

“Nice lad,” Sirius commented and threw himself down beside him. “So, Harry James Potter, you look...” He paused, taking a moment to let his eyes trail down his frame and draw slowly back up again. As his eyes made the return journey, Harry could tell what he saw did not meet his approval. He wasn’t surprised given his lack of sleep and general malaise. “Bloody awful is how you look. I think I should have forced the locks three days ago. No grand entrance is worth having you look like this. Honestly, Harry, you look nearly as bad as when you turned up at my Hogwarts.”

Understanding dawned on him. “Fucking hell, Harry. Is it because you’d lost me again?”

Harry barely got the chance to nod before Sirius wrapped himself around him, solid and warm and, more than anything else, real. He closed his eyes and delighted in the feel of the boy’s arms squeezing him tight as if Sirius feared he might fall apart at any moment, which he probably would have if he hadn’t sprung from his trunk. All the pain and ache and blackness that had been consuming him from within came surging from his mouth in the form of a contented sigh.

“This is real, isn’t it?” he whispered, fearful of the answer. “This isn’t just happening in my head?”

Lips brushed against his. “What do you think?”

“I think my mind has played tricks on me before, especially where you’re concerned. Tell me this is real.”

“Why tell you when I can show you?” The boy took in a slow breath before deliberating aloud. “How best to start? A kiss, do you think?”

“You’re asking me?” Harry said or had been attempting to when Sirius shut him up with a searing kiss unlike any they had shared in their brief and confusing relationship. It was hard and deep and had him seeing stars, had him groaning into the boy’s mouth, had him grasping at hair, robes, arse, anything he could to pull him closer.

Sirius was more than happy to oblige, pressing himself down on top of him, chest to heaving chest, stomach to tightening stomach, groin to hardening groin. The last item drew his particular attention, made him smiled against Harry’s mouth.

“Is that in your head, too, you think, Messer Potter?”

“Oh, sod o---oh, Merlin, do that again,” he bit out as Sirius snapped his hips against him.

“If this really were only in your head, then would that just make you terribly randy?”

Harry couldn’t respond, not with Sirius rolling his hips like that, not with his hands roaming under his jumper, not with his eyes so dark and lips swollen. When he looked like that – looked at him like that – all he could do was moan and try very hard not to come in his pants. As if he knew just how close he was to coming undone, Sirius slid down his legs to straddle his knees. His hands set
to work unbuttoning his trousers, shoving the cloth out of the way until there was nothing between him and Harry.

They had done this before, but only once. It had been the dead of night, black as pitch, and Harry, admittedly, had thought that was a dream, too. Now, the sun had just finished setting; it was still bright enough for him to see Sirius eying him.

“‘You really ought to be naked,’” the impossible boy commented. “‘We weren’t naked last time. So if we’re aiming to prove this isn’t in your head, we ought to be doing something completely different. Kit off, Potter!’”

Harry had no time to offer a rebuttal before Sirius had his hands on the hem of his jumper, tearing it up and over his head, dislodging his glasses in the process. “Buggering hell, Sirius.”

“Sorry,” he said, cursing as he untangled the boy from his clothes and hunted in the fabric for the lost spectacles. When he returned them, the lenses were a mess with fingerprints and smudges.

Looking up at the blur of a red-faced Sirius Black, Harry laughed. He laughed like he hadn’t in weeks.

“What? What is so damned funny?”

“This,” he hiccupped. “There is no way I’d dream anything this awkward and embarrassing. This is real. You’re really here.”

“Yeah, really here. Really staying,” he promised.

“That means we’ve got plenty of time for this later,” Harry said, falling back onto the bed, yanking his trousers back into place and sliding under the blanket. “Right now, I just want to sleep. Haven’t slept in days.”

Silence met his declaration. Silence that stretched and grew until Sirius cleared his throat uncertainly. “Can I sleep with you? I mean, actually sleep, not fondle and grope. Although I might cop a feel or two. I mean, you can’t really blame me fo—“

“Sirius, shut up and get in.” He threw the duvet open, and Sirius crawled into bed beside him, tangling their legs together and pulling him close again.

“Thanks.”

“Shut up and sleep.”

Chapter End Notes

While googling info, facts and quotes about the Dog Star, I came across the fun fact (as mentioned in Ch55) that Sirius is a binary star. Learning that changed the entire direction I had intended to take this fic. Let’s all be extremely grateful for that, otherwise it would have been supremely disappointing and far more bitter than sweet.

Also, raise your hand if you saw it coming! No, seriously, I tried to leave enough clues to help everyone along. Nothing worse than a deus ex machina/twist with zero foreshadowing to suggest it might be coming. Let me know if I got it right!
“Bloody hell!”

The shout rang out, forcing him to crack his eyes open enough to see the ginger standing between the curtains. “If you don’t like it, don’t look.”

“Bloody hell,” the ginger said again. “I mean, just... bloody hell!”

“Ron, what do you want?” Harry groaned, shifting in the bed to blink owlishly at the intruder.

“Well, it’s quidditch tryouts today,” the boy stammered, eyes darting, huge and terrified, between the two boys in the bed, to Harry’s bare chest and Sirius’s hand placed low on the boy’s belly. “I... I wanted to...”

“No, I will not let you try out alone,” he said. “When you make the team, you’ll have to play in front of the entire school, Ron. You need to try out with an audience, too.”

“Oh,” the boy said, dejected. For a moment, he stood shame-faced and awkward, then he cleared his throat. “Uh, Harry... Did you fall asleep studying together? I mean, is that why you’re in bed with another bloke? ‘Cause if that’s the case, you need to be more careful or people will think you’re, you know, gay.” He whispered the last word, as if saying it too loudly might make it true or possibly contagious.

Sirius scowled at the ginger but readied himself to support whatever lie Harry decided to hide behind. He remembered how the boy had railed against the idea of liking Sirius, insisted that he had only ever liked girls before. It was the truth everyone in this time knew. He didn’t expect the boy to shout it from the top of the North Tower that he and Sirius liked to fondle one another, but, as always, Harry surprised him.

“I am gay,” Harry said.

“Wha—?” the ginger gaped, his mouth falling open before he’d even finished saying the word.

“This is Sirius. I fancy him.”

The boy’s mouth flapped and his face flushed to so deep a red Sirius had to wonder if there was any blood left in the remainder of his lanky body. To his credit, the boy didn’t move, not even an involuntary step away in subconscious repulsion, though he did look as if he might vomit. “I’ll have to start changing in the washroom.”

“Why?” Harry questioned, face screwed up in confusion.

“Well, if you fancy blokes, I don’t want you looking at me.”

He snorted and threw a pillow at him. “Never going to happen.”
“What? Why not? I’m perfectly fanciable!”

“Not to me,” Harry said and turned to him with a questioning eye. “Sirius?”

“Not my type,” he offered.

“Gits.” The ginger cursed under his breath as he marched to the nearest bed and woke the occupant awake by shouting, “Oi! Neville, if you were gay, would you fancy me?”

“What? No!” the boy cried. “Harry, Ron’s been in the mushroom patch again!”

“Have not!” Ron shouted. “You lot do not appreciate how handsome I am.” He tore from the room, no doubt to wake every available Gryffindor to find the one blind oaf that would own up to liking him if they swung the other way.

