Blessed Be The Boys Time Can't Capture
by rainfallsglass

Summary

A Marauders' Era fic detailing the Marauders' lives from their first year at Hogwarts to the downfall of Voldemort.
In The Beginning

Four families stood, quite apart from each other, on platform 9 3/4, watching the Hogwarts Express pull into the station with a squeal and a rush of steam. Each family quickly said their goodbyes, in the form of a few words, a hug perhaps, with varying degrees of affection.

“Make us proud.” The tall, cold parents of a tall, cold boy patted him on the shoulder, his mother pulling him into a stiff hug. He pulled away from her quickly, ruffled his younger brother’s hair affectionately, and walked onto the train, not looking back for even a moment.

“Good luck!” A round woman with short, dusty hair and a wide smile hugged her son. He squeezed her back, gave a one-armed hug to his distant-looking father, and leaned down to wish a lengthy goodbye to each of his five dogs.

“Have fun, sweetheart! Write us as soon as you arrive!” Aging parents, old enough perhaps to be mistaken for a young set of grandparents, enveloped their messy-haired son in a warm hug. He pulled away, protesting loudly but with a grin on his face. As he dashed onto the train, owl and trunk in hand, he took in their smiling faces, noticed tears on their cheeks, and walked onto the train.

“Be careful.” These were words the boy had heard thousands of times, but whispered into his ear under the guise of a loving hug from his father made them feel cold. No goodbyes were said, and the boy dragged his battered trunk onto the train, turning back to look at them and waving a sad, silent goodbye.

The train left. The first boy sat in a compartment with the third, while the second and fourth went their separate ways, not seeing each other, not knowing.

The first was Sirius Black. At eleven years old, with black hair he was growing as long as he could to elicit a response from his family. He smiled bravely, sadly, out the window, for a reason he didn’t quite understand, and the boy opposite him mistook his expression for homesickness.

“Don’t worry,” the other boy, the third, the one the other boys would always envy for his perfect life and perfect family. “I’ll miss my parents loads too.”

Sirius snorted. “I don’t miss them.”

“Sounds like someone who missed their family would say.” The other boy remarked. Sirius had to admit he was right. “Sirius. Sirius Black.” He stuck out a pale hand for the boy opposite him to shake.

“James Potter,” the other said. His handshake was warm and friendly. “Delighted to meet you.”

Sirius grinned. “Likewise.”

Two others sat in the compartment — one boy, sallow skinned, greasy haired, with robes that hung off his painfully thin frame, by the name of Severus Snape. Seated next to him was Lily Evans, a girl with glowing pale skin, her nose sprinkled with freckles, red hair hanging down her back in a wavy curtain.

Both James and Sirius, upon seeing her, noted that she was pretty but was currently holding hands with Snape, and resolved to speak to her when she wasn’t accompanied by a boy who looked like an oversized bat. Hogwarts, suddenly, seemed full of potential not just for magic, but for a chance to meet girls such as the one sat in their compartment at that very moment.

Severus and Lily were in quiet conversation, and James and Sirius were trying to avoid looking at them as the girl wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robes.

“You’d better be in Slytherin,” Severus said, pushing back his greasy hair. Sirius stiffened, his jaw tightening as he glared out the window.

“Slytherin?” James made a face of disgust. “Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?” His second statement was directed towards Sirius, whose face remained stiff, fighting not to betray his emotions.

“My whole family have been in Slytherin.” he said quietly.

“Blimey, and I thought you seemed alright!” James exclaimed.
Sirius grinned despite himself. “Maybe I’ll break the tradition. Where are you heading, if you’ve got the choice?” He lounged back, comfortable now that the conversation was turned away from his family.

James lifted his arms as if raising a sword. “Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!” like my dad.”

Severus stifled his distasteful snort with a cough at the back of his throat. “Got a problem with that?” James asked defensively, spiking up his already extremely untidy black hair with one hand, almost as an instinct.

“No,” he smirked. “If you’d rather be brawny than brainy —”

Sirius didn’t know much about Slytherin — all he knew was that he’d never met one he’d liked.