In the confused silence that followed the boy’s departure, the others occupants of the room poked their heads from behind their curtains to see what had set him off. Three sets of eyes stared at them. He recognised the boy with the Herbology book from the previous night; the others he didn’t know, but neither were looking their way with malice or disgust. The only thing he could read in their curious faces was exasperation.

“Facking hell, Harry,” sighed the boy with a face scattered with freckles, his voice heavy with sleep and brogue, “you’re back five days and you’re already making trouble?”

The other boy chimed in. “Do you think you could keep Ron distracted with your gayness for a while longer? I don’t want him freaking out that Ginny and I are dating.”

“Just pretend you fancy him,” Freckles suggested with a smirk. “He’ll be so happy, he’ll wet himself. Once he realises what he’s done, he’ll hand you his sister to make you piss off.”

“Worth a try,” he shrugged and turned back to Harry. “Please remember that silencing charms are as much for our benefit as yours. I don’t care if you’re gay, but I don’t want to hear you at it any more than I do Seamus.”

“Agreed!” the freckled Seamus cried and disappeared behind the curtain of his bed. The others followed, leaving Harry and Sirius in relative seclusion.

“So those are your friends,” Sirius said slowly, savouring the flavour of the room. “They’ll do.”

“Gee thank, ya poof.”

“Shut it, Seamus! I may fancy blokes, but I’m still Captain of the team you would give your left testicle to play for!” Harry shouted.

The boy offered a string of colourful curses behind his curtain that likely would have continued if Harry didn’t throw a silencing spell around their bed.

“So you fancy blokes, do you?” Sirius grinned.

It was a comment playfully meant, little more than an ever-so-casual means of getting Harry to finally vocalise his feelings, and the kind of thing that always fell from his mouth – pithy, sly, blasé, meaningless. Harry, however, took a moment to really consider the question.

“No, not really,” Harry replied carefully. “When I thought you were gone, I tried to figure out what that made me. I always thought I liked girls, but after you they didn’t make me feel anything. I
tried thinking about boys instead, but that didn’t do anything either. I don’t fancy blokes. I fancy you. Is that normal?”

“Perfectly normal. Loads of people fancy me.” A fist to his arm had him biting his tongue to keep from automatically apologising.

Harry scowled at him. “I’m not joking. You’ve had experience with this before, you know about this gay thing.”

He fell back on the bed, throwing the curtain closed as he did. “I really don’t.”

“But, you’ve dated boys before.”

“I dated that one boy second year just to keep him away from James. I didn’t fancy him, certainly didn’t shag him. Then it was nothing but girls until you came along.”

Harry stared at him, eyes narrowing and lines forming around his already downturned mouth. “But that day outside Healing, all that stuff you said to Hermione about finding your soul mate in different places. Was that was just taking the piss?”

“No, meant every word. Doesn’t mean I’d done it, though,” he countered, pulling the other boy down so he could look him in the eye. This was a speech he’d been practicing for days while stuck down in the boy’s trunk; he wanted it to be right. “Harry, I dated a lot of girls, never for very long. I did it because that’s what I thought I was supposed to do. They were nice, but like you said they didn’t make me feel anything. Same with that Ravenclaw boy. No one I looked at made me feel anything. I thought there was something wrong with me, that maybe I’d had love beaten out of me before I even knew what it was. Then I met you. I don’t know what it means or what it makes me. I just know that I love you, and I want to stay with you no matter what.”

“Why did you risk it?” he asked, putting a palm to the newly acquired scars. “I pushed you away.”

“Well, I love you, don’t I?” he replied as if it were obvious. “I wasn’t going to let you leave with half my heart. I would’ve been a useless, crying wreck for the rest of my life, and I couldn’t have that, now could I? I have a reputation to maintain.”

“But I pushed you away,” the boy repeated stubbornly. “I never said I loved you. I never even admitted that I fancied you. You risked your life, abandoned your whole world in the hopes that I would want you. That wasn’t very bright.”

“Oi! I am more than bright; I’m brilliant as a fucking star, and you know it, Potter.” He jabbed the boy with his knee for his commentary.

“What if it didn’t work? What if I didn’t want you?”

“Bollocks. I knew what you were doing, knew you were trying to make things easier on yourself. How did that work for you, by the way?” He offered a saccharine grin. “If you want to talk about plans backfiring...”

He slapped the boy’s arm. “Shut it. I’m the one who had to deal with you dying twice.”

“And I’m the one who, quite literally, ripped himself in two three times to keep you from dealing with that, so I do believe I win this argument. And every argument from here until the end of time. Whenever you are cross with me, I shall remind you of the excruciating physical pain I put myself through to make our relationship possible. I shall remind you of all the things I sacrificed to be here for you. My friends, girls, family – fuck that, it would have been a sacrifice to stay with them.” He
paused as a thought hit him before looking back at Harry with huge, hope-filled eyes. “Is my mother dead? Please tell me she’s dead.”

Harry breathed a laugh. “Yeah, she’s dead. You are the proud inheritor of the noble and ancient Black estate.”

“Wait, my mother is dead, and I’m still rich? This is the best plan I have ever had,” he grinned and kissed the boy. “And I get to play Quidditch.”

“Says who?”

“Says you. You’re Captain. You’ve seen me play. I’m brilliant, make me a Beater.”

Shaking his head, Harry disagreed. “Can’t. You don’t even have a house.”

“I’m a Gryffindor.”

“You were a Gryffindor. The hat might put you somewhere else, if Dumbledore doesn’t try to send you home and put you back together instead.”

His heart began a frantic, frightened rhythm in his chest. Would Dumbledore try to undo all his hard work? Send him back? Leave Harry alone? “No, Dumbles wouldn’t do that.”

“A lot’s changed, Sirius.” Harry was up and dressing before he could question exactly what the boy meant. The bleak tone implied volumes. He knew the boy had been withholding secrets. He had known that from almost as soon as they’d met. More than just being from another time, being James’ son and knowing when and how Sirius would die, Harry was carrying the weight of twenty years of history on his shoulders. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he had divulged only enough to satisfy the questions put to him. That was a miniscule portion of the years Sirius had skipped over.

Inside Hogwarts, it was virtually impossible to discern the difference. The posters on the walls were the only clues that he had travelled anywhere. Everything else was exactly as he had left it. So it was in the common room and corridors, too. The braziers and sconces, the portraits and tapestries, the rugs and even the questionable stain on the fourth stair tread of the second moving staircase were all precisely as he had left them. But, outside the castle walls, he knew things had changed. He wasn’t sure how, but Harry’s tone made it clear that he ought to expect some truly jarring differences.

“So, what have I missed?” he asked, trying to sound casual. When Harry didn’t answer, he tried again. “Where’s James got to then? Lazing about at home all day or did he manage a job?”

His face turned haunted and pale as he had all those months ago. Behind his glasses, the boy’s eyes began to shine. “James, Lily – my parents – they died.”

He staggered to a halt, the air flying from his lungs as violently as if Harry had dealt him a physical blow. “That isn’t funny.”

“Fifteen years ago,” insisted Harry.

“But—they – I just saw them – You just saw them. You didn’t say anything. You didn’t say a bloody thing,” he shouted as a stone fell to the pit of his stomach.

“I couldn’t warn them. We weren’t supposed to interfere, no matter how much we wanted to. And even if I had, they wouldn’t have believed me.”
“You should have fucking tried!”

“Language, Mr Black! Five points from Gryff…” The woman’s voice faded into nothing as Professor McGonagall realised who she was scolding. “Sirius?”

“Minnie,” he greeted her gruffly, still glaring at the boy who had let his best mate die.

“What? How is this possible?” the woman cried, a hand reaching out and touching his shoulder. “Mr Potter, explain.”

“He did something stupid,” Harry offered.

“Says the boy who left the past without bothering to mention to his own fucking parents that they were going to die in five years. You could have saved them!” he shouted and cursed, lashing out at the nearest table with a ferocious kick and not caring a jot that a professor was two feet from him.

Harry, it seemed, was equally oblivious to the woman’s presence and authority. “I couldn’t do anything to stop it! Voldemort wanted them dead!”

An involuntary shiver ran through him at the name. “You-Know-Who? Why would he care about them?”

“Because of me. Remember that ‘very bad man’ who gave me this?” He lifted his fringe, revealing the scar on his forehead. “That was Voldemort. He tried to kill me when I was a year old. He’s still trying. Has tried nearly every year since I started school here. The year I met you was the exception. That was the year I learned Peter handed my parents to Voldemort on a plate.”

“Pete wouldn’t—“

“He did,” the boy spat. “And I had to sit at the table with him, knowing what he’d do. Pretending nothing was wrong. He was the coward who gave me this.” He tore at his sleeve to show the gouge in his arm.

Despite the anger burning in him, he wanted to reach out and touch the wound, to soothe the pain. His hand fell limply by his side as words failed him. He remembered Harry’s first morning, the way he had gripped the knife and stared Wormtail down as if he had wanted to kill the boy. Hermione had offered a vague excuse about Peter looking like someone who had hurt him. He hadn’t realised how deep that hurt was. Peter was a traitor, a servant of the Dark Lord. James was dead. He truly had travelled to a different world.

“What about Remus? When did he die?”

“He didn’t,” Harry said.

Sirius couldn’t help the cold laugh that pulled up from his lungs. “Poor bastard. He never thought he’d live past thirty-five, and he’s managed to outlive us all. That’s got to hurt.”
Harry could feel the anger rolling off Sirius as they stalked thorough the halls toward the headmaster’s office. It was a constant prickle on his skin that made the hairs of his arm stand on end and would occasionally intensify into a visible spark of electricity between them. Through it all, Sirius’s face remained set in a mask of stony nothingness.

As the gargoyle leapt aside to make way for them, Professor McGonagall gestured for them to ascend the stairs. “I’m sure the Headmaster is expecting us by now.”

Sirius and their head of house climbed the stairs, leaving Harry alone to wonder just how true her words were. Over the years and through the decades, he had come to understand precisely how well-informed of the goings-on inside Hogwarts Albus Dumbledore truly was. He had spent most of fifth year avoiding Harry, knowing the boy had part of Lord Voldemort fused to his soul; he had realised the true danger the Philosopher’s Stone was in when no one else believed Harry, Ron and Hermione; he knew how deeply involved he and Hermione had become with people they never should have met. He knew all that. Did he know what Sirius had done? Did it matter?

Sirius hadn’t spoken a word to him since shouting his disapproval. Perhaps he had decided Harry wasn’t worth the bother.

“You coming?” the boy barked from the landing, only reaffirming his fears that his love had been doused in the cold waters of Harry’s inaction.

He managed to avoid scrambling up the stairs, but only just. Sirius offered nothing on his arrival, not even looking at him as the woman pushed the door open.

Dumbledore was behind his desk nursing a cup of strong tea when McGonagall ushered them hurriedly into the office like some dirty little secret she didn’t want anyone catching wind of. He rose without offering a greeting, his dressing gown swished noisily in the anxious silence of the room. Harry didn’t dare breathe for fear of disturbing the pensive quiet. Even the paintings were holding their tongues in anticipation or apprehension.

When at last he spoke, his voice was not hard or unkind. “My, Sirius, you have been busy.”

“Keeps me out of trouble,” the boy offered, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Is it time travel again, do you think, Albus?” McGonagall questioned tightly, considering the boy next to her.

“If that were the case, how would we know Sirius died at the hands of his cousin just three months ago? Unless, at the end of this discussion, it is decided that we send the boy back where he belongs,” the man pondered aloud.
Harry’s heart stuttered in his chest at the thought. He didn’t want to leave Sirius again. He loved him. It took him months to realise it. It took losing him twice to make that truth plain. Now that he understood just how much the boy meant to him, he didn’t think he could take another breath without him nearby. But he had mucked it up. He had let his parents die. He had lost Sirius’s faith and trust and love, and the boy wanted nothing more to do with him. He wouldn’t want to stay now.

It was in the midst of this depressing spiral of self-loathing and blame that Sirius finally replied. “I’m exactly where I belong.”

“What?” Harry breathed, hardly daring to believe his ears.

“You twat, I love you. Even cross, I still love you. I’m not going to give you up just because you did something daft like try to keep the timeline as it was,” he offered with a snort and slap to his arm. “Why do you think I went through all this” – he gestured to his chest – “instead of simply climbing into your trunk? Would have been a lot easier, and, believe me, I thought about it. But I knew you’d never forgive me if I mucked up history.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, saving Harry from gaping at him in wonder. “You seem quite confident that things will remain as they ought. If we allow you to stay here with us, how will the past continue as it needs to?” There was a glint in his eye and a tone in his voice that Harry had come to know well; he heard it in the voice of most teachers at some point, though few were able to use it to the same level and affect as the headmaster. That look and that tone implied he knew perfectly well what the correct answer was, but he wanted to hear his student say it for the benefit of the whole class.

“I’ve already arranged it,” the boy said.

“Oh?” the man said, gesturing for him to sit. “I do so enjoy hearing about one of your plans, though I do hope you haven’t given it an official name.”

He mumbled a reply into the cup of tea the man offered him. “Operation Keep Your Fucking Promises.”

Dumbledore gave a sad shake of his head as he sighed, “And I thought nothing could be worse than the title for Mr Gillespie. Regardless of its name, would you kindly share the purpose and details?”

“I promised not to leave Harry,” Sirius said, holding the boy’s eye as he said it.

“A very noble pledge but one you had to have known was impossible to keep once learning the true origin of your friend. Surely, once you understood Harry’s parentage and home, you realised you couldn’t stay together.”

“I realised no such thing. I love him, and I am staying with him. I didn’t put myself through that much pain just to be sent back to where there’s already a Sirius living and being a general prat,” he insisted.

“You are very certain you’ve taken care of everything. Tell me of this other Sirius you left in your place. Where did you come by him?”

He pulled the parchment from his pocket, opening it and placing it on the desk. “Harry’s curse. I took it.”

The man was silent as he considered the spell before him. His eyes darted across the text quickly and hovered over the woodblock image, twinkling not with delight but with intrigue. The same
intrigue that filled his voice when he said, “A clever and apt choice, Mr Black. Though a rather dangerous one. How did you manage to keep from tearing yourself to shreds?”