“Where’re you hoping to go, seeing as you’re neither?” He interjected.

James laughed hysterically. “Nice one,” he gasped in between guffaws.

Lily stood up, her pale cheeks flushed, her small hands shaking with anger. She glared at James and Sirius, clenching her jaw.

“Come on, Severus,” she said, grabbing her trunk from the shelf above them. “Let’s find another compartment.”

“Ooooooooooooo…” James imitated.

Sirius laughed. “Come on, Severus, let’s find another compartment. Who does she think she is?”

James stuck his foot out as Severus passed him in an attempt to trip the other boy.

“See ya, Snivellus,” Sirius shouted as the compartment door slammed behind them.

“Snivellus?” James chuckled.

“It slipped out.”

“Whatever. He’s a prat.”

“Making enemies on your first day, eh?” Sirius said.

“Everywhere I go. My parents would be proud.”

“Mine too,” Sirius said. Only one of them was joking.

Still, Sirius was glad to make friends on the first day, just to rub it in his parents’ faces. His mother and father had spat over dinner one night that he would be alone for seven years, a disgrace to the Black family name, but he hardly cared. He’d already proven them wrong.

“Firs’ years! Firs’ years!” The Hogwarts groundskeeper, known only as Hagrid, standing feet above even the tallest of students, waved his hands and ushered them over.

He piled them into boats, Sirius and James sticking tightly together, while the other two boys, sat in a boat slightly apart from them, not speaking to each other, but the proximity of them was exciting, almost, to those who could sense, somewhere deep inside themselves, that these four boys were destined for each other.

After crossing the lake, the first years were greeted by a tall, stately woman in a witch’s hat, her hair pulled back tightly underneath it. Her mouth was thin and stern, and she stood exceptionally stiff and poised. There was something in her eyes that flashed before she spoke, it spoke of a composure and strength that most of these children would never understand.

“Welcome, first years,” she said. “I am Professor McGonagall, the Gryffindor head of house.”

“If that’s where that absolute toe rag from the train ends up I surely hope I won’t be placed there,” Lily hissed to Severus, who grinned gleefully.

“Before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into one of four houses: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin. Doing well in classes will earn you points, and breaking rules will cause you to lose points.”

Sirius snorted, and she gave him a rather direct look, her mouth pursing into a thin, threatening line.

James laughed.

“Shall we proceed to the Sorting?” Professor McGonagall asked, leading them through a wide set of double doors and into a grand hall.

They all stood in a group together, full of fear and anticipation as the Sorting Hat burst into song.