“I practiced on pumpkins and chickens from the kitchen, then on mice once I’d sorted out how to make it do what I needed.”

The man’s brows pulled together. “I do recall Argus complaining of a proliferation of mice around the time of the Grangers’ departure. I thought nothing of it. How many practice mice did you make?”

“Two hundred or so.” He shrugged. “Didn’t want to kill myself, did I?”

“A wise decision,” Dumbledore agreed. “Harry does not do well in your absence.”

Harry flushed and ducked his head when the old wizard turned his knowing eye on him. It was true. He was a wreck without Sirius.

“Then you wouldn’t send me away, would you?” Sirius all but begged. Until now, he had offered a calm assurance that bordered on detachment, showing only the logic and intelligence behind the plan and not the emotions that had brought it about. With his question, the truth was out. He was as desperate to stay as Harry was to have him stay. He may be cross, but Sirius loved him. “Please, Professor, don’t make me go back. Harry needs me.”

Second after painfully long second ticked past without the man giving the slightest inkling as to what his decision would be. He looked over the top of his spectacles, past his folded hands and at the boys before him. Finally, what felt like hours later, he sighed, and Harry was certain what was left of his heart shattered. The look on his face said that Sirius felt the same.

“Sirius, you have broken more laws than I care to count to bring yourself here, not to mention the danger you have put yourself through. What was it all for?” He didn’t pause long enough for either to provide an answer; he continued on, telling the boys what they already knew, “For love. I cannot think of a motivation more selfless than that.”

“I can stay?” he barely breathed the question.

“Even if I had the ability – which I do not – I would not. With your passing, I have been forced to watch Harry wither into a ghost of the boy I had once known. He returned stronger than I have ever known him, but I can see what your loss would do to him. You have healed Harry, and I would not dare rend you from him when stronger magic than mine deemed your presence necessary.”

“Stronger magic?” Harry questioned.

“Split-Apart,” Sirius muttered smugly.

“Quite correct, Mr Black,” Dumbledore agreed. “There is a simple idea that most witches and wizards never grasp but one that is vital to the work we do: Magic is alive. It has means and methods all its own. And, on occasion, it will use those methods for its own goals. Magic kept you safe, Harry, sent you where you needed to be, sent you to your other half. Unorthodox as it might be, I cannot alter what magic has deigned necessary.”

Sirius said nothing, but the I-told-you-so glimmer in his eyes was more than enough to have Harry slouching in his chair.

The headmaster smiled. “Now, where shall we put you?”
The glimmer in the boy’s eye turned suggestive. Harry could all but hear his cheeky suggestion that he simply stay in Harry’s bed for the next two years.

“Here we are,” he said, dropping the tattered Sorting Hat onto Sirius’s head without pause.

Harry had been through this before, months ago; he remembered watching Hermione’s face contort as she argued the hat into submission. Sirius did the same. His jaw clenched and mouth pulled down in a scowl of determination, but finally the hat cried:

“Gryffindor!”

“Well, that’s settled. Can I go now?” Sirius grinned.

“To the hospital wing, yes,” the headmaster said in a tone that would take no argument. “You performed terrifying magic on yourself, Sirius. We must ensure you are healthy and whole. I will also need to make certain the spell has not had any lingering effects on your person. To that end, I will call an expert on such matters, and you will return this afternoon. These are the conditions of your staying here.”

He offered a shrug. “Small sacrifice.”

“As I thought you might say.” The man’s eyes twinkled with pleasure as he nodded toward the door.

“You coming?”

The words were not barked with cold indifference as they had been before. Harry looked up at Sirius, at his offered hand, his half smile and wide, hopeful eyes.

“Yeah,” he muttered, taking the hand and letting Sirius pull him to his feet. “So are you not angry with me anymore?”

“Course I am,” he replied as if the question were a stupid one. “You let my best mate die.”

“I—“

“We’ve been through this. I know why you did it, but I’m still cross. I loved James more than my own brother. It’s going to take me time to accept it.”

Harry could only blink stupidly in reply. He didn’t think he could be so composed if someone he knew had failed to warn Ron he was about to be horribly killed. He would shout about it for days, marinade in his grief and fury for weeks, and then, maybe, would he reach Sirius’s level of understanding.

“I think I knew something was going to happen to them,” the boy contemplated as they walked. “James would have been as doting as old Charlie. There’s no way you’d have that many scars, secrets and strange turns if James had raised you.”

“What was he like? My grandfather, I mean,” Harry asked.

“Best man I’ve ever met,” Sirius replied without pause. “Used to tell me some wild stories about when he was young – travels, adventures and dangerous beauties. I’m not sure how much of it was true, but they were great stories. You would’ve liked him.”

Though he had no response, Harry didn’t mind. He tried to imagine the man Sirius was describing.
He had never seen any pictures of his grandparents, so he could only assume Charlus Potter looked rather like James and himself – short and knobby-kneed with hair too unruly to be allowed. Based on the boy’s description, he certainly seemed to be as full of life and character as James had been.

“What are you smiling about?”

He looked at Sirius, the smile still on his face. “Just thinking that I finally have someone who can tell me about my family.”

Chapter End Notes

Just last night I learned that a favorite actress, one I named Tildy after, doesn’t actually like Harry Potter. Pausing to enjoy this irony.
Unparalleled

Chapter Summary

In which the extent of one witch's genius is revealed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Madam Pomfrey was as thorough as she ever was, seeming to care more about the methods and unforeseen side effects of Sirius’s plan than she did about him being there at all. She didn’t swoon or stammer in disbelief. She simply got to work checking him for any consequences his actions might have had on his health and well-being.

“Never would have suspected you would try something so foolish,” the matron muttered as she shook the mercury down in a thermometer.

“Love makes fools of us all, Poppy,” quoted Sirius, opening his mouth wide, “black and white.”

“Big and little,” the woman corrected, and shoved the thermometer under the boy’s tongue.

He shrugged in response and sat back as she prodded and poked at the scars on his chest before moving on to the rest of him.

After three hours, she finally gave up on her search. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, Mr Black.” She paused. “Is that even your name anymore? Sirius Black is officially dead, and, even if he weren’t, you certainly wouldn’t want to be him.”

Sirius frowned. “Hadn’t thought about that bit.”

Harry snorted. “You spent a fortnight practicing this spell, making sure you left a double who could pass as the real thing, but you didn’t put any thought into what you’d call yourself once you got here? Typical.”

“What’s in a name?”

“Quite a bit when that name is Sirius Black. Or did you want to spend the rest of your days in Azkaban?”

“Fine. I’ll steal a line from your script and call myself a Granger,” he smiled. “I’m sure Hermione would love to have a South African cousin hanging about the place.” He paused remembering just how fierce and protective the diminutive girl could be. When she was pointing that skill his way, it was terrifying, but he warmed at the thought of the girl wielding that power to protect him. He had never had anyone like that to call family. James, sure, but most of the time they were causing trouble together, not fighting battles of good and evil. He wondered how different life might have been if he had a girl like Hermione for a sister, if his mother could have gotten away with half the indignities and abuse she subjected her sons to. He knew Reg would certainly have benefitted.

“Harry?”
“Hm?”