After singing for the better part of ten minutes, most of the returning students joining in, McGonagall
started to read out names.
It didn’t take long for her to reach, “Black, Sirius!”
Sirius sat on the stool as if it was his birthright, but his knuckles were white under the edge of the wood. He was sure the answer was Slytherin, and sure that his parents would send him a note of encouragement, “congratulations on making Slytherin! Carrying on the tradition, that’s our boy!” A boy from the noble and most ancient house of Black, he’d be sent a Howler for anything less than perfection.
The Sorting Hat smirked. So you don’t want to be a Slytherin, it said in Sirius’ head, sly and devious. I don’t want to be like them! Sirius himself was surprised by the vehemence with which he thought it. I don’t want to be a Black. I don’t want to be a Slytherin.
Not Slytherin?
Not. Sirius thought, screwing up his small, scared face.
“Gryffindor!” The Sorting Hat shouted out, loud and clear, without hesitating for a moment.
“Save me a seat, mate!” James called, clapping along with the rest of them. Sirius took off the hat and sat down in an empty spot at the Gryffindor table, as if he had never questioned for a second which house he would be in.
He watched Lily Evans be sorted into Gryffindor — well, less watched, more gloated at Severus’s heartbroken face. Lily gave a regretful look back at Severus and sat down as far from Sirius as she could get.
“Lupin, Remus!” McGonagall read out, and the headmaster gave an odd sort of nod to the boy as he sat on the stool. He stared at his shoes instead of the throng of people.
Sirius looked at him and recognized him from the train station, remembered how his parents had hugged him gingerly, like he was made of glass, and how he’d pulled a Hogwarts wizard’s hat low over his head and was now crumpling it in his lap. This was the fourth boy, and how important he was and would be.
It took just a few seconds until Remus was sorted into Gryffindor, and he walked quickly, with a slight limp, to the table. Lily smiled at him, and he couldn’t bring himself to smile back at this strange girl who smiled at a boy with so many scars, but when she gestured for him to sit down, he did.
“Pettigrew, Peter,” McGonagall called, around ten minutes later. A few seconds of silence, a lull in the conversations, and then a small, plump, unassuming boy scurried up to the stool and sat down. There was something rodent-like in his visage, the sharp, small nose, the terrified eyes. Despite all this, the Sorting Hat roared,
“Gryffindor!”
The boy sat down next to Remus and introduced himself shyly, as Peter.
“You’re Remus, right?”
Remus nodded. He remembered seeing Peter at the train station, and took a deep breath. You can do this, he thought. “I saw you at the platform. You have a lot of dogs,” he managed. He exhaled as Peter’s face lit up. Thank Merlin.
“Yeah, I have five. We see all these strays around our house, and we take them in a lot of the time. My mum loves them, but she’s not fond of dirt, so she makes them sleep outside a lot.” Peter said excitedly. “Do you have any pets?”
Remus shook his head. Does the fact that I turn into a murderous beast every month count as a pet? I suppose not. “No, no pets. Always wanted one, but animals seem to back away from me in fear.”
“I’m sure you’re exaggerating.” Peter said graciously.
“I wish.” A Ravenclaw’s cat hissed at Remus when he reached down to pet it. “You see?”
“I reckon it’s the, er, scars.” Peter said. Why on earth did I say that? That was so rude! He must hate me...
Remus let out a shocked chuckle. “Yeah. Must be.” This was the most he’d ever talked to someone his age, and he felt equal parts special and uncomfortable.
James Potter sauntered over to the table, with a natural arrogance that looked almost comedic on a boy of his age and size. He sat down next to Sirius, exchanging congratulatory remarks. Both boys grinned.
“Hello,” Mary MacDonald turned to Lily and shook her hand. “I’m Mary. You look upset, is everything alright?” She had a direct way about her, a way of asking questions no one else was going to ask.

“Lily,” Lily replied, her green eyes fixed on the Slytherin table, where Severus had sat next to a tall, blonde seventh year with steely eyes. He looked perfectly at home without Lily, and she had to admit it hurt.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Mary said with a smile.

Lily smiled back, momentarily looking at Mary before thinking, I never thought Severus and I would be separated. Are we even going to see each other? He’s my best mate.

Albus Dumbledore stepped up on a platform, casting an amplifying spell so the entire Great Hall could hear him. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, for all our returning students, and welcome to our first years. I trust you had good holidays?”

A few people whistled and applauded.

Dumbledore raised a hand. “There is, however, one thing I’d like to discuss with all of you before we begin the feast. You may have noticed the presence of a Whomping Willow outside the school —“

Remus Lupin’s face grew red. Stop stop stop stop stop — he wanted to cover his ears so as not to hear Professor Dumbledore continue to talk about the Whomping Willow, which he knew had been planted solely for his benefit, as a passage to an abandoned shack near Hogsmeade.

“What’s a Whomping Willow?” Lily whispered to Mary.

Mary grinned mischievously. “Oh. You’re Muggle-born.”

“Yes,” Lily said, her eyes narrowing. “What is it?”

“A tree. Professor Dumbledore will explain why it’s there. It kind of…moves around and smashes things.”

“Maybe it’s to guard the school…or something?” Lily managed, in an attempt to redeem herself. Already, she could see, Mary knew how different she was. She would never fit in. Not with Muggle parents. Severus had lied to her to make her feel better about leaving her family. Severus had abandoned her. She clenched her fists in the pockets of her robes.

“Professor Sprout had requested the planting of a Whomping Willow for Herbology. As such, I do recommend you avoid antagonizing it. I trust the prefects will keep the younger students in line?” Dumbledore said.