“What happened to Regulus?”

“He died,” Harry said. “He changed his mind about being a Death Eater and was killed for it.”

He nodded and muttered, “Lion’s Heart.”

“What’s that?”

“Regulus in Muggle astronomy. It’s called Heart of the Lion. Always thought it was a mistake to call Reg that, but apparently I was wrong. Guess that explains why I inherited everything after Mother died.” He sighed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, we hadn’t spoken for a year before I left,” he admitted. “We’d been close once, but Mother’s politics and my general disregard for the family put an end to that. Really, I’m just sorry I wasn’t there to help him. He made the right choice in the end, but he was alone. That Sirius I left behind was useless. My fault, really. I didn’t want to give that much of me up for someone who was just going to die anyway. Maybe if I’d been willing to sacrifice more of myself, Regulus would be alive still.”

Harry put his arm around the boy’s shoulder, offering the quiet comfort he needed as they walked along the empty corridor.

“Admittedly, if I’d given up more of me, then that Sirius would have been clever enough not to be tricked by Wormtail and not to die. And wouldn’t that just be awkward, getting the shovel talk from yourself?” he commented, earning him a knobby elbow in the ribs.

“Git,” Harry laughed.

“And you love it.”

“I really do.”

“So give us a kiss,” Sirius demanded.

Harry obliged, pulling him closer and pressing their lips together. It was brief and chaste, just enough to whet his appetite for more and have him groaning his need. He would have pursued that teasing mouth, but a voice echoing down the corridor drew their attention away. A girl calling out a name they both knew well. “Graaanggeer.”

The boy beside him cursed and broke from him, running down the hallway in the direction the voice had come. Sirius followed, uncertain why Harry seemed so panicked and angry but determined to do right by the boy in this new life.

The voice grew louder as he ran, loud enough to hear the mocking lilt.

“I saw you making eyes at that sad old werewolf. Are you really that desperate? I mean, I know your blood is filthy as the mud on my shoes, but even *you* must have standards,” the girl laughed, and Sirius put on a burst of speed, rushing past Harry to reach the scene first. He might be new to this decade, but he could tell a snake when he saw one, knew precisely what to do when confronted with a bully such as this one.
“Hermione!” he shouted, hurling himself at her and pulling her into a hug so tight he had to be threatening the integrity of her rib cage. “Merlin, I missed you!”

The pug-faced girl at his back was lost for how to react, as was the girl in his arms.

“Sirius?” she squeaked.

“The one and only.”

“But how?”

“Do you even need to ask?” he smirked down at her wide, disbelieving eyes.

“You’re fucking brilliant,” she offered.

He hugged her tighter. “You remember!”

That taunting voice came again, shrill and demanding from behind him, “Who the bloody hell are you?”

“Sirius Granger,” he said without even turning to look at the girl. “So, Hermione, you look bloody awful.”

Hermione offered a wet laugh. “That’s what Harry said.”

“And he is absolutely right. Moony not treating you right?”

“He’s not treating me at all,” she admitted, her already red eyes brimming with fresh tears. “I tried talking to him, but he just won’t listen to me.”

“That’s because you aren’t me,” Sirius said, manoeuvring the girl toward the Great Hall. “I have a particular knack for dealing with reluctant lovers.”

“Is that what you told Peter about Tori? I heard how well that turned out.”

“Oi! Shut it. I’m brilliant.”

“And anyway, it’s no use.”

“Just you wait,” he said with an assured smile. He strode into the hall, with Hermione still clinging to his side and Harry, presumably, trailing after them. Wherever the snarling girl went, he couldn’t be bothered to care so long as she got the news of his arrival spreading.

If the world operated according to the rules of cinema, all the chatter of students taking their lunches would have died as he made his entrance, so shocking was the coming of such a new and handsome lad. Instead, the students kept talking and dining, their cutlery clattering against the plates and laughter ringing out. One person did stop dead with his appearance, a particularly dishevelled man sitting beside Dumbledore at the high table.

“Moony,” Sirius muttered and bore into the man with every ounce of disapproval he had to spare.

The man dropped his fork and stood, his chair all but falling backwards in his haste.

“No.”

The quiet declaration found its way through the room to Sirius’s ear. His response was a single nod
and an assured smirk.

The man scrambled down from the dais, running the length of the main aisle until they stood inches from each other. He looked different. Older, certainly, but it was clear that the man before him had been kicked around by more than just time. Life had not been kind to Remus Lupin, but, considering that he thought he’d be dead by now, this slightly scruffier adult version had to be the more favourable alternative.

“Moony,” Sirius greeted his old friend.

“Sirius? But how?”

“He’s fucking brilliant,” Hermione offered from his side.

“That he was, but even he couldn’t have managed this,” Remus said, hand reaching out to touch his shoulder. “You’re real. How is this possible?”

Sirius offered a deep sigh. “Well, Moony, I loved Harry so much I was willing to perform dangerous and deadly magics on myself to make sure we stayed together. As I recall, you insisted you loved Hermione...”

His hand flew away as if Sirius had bit him. “That’s different.”

“Don’t see how. I love Harry. I want to be with Harry. I made it happen. You love Hermione. You wanted to be with her, and – what? – you gave up? The Moony I know wouldn’t have let go so easily.”

“You think it’s easy?” Lupin spat. “I loved her for years. But I moved on.”

Sirius paused, considering the man opposite, the defeated curve of his spine, the slump of his shoulders, the way he refused to allow his gaze to drift in Hermione’s directions. “Have you now?”

“Yes, it’s called growing up. Something you never bothered to attempt, by the way,” the man replied.

“I get to try it now. My first act in this new life will be to prove how wrong you are,” he declared, drawing his wand.

A murmur rippled through the Great Hall, and he glanced around at all the curious faces pointed their way. Remus’s mad dash between the tables had done what his own arrival had not, and now their strange little show was the sole focus of every Hogwarts student.

“Uh, perhaps this is a discussion best held elsewhere,” Harry suggested, wrapping his fingers around their arms. “Lily-flower.”

Sirius felt Hermione’s grip on him tighten as the hook caught behind his navel, ripping them both from the Great Hall and depositing all four of them in the echoey emptiness of the entrance hall. In the moment it took Remus to regain his balance, Sirius struck. It was a cheap trick, practically cheating really, but he knew Moony. As a teenager, he could beat any of the Marauders in a fair duel. If he gave this older version the chance, the man would be more than capable of blocking the spell.

He flicked his wand and sliced downward, focusing all his attention on the man before him.

Moony’s scream reverberated against the walls and in his bones and made Sirius feel more than a
little guilty that he hadn’t given the man at least some small warning that the pain was coming. But, he reasoned, he was used to bone-crunching transformations; this was likely no worse than the average full moon. He hoped.

“Stop it!” Hermione cried, tugging at his arm.

“Nearly done,” Sirius assured her. “Trust me, it’d be worse for him if I stopped now.”

“What the hell are you doing?” demanded the boy beside him.

“You’ll see.”

And they did. Slowly, a figure began to pull its way from Remus’s chest – head, arms, torso and legs – until standing beside the tattered old man was a considerably younger, considerably more naked Remus Lupin.

“Fucking hell, Padfoot, that hurt!” the young Remus shouted and moved to punch him but staggered to a stop, his clear, blue eyes locked onto the girl beside him. “Hermione.”

She breathed his name in reply.

“Merlin, I missed you.” He ran the short distance, wrapping her in his arms and taking her mouth with his own.

“What the hell was that?” the hard voice of Lupin demanded.

“My fantastic way of showing what a big, fat liar you are, Moony,” Sirius replied and pointed to the naked Remus. “That tells me you still love Hermione. So what’s the problem? Why say you don’t?”

Lupin growled and pulled a hand through his hair, so much greyer than it had been before Sirius cast his spell. “Yes, I love her. Is that what you want to hear? You want to hear how long I waited, hoping she’d change her mind and find her way back; waiting for the letter inviting me to teach here just so I could see her again; praying that she would fall in love with me the moment she saw me that year? I waited and hoped and prayed for so long.”

“So why give up?”

“Because I finally saw her, perfect and full of potential. And I saw what I had become. I refuse to weigh her down with the stigma of a werewolf.”

“That’s bolloca—“

“You know what people are like,” Lupin insisted. “Not everyone is as accepting as you lot were. I’ve spent twenty years struggling to eat. Why would I subject her to that?”

Sirius scowled. He hadn’t quite taken societal ills into consideration, but when it came to love he was a fierce proponent of following one’s heart and offering a hearty ‘fuck you’ to anyone who disapproved. “Did you even bother asking Hermione about all this? She’s a smart girl.”

“Yes, she’s smart, but she’s also young.” Lupin admitted, glancing at the girl still tangling with his Split-Apart. “But she couldn’t fight what her heart is telling her, not even in the face of a well-reasoned argument. Would she really walk away from me if I showed her my empty wallet, the fifty rejection letters I’ve gotten in reply to job inquiries, the one room flat I let with an empty refrigerator because I can’t afford the electricity to run it? I don’t think she would, and it would kill
me to see her suffer through life like that. Sirius, please, just believe me when I say she can do better than this."

He considered the man and how old he had become in the last few minutes. Everything about him seemed more worn out for the loss of the part of him that loved Hermione. It wasn’t just Harry who fell to pieces when he lost his other half. Without that youthful love, Moony would crumble into nothing. He understood why Remus had lived so much longer than he had planned, so much longer than any other werewolf on record.

“I’m sure she could do better than you, and better than that single-minded git over there,” he agreed. “But if we put you back together, I think you’ll do the job just fine.”

He raised his wand, tearing the Split-Apart from Hermione.

“No! Sirius, you fucking twat, don’t you dare!” the young Remus shouted, clawing at everything in his reach to keep himself separate. His curses made no difference. The spell was cast, forcing him back where he belonged, merging his body and soul into place inside Moony. He vanished into the fresh red scar on Lupin’s chest.

“What the bloody hell was that?” Lupin demanded, sounding far more youthful than he had moments ago.

“My infallible lie detector,” Sirius smiled proudly. “I carved out the part of you that still loves Hermione, and, in case you were too busy to notice, it was a rather large bit.”

The man sighed, hand sliding through his hair once again, and Sirius saw how much of it was back to that tawny colour somewhere between brown and blond. “Okay, fine. Yes, I love her, but I’m still too old and poor for her.”

“Horseshit.”

They blinked down at the girl who had spoken.

“What was that?”

“You heard me,” Hermione said, stomping over to him and stabbing a finger into his chest. “That is the laziest excuse I have ever heard. You love me.”

“But I’m—“

“And I love you,” she barreled over his protest. “I knew what I would be coming back to. I knew about your being a werewolf, about prejudice against your kind. I knew you had trouble finding work and making rent. I knew how old you would be. I knew it all, but I fell for you anyway because I knew how wonderful a man you became. Apparently, you’re a bit of a coward, which is disappointing, but I want all of you. I have wanted all of you for some time now.”

Lupin swallowed thickly as red crept up his chest and neck. “But, Hermione, I’m so poor...”

“Ah, well, you see, I happen to be the cleverest witch of my age,” she reminded him. “Now, if you were as clever a witch as me living some twenty years in the past with a knowledge of the Muggle world and a pocketful of gold, what would you have done?” She smiled and pulled an envelope from her bag.

“What is this?”
“Are your eyes too old to function now?” she mocked, tearing the letter open and reading it aloud for him.

‘Hardwick & Ashton Solicitors
42 Broad Street
London

‘Dear Ms Granger,

‘In regards to the account opened in your name on 4 January 1977, we are pleased to inform you that at the time this letter was written your estate holdings have grown to £1,343,709.46, including, per your instructions, the house at number 19 Egerton Crescent, Chelsae and shares in the following corporations—’

“What?” Lupin snatched the letter from her hands and read through it. “You’ve a million pound? How did you get a million pounds?”

“And a house in Chelsea,” she pointed out.

“How did you get a million pounds,” he said again, mouth agape.

“I tutored some students and was paid for my services,” she smiled. “I had Tildy convert it to Muggle money, and the rest was done through letters. I happen to know of a few businesses worth investing in and certain trends to be avoided, so I was able to give strict instructions on when and where to invest. I left Tildy with directions to keep an eye on it all until we returned. When I graduate, I should be able to set us up quite comfortably. So... do you still care how poor you are?”

In the face of such unparalleled genius, any man would crumble. Remus Lupin as no exception. “Fuck it.”

He threw the letter aside and wrapped the girl in his arms, taking her mouth with as much enthusiasm as his Split-Apart had.

“So happy endings all around?” Sirius smiled. “I think I earned myself a kiss with that one, don’t you?”

“You certainly kept me from having to break his legs. I didn’t fancy having to spend the rest of my time here in detention. Bad enough I still have to scrub algae for what I did to Alfie.”

“Worth it,” Sirius declared. “Now where’s my kiss?”

“HARRY!”

Sirius turned and glared at the boy running down the corridor toward them. It was the freckled Seamus holding a steaming red envelope in front of him as he ran. “Harry, open it quick!”

Faster than he imagined possible, the boy grabbed the letter and tore into it.

He’d gotten plenty of Howlers from his mother, knew the kind of things that generally came shrieking from those horrifying envelopes. He covered his ears in anticipation of the vile shouts, but the voice that filled the entrance hall was not the hissing, venom-spitting sort he had come to expect. It was a bouncy, exuberant chirp. It was Tildy.

“Harry! I thought a Howler would get your attention. Was I right? I was right! So I’ve been a super good girl keeping quiet, but I know you’re back and demand you come see me. Remus knows the
address. Come see me! Like now! Or maybe on Christmas holiday, but now would be so much better. Tell Hermione ‘Hullo’ for me!”

With that final cheerful demand, the envelope tore itself to shreds leaving the five of them blinking as the silence rang in their ears.

“Well, that was certainly different,” Seamus observed. “Harry, you got a secret girlfriend?”

“Like he’d need one,” Sirius scoffed.

“Tell me nothing else of your bedroom exploits,” the boy insisted.

“Well, how about I tell you about my plan to turn every Slytherin’s hair acid green instead.”

The boy eyed him as a smile broke out across his face. “Keep that up and I might start fancying you myself.”