The blonde boy next to Severus nodded proudly.

“But enough chatter,” Dumbledore said, waving his hands. “It’s time for the feast.” Lily looked down at the food that had appeared in front of them and gasped audibly. “Is that even possible?” she asked.

James turned to her, his black hair sticking up in back, his hazel eyes full of amusement. “Of course it is.”

Lily glared at him. “Oh, of course it is,” she mimicked, scooping cranberry sauce onto her plate. After an hour, the Gryffindor Head Boy and Girl escorted the first years up to their dormitories.

Peter, Sirius, James, and Remus shared a room, walking in together to find their trunks already placed on beds for them.

Remus’s bed was by the door, furthest from the others, and he sat down on it with a quiet sigh, pulling a Muggle book out of his trunk.

“Are you a Muggle-born, then?” Peter asked, walking around James and Sirius, who were having a heated pillow fight on James’s bed.

“Half-blood.” Remus said. “What about you?”

“Pureblood.” Peter shrugged. “You know, I —“

He was interrupted by Remus getting hit in the face by James’s pillow as it flew across the room. Remus threw it back, rubbing his eye.

“Oi, sorry, mate,” James said, putting out his hand to shake. “I’m James.”

“Remus,” Remus said, looking at the ground.
Sirius jumped onto James’s back and attacked him with a pillow.
“Hey! You!” James smacked Sirius with a pillow, looking at Peter. “What’s your name? Also, come help me attack Sirius!”
“It’s Peter,” Peter exclaimed breathlessly, snatching the pillow off his own bed and hitting Sirius with it.
Remus watched with mild amusement over the top of his book.
“Remus, you want to join us?” Sirius asked.
Remus shook his head.
“Alright.” Sirius shrugged and threw his pillow at James.
Remus fell asleep in his Hogwarts robes, waking up late to Peter sitting on the edge of his bed pelting rolled up pieces of paper at him. He rubbed his eyes and tried not to look angry.
“Remus, you’re going to miss breakfast,” James said, rumpling his black hair.
“I’m not that hungry.” Remus said, brushing his scruffy hair with his fingers. It had an odd, chopped appearance, having been cut over the kitchen sink with a dull pair of scissors.
James crossed his arms. “No offense, mate, but you look like you’re starving. And I’m warning you now, if you miss a single meal I swear to Merlin I’ll start shoving food down your throat. I suppose I really am my mother’s son.”
Remus chuckled slightly, glanced about the room, and followed the others downstairs to breakfast.
Sirius is sent a Howler from his parents. McGonagall (to her great despair) unwittingly provides a collective name for the four most mischievous students she’s ever had.

Within a month, two stamped letters, both sealed with the Black family crest, dropped into Sirius’s eggs. He knew instantly who they were from, as soon as he saw his owl swoop into the Great Hall, and let out a tiny groan of despair.

“Blimey,” he muttered.

“What?” James leaned over his shoulder. “Are those —?”

“Unfortunately,” Sirius muttered. “Look, they put the stamp on them too. How thoughtful.”

“Howlers? From whom? That’s your family crest, isn’t it?”

“I have my suspicions,” Sirius sighed. “I expect we might as well get it over with now, then?”

James sniggered. What could have possibly been so bad that Sirius would be sent Howlers?

Sirius glanced around and opened the first Howler, which fashioned itself into a spitting, furious mouth and shrieked with the piercing voice of Walburga Black.

Severus Snape burst into raucous laughter from across the room at the Slytherin table.

“Just WHO do you think you are? Is this another of your little pranks?”

The teasing smile quickly faded from James’s face, and he grabbed Sirius’s arm, trying to pull him away from the table.

“PUREBLOODS LIKE THE NOBLE BLACK FAMILY —”

“It’s getting blacker every day, it’s filthy,” Sirius commented, a self-satisfied smirk on his paling face.