Chapter End Notes

While writing this, I tried to find out via Google which areas of London increased in property value between the late-70s and mid-90s, however, all the articles I found were dated to no earlier than 2010, so I'm hoping Chelsea was starting to rise in value around then since apparently it's worth a fortune now. Britpickers, if I'm wrong... blame Google.
Tea With Tildy (an epilogue of sorts)

Chapter Summary

In which more than tea fills our protagonist with warmth.

Chapter Notes

This story is finally complete. It only took me five years, with a few detours from life, Wedlocked and a moderately graceful swan dive into the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

I once again remind you that this story is based on Turn Back Time by SStarLuna. Please, please, please, go read the original and give it all the praise it deserves. All my attempts at contacting the author have yielded no results, but that doesn't mean we should stop sending reviews her/his way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tea with Tildy (an epilogue of sorts)

Harry had only ever travelled through King’s Cross during the rush of school starting or ending. To be there on an arbitrary Saturday was beyond strange to him. There were no trunks or owls, no wizards or witches dressed as they thought Muggles did. Just regular people coming and going on their regular weekend errands, and he was one of them.

“What’s that smile about?”

He looked to the boy by his side, Sirius Granger, and smiled again. “Just enjoying being one of the crowd, I suppose.”

“Well, when you’re famous, I imagine that would be a nice change of pace,” he agreed.

He had to laugh. Sirius had taken quite a fancy to the idea of dating someone ‘properly famous’. The first time the Daily Prophet printed a photograph of them together on a Hogsmeade Weekend, he ran through the common room showing it to everybody, though no one much cared. It was still a subject of some ire that he never once mentioned being a celebrity, but, as with most of the other secrets Harry had kept from him in the past, Sirius seemed to enjoy the thrill of discovery.

“There’s Remus!” Hermione cried and waved her hand high to get the man’s attention. She needn’t have bothered; the foot traffic was so sparse, he could hardly have missed them, and, besides that, Lupin was in tune with his girlfriend more than any other people Harry had ever known. They always knew precisely where the other was. If one sneezed, he wouldn’t have been shocked if the other sent an owl from across the country with a note reading ‘bless you’. Sirius thought it was sickening, but Harry’s heart warmed whenever he got to see them together, defying time, prejudice and bigotry.

“Smiling again,” Sirius whispered in his ear.
“Because I’m happy,” he admitted.

Hugs were offered, and then Remus led them through the train station, where their portkey had deposited them, out through the exit and into the Underground station nearby.

“Why couldn’t we have just portkeyed straight to the shop?” Hermione griped.

“One,” Remus said as he paused to allow a cluster of women to bustle past, “it would be too dangerous for Tildy if someone found out she was connected directly with Harry. And two, you’ll want a moment to acclimate yourself to Tildy’s world before she finds you.”

Harry and Hermione shared a concerned glance before Harry questioned, “Is there something we ought to know about this place?”

“Nothing specific. It’s just... Tildy is still Tildy.”

They boarded the Piccadilly line, settling into the plastic chairs lining the curved exterior of the tube car, and rode in contemplative silence, Sirius studying the adverts and other passengers with a rabid delight, until it was time to change lines. Remus and Hermione linked hands and walked together, Sirius and Harry following behind as they stepped onto a new train travelling toward World’s End. Those hands stayed linked throughout the ride to Fulham and the walk from the station to King’s Road, their fingers knitted together and as inextricable as a gorgon’s knot.

“Smiling again,” observed Sirius. “Is it hand-holding that makes you so happy? Or just when those two hold hands?”

While he knew precisely what it was that made him smile, he replied, “I’m not sure. Care to test it?”

With a smile of his own, Sirius slid their fingers together. His hands were just as large and warm as ever, making his own hand heat – a heat that rose and spread through his entire body.

“Ooh, now you’re not just smiling, you’re blushing. Thinking naughty thoughts, are we?”

“Not at all,” Harry assured him.

His cheeky reply died on his lips as he looked past Harry to the shop opposite. “That has got to be it.”

The shop he indicated was, much like any other in Chelsea, housed in an old Victorian building. The wide expanse of windows on the first floor was surrounded by a vibrant, electric blue trim mostly covered by artistic graffiti and concert posters. The brick of the upper floors seemed far too dull to be allowed, but the top floor diminished in a scrolling peak that reminded him of something he had seen in one of Aunt Marge’s photographs from her holiday on Majorca.

The window displayed a collection of mannequins dressed and posed as if they were performing the songs being played through the speakers. As they stood, the mannequins moved to a new position – the singer raising the microphone, the drummer slamming down on the drums, a guitarist leaning back as she played.

“Magic?” Harry questioned.

“Unlikely,” Remus said with a shake of his head. “This is a Muggle neighbourhood.”

He could only nod as he watched the artificial band change positions again.
“Shall we?”

Remus had been right. Travelling directly into the shop would have left him stunned. The lights, the noise, the crowd, the sheer chaos of it all was, well, it was Tildy. She might be nearing forty years old, but apparently her exuberance had not dimmed one bit. Harry could hear her chirp over the loud speaker announcing newly arrived CDs and sales on vintage vinyl.

“Wow,” Sirius muttered, eyes huge and mouth agape.

“Yep,” Remus replied knowingly.

“HARRY!”

Even with his reflexes, he didn’t have time to brace himself. The body that crashed into his sent him to the floor.

“Oh my god, you look exactly the same!” Tildy cried and wrapped him in a hug.

“Yeah,” he wheezed.

“Oi! Stop hogging my boyfriend,” Sirius demanded.

“Sirius?” The woman leapt to her feet and hurried to crush the boy’s ribs as she had just Harry’s. “SIRIUS! You’re alive!”

“Not for long,” Harry muttered.

“I should have known you’d done something brilliant. There was no way you’d turn on James like they said you did. I mean I know people change and all that, but, honestly, there was no way—“

“Tildy, he’s turning blue,” Remus said gently.

“Oh, sorry,” she grinned that toothy grin Harry remembered. Despite a touch of grey in her hair and a few crinkles around her eyes when she smiled, the woman had not changed a bit. “So! Tea!”

“Yeah,” Sirius wheezed and rubbed at his sides.

Tildy shouted to an employee with violently orange hair to man to shop before leading the way up a set of stairs, through an office and up to her flat. It looked as if a bomb had exploded in her dresser, sending clothes and shoes flying everywhere, but the woman made no comment and simply walked over it all to reach a tidy kitchen with a large round table.

“Sit,” she ordered and bustled about, setting the kettle to boiling and making a pot of tea so properly British that even Aunt Petunia would have been proud of her.

“Shop’s doing well,” Hermione commented.

“Isn’t it?” Tildy agreed happily. “I totally have you to thank for the start up capital. I copied every investment you ordered in that letter to the solicitors.”

“Well, that was clever,” the girl agreed.

“I have been known to show a bit of smarts once in a while,” she grinned and set a plate of biscuits on the table. “Been putting those smarts to use in research lately.”

“What on?” Remus questioned, trying and failing to hide his concern.
“Locating certain people of interest,” she said vaguely. Her coy evasiveness lasted for approximately naught-point-five seconds before she was bouncing in her chair again. “Okay, so I was curious what you lot were up to. Obviously, Harry, you’re properly famous. Everybody’s heard of you since 1981, but I wanted to know about everybody else. I have a whole album!”