“You chose Gryffindor, is that it? To shame us? After all we’ve done for you, what we’ve sacrificed all for your benefit? Ungrateful little swine, unworthy of — “

“Yeah, I’ll bet you made loads of sacrifices for me. Always putting others before yourself, eh, Mum?” Sirius spat at the Howler, fully aware that it couldn’t hear him.

“You’re the shame of this FAMILY, the shame of our COMMUNITY. You wanted to be seen as different, you’re such an arrogant little brat, why couldn’t you be more like your little brother? If you don’t sort this out within the month we’re sending you home! Hogwarts is not required for wizards. Should’ve sent you somewhere respectable, like Durmstrang!”

At this Sirius could do nothing but laugh, although he’d never felt less like doing so.

Many of the Slytherins were chuckling and whispering, the loudest among them Sirius’s cousins. All but Andromeda, who was going out with a Muggle-born and had received a Howler herself just a week prior. She alone looked at Sirius with pity, but he refused to look back.

“We ought to have you brought home for what you’ve done! I expect a full apology delivered by owl tomorrow morning and no later, or there WILL be dire consequences.” The Howler burst into flames and crumbled away, while Sirius stared at the ashes.

The next Howler burst open of it’s own accord. “I WAS HORRIFIED TO HEAR OF YOUR PLACEMENT IN GRYFFINDOR. MY OWN SON, A BLOOD TRAITOR. I’M SO EMBARRASED OF YOU! ABSOLUTELY HUMILIATED, THE WAY YOU SHOULD BE. I’M SURE YOU DON’T EVEN CARE. MY FRIENDS ARE APOLOGIZING THAT I ENDED UP WITH SUCH A HORRIBLE SON, A ‘BAD EGG’ AS THE MALFOYS PUT IT!” His shouts rippled through the Great Hall. “DISGUSTING BOY, YOU OUGHT TO BE ASHAMED. I’VE TOLD YOUR COUSINS NOT TO SPEAK ONE WORD TO YOU FOR THE REMAINDER OF YOUR TIME IN GRYFFINDOR UNLESS THEY WANT TO RECEIVE A HOWLER THEMSELVES.
YOU DISGUST ME, SIRIUS, I OUGHT TO BE ASHAMED TO CALL YOU MY SON!"
Sirius stiffened, and James thought for a moment he might cry, but he sat as if he’d been carved from stone.
James did the only thing he was able. He stood up, pointed his wand at the far wall, making bricks fall onto the ground with a clatter.
“What spell was that?” Remus asked out of curiosity, craning his neck to look at the bare, exposed patch of wall.
James grinned at him. “Wasn’t. I had no idea if that would do anything at all. Worked, didn’t it?”
Remus nodded as the caretaker, Filch, limped into the Hall complaining to anyone who would listen about annoying little brats with no respect for the hard work people did at Hogwarts.
The noise had distracted the audience, giving Dumbledore time to discreetly silence the Howler and give Sirius a firm but kind look.
My office, Dumbledore mouthed, as people began filing away from the tables.
Sirius met Dumbledore outside in the hall. Dumbledore was whistling a Muggle song as he walked to his office, his boots clicking on the floor.
“I’m afraid I must apologize to you, Mr. Black.” He said kindly. “I should have realized your parents would want to make a laughingstock of you and would create a scene. For that, I am very, very sorry.”
Sirius nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. “It’s alright.”
“Lemon drop?” Dumbledore asked. Sirius nodded and accepted one.
“Professor?”
“Yes?”
“They can’t have me taken out of school, can they?”
Dumbledore shook his head. “I should hope not.”
Sirius was dissatisfied with the answer, but thanked Dumbledore and walked away.
“Sirius, I had no idea — “ James started to say, holding onto Sirius’s arm.
“Oh, Potter, don’t get emotional on me now. They’ve got bad tempers is all.”
“Okay,” James said. Sirius could tell he didn’t believe him.
“Look, I’m fine,” Sirius said.
“Okay, mate,”
“Really.”
“You just got Howlers from both your parents that essentially said they hated you for being a Gryffindor, and you’re fine with that?”
“I wasn’t expecting anything different. My entire family’s been in Slytherin, you know.”
“I know. But did they really have to do that in front of everyone?”
“Everyone whose opinion they care about is sitting at that table,” he gestured to the Slytherin table, “and was agreeing with every word coming out of their mouths.”
“It was still wrong,” Peter argued.
“Who are you, exactly?” Sirius asked rudely, although of course he knew who Peter was.
Peter blushed, humiliated. “Sorry. I just — “
“Mind not butting into other people’s conversations, maybe?” James asked.
Peter put his head down in shame. “Sorry.”
“No, it’s not your fault,” James said, seeing the tears in the other boy’s eyes. “Didn’t mean to snap at you.”
Peter nodded quickly, while James turned back to his conversation with Sirius. “As you were saying?”
“My parents didn’t see it that way. They love me, you know.”
“Is that how you’d treat someone you loved?” James asked.
“Are you implying that my parents don’t love me?” Sirius’s voice rose dangerously.
“No. I’ll drop it. I won’t mention it again, if you’d like.”
“I would.” Sirius said tersely.
“Alright, alright, let’s go to Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall will have our heads if we’re
They arrived just before the bell, and McGonagall gave all three of them rather stern looks. “Alright, shall we start with transfiguring water into rum?” She looked over at James, whose head was bent over his desk as he doodled a broomstick in the margin of his notes. “Mr. Potter,” McGonagall sighed, exasperated.