She spun in her chair and pulled a fat book off a shelf of cookbooks. It was four inches thick and had to weigh at least five pounds.

“That’s us?” Hermione questioned.

“A bit of you, a bit of Harry, some Remus and Sirius,” she said with a smile. “And a bit of Alfie Quintain.”

“What?” Sirius growled.

“He’s still alive?” Harry said, blanching at the thought of what that monstrous creature might have gotten up to in the past twenty years.

“Oh yeah,” she said, flipping past pages brimming with articles clipped from various Muggle and Wizard newspapers. She slapped the page down and spun the book around for them to read. “There.”

The moving photograph told him the story was from a Wizarding magazine, but the text read more like a medical journal.

“What’s this from?” he questioned.

“The Healers’ Herald,” Hermione answered. “Fascinating. I never would have thought to use a transfusion to help reverse the effects of a curse. This is brilliant.”

“Alfie won an award for this work,” Tildy said. “He’s been a healer at St Mungo’s ever since this came out.”

“You’re kidding?” Sirius baulked, nearly tearing the page in his eagerness to read the next article. This one showed a photograph of Alfie looking much more like his old self, though he was still rather hunched and his hair was sparse across his head; he was standing in a hospital ward, the rows of beds stretching out behind him, smiling that perfect smile and looking in no way disingenuous. “You mean he’s capable of selflessness?”

“Uh, no, I didn’t say that,” the woman said, pointing to the paragraph where Alfie brags about his accolades and how much money he had earned from Wizarding hospitals on the continent paying for his cutting-edge techniques in curse reversal.

“Yeah, that fits.”

Hermione managed to find a tarnished silver lining. “He’s at least helping people.”

“Not like Mary,” Tildy crowed. “Check this out.” She turned to the back of the album and began crowing about the woman’s facial reconstruction spells before moving on to Silvia’s grand exploits in the world of Quidditch and sports writing – apparently, half the album was Silvia’s articles from the Daily Prophet and Seeker Weekly, plus a twelve-page excerpt from her soon-to-be-released The Greatest Game: How Quidditch Shaped the World.

She turned the page onto a photo of Peter, slamming the book shut and muttering an apologetic, “And the less said about that rat the better.”
“What have you been up to?” Hermione inquired.

“The shop mainly,” Tildy said. “But I hear rumblings about computers taking over and making physical music collections obsolete, so I think I might look into forming a record company or maybe get in on the ground floor of this computer stuff. Any thoughts on that? You are my financial advisor.” She beamed at Hermione, eyes wide and hopeful.

“Sorry, I only know about past trends, not future ones,” the girl apologised.

“Damn.”

Harry had feared that after the dashed hopes and nostalgia they would run out of conversation and sit around the table awkwardly until it was time to leave, but Tildy heaved a theatrical sigh which barrelled into a barrage of questions about the current goings on at Hogwarts, what Harry was planning on doing about Voldemort, what Hermione and Sirius would do with themselves after school. There was fast and lively debate about the possibility of revealing the existence of their world to Muggles, whether Dragons ought to be re-introduced to the UK, if they ought to allow for mid-game player swapping when someone wasn’t broken, bleeding, dying or vomiting, among countless other topics.

“You’re smiling again,” Sirius whispered, his lips brushing the shell of his ear.

“This is fun,” he said quietly as Hermione and Tildy argued passionately about the ramifications of electrifying Hogwarts. “Is this normal for most people?”

The boy snorted. “Nothing with you or Tildy would ever be considered normal, but, yeah, talking about something other than people trying to murder you is how most people spend their time.”

“Can we do this more often?”

“Of course!”

The excited cry came from Tildy, who had paused long enough to notice the two boys talking.

“Remus said you’re moving in with him in Egerton Crescent for the holidays, so you are totally going to be here like every day. You can work down in the shop if you like, but if you’re shit at music selection I’ll have to keep you in the back room no matter how pretty you are – Sorry, Sirius.”

“What? My musical tastes are fantastic!”

“For the 1970s,” she sighed. “You’ve missed twenty years of innovation. I mean, do you even know what Prog Rock is? Have you heard of Bauhaus?”

He levelled her with a scathing glare. “How can I forget the three-hour lecture on Prog Rock I sat through first year. It’s a wonder I talked to you after that.”

She smiled fondly at the memory. “Oh, yeah. Well, prepare for further musical enlightenment!”

“And on that note, I think it’s time to leave,” Sirius announced and stood. “Ta for the tea.”

“He’s right,” Remus agreed when the woman moved to protest. “We were trying to avoid drawing attention to you in case we were followed, but we’ve been here too long.”

The woman shrugged as if threat of Death Eaters was nothing to get worked up about. “That just
means you’ll have to make shorter visits more often. Tomorrow. I’ll make sandwiches.”

“Uh, why don’t you come see us at Number 19?” Remus hedged. “I don’t think I could handle another Tildy Special.”

“What? I am an incredible cook!”

“Sardine and banana sandwiches,” he reminded her coolly.

“They were delicious,” she huffed and crossed her arms over her chest petulantly.

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Hermione smiled and offered the woman a hug.

“I’ll bring sandwiches,” she told the girl in a stage whisper that had Remus shuddering.

“Fuck that, bring whiskey,” Sirius demanded.

“For you, I will bring a mix CD for educational purposes.”

“Sod off.”

“And for me?” Harry asked.

“All my love and affection,” she cried and threw her arms around him. She didn’t playfully squeeze the life out of him as she had when they arrived in her shop. This was a proper hug like those he got when visiting The Burrow, like those he got from a mum. The feeling only increased when Tildy whispered, “You better remember to write. I’m like a proud mother always bragging about you to people.”

The warmth of her embrace clung to him even after they had separated. Her words echoed in his head all the way to Egerton Crescent.

“Harry?” Sirius said quietly. “You’re crying.”

“What?”

“You’re crying,” the boy repeated, adding, “And smiling.”

He wiped a hand across his face and felt the tears on his cheek. “Yeah.”

“You okay?”

He looked at Sirius, the boy who had given up everything because he loved him. He looked at Remus and Hermione disappearing into the kitchen of their home, a home he had been invited into as family. He felt the warmth of Tildy’s hug, heard the words she had spoken only to him.


All the things he had ever wanted and been denied, all right here.

“Yeah. I’m perfect.”

Chapter End Notes
The End.

I hope you liked it.

It wrote itself in no way as I originally plotted, with Harry and Sirius being nothing more than bi-romantic, Sirius staying in the past and Harry seeing Tonks as the reason he semi-fancied Sirius to begin with. After Sirius and Harry turned into a proper thing, that ending was inadequate, especially after all the angst I put them through. So yay for characters taking over and dictating the story!

Please let me know what you think. Did I leave any loose ends or spare parts lying around?

End Notes

I must give credit where it is due. This story is based on Turn Back Time by SStarLuna, a sadly abandoned fic over on FanFiction.net that had great potential. This is not a scene for scene, chapter for chapter rewrite. Despite the changes, this is still very much inspired by the original and a lot of its idiosyncrasies will make more sense if you follow the link to SStarLuna’s original work.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!