He looked up with a cocky grin. “Yes, Professor?”

“Detention after classes today. Do try to pay attention.”

“But I’ll miss my Herbology detention, Professor!” James said in mock horror. This earned giggles from several other students.

Lily looked over at one of her friends and rolled her eyes.

“Professor Sprout will surely understand, don’t you think?” McGonagall said. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t punish you.”

“I’m sure you will, Professor,” James said.

McGonagall’s eyes flashed. “Watch your tongue, Potter.”

“I wish I could, Professor.” James said, not at all regretfully.

Sirius hooted from the back of the room, and James flashed him a grin. Remus found himself stifling a laugh.

“Silence, Mr. Black. Miss Evans, would you care to demonstrate the transfiguration of water into rum?”

“Of course, Professor,” Lily said, pushing her long hair from over her shoulders to tumbling down her back. She waved her wand and recited the incantation clearly, and the water in the glass in front of her turned into a rather nice rum.

“Well done, Miss Evans,” McGonagall said, with a hint of a smile. She sent another steely glare in Sirius and James’s direction. “Now. If everyone would raise their wands and try the spell for themselves, I would appreciate it.”

“You know, James, we should have a name.” Sirius said nonchalantly one evening, almost a month later, stretching out his legs where he sat. Most of the first year Gryffindors spent their time in the Gryffindor common room, and Sirius and James had claimed one large armchair which they insisted upon sitting in together. Peter sat next to them, as close as he could get.

“A name?” James asked, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“You know, the Professional Hexers, Class Disasters — speaking of which, James, how was your detention with McGonagall?”

“It went very well.” James said, spiking up his hair. “She gave me some tea and biscuits and a lecture about not being a disruption.”

“How much of that got through?” Sirius sniggered.

“Not much, to be honest.” James shrugged. “She’s proud of me though, for not turning my water into milk rather than rum.”

“Don’t say that, you’re really quite good at Transfiguration, I’ve seen you,” Peter protested. James and Sirius were his heroes, everything he wanted to be.

“Oh, stop it, Pepper, I’m swooning,” James teased.

Peter blushed a bright red, but didn’t correct him.

“Anyhow, I really do think we need a name for our hexing skills. I mean, just the other day I managed to hex Severus’s jumper to tickle his armpits, I’m quite proud of that one —“

“Really?” James laughed so hard he nearly choked. “Blimey, Sirius, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to get caught just yet, wanted Severus to go on believing that he’d developed a mild allergy to wool —“

James glared.

“Come off it, you know how it is. I tell you and someone overhears and suddenly everyone’s hexing people’s jumpers! You can’t do anything around here, honestly!”

“Except get away with hexing innocent people,” Remus mused from across the room, very focused on his Charms homework.
“I’ve always wondered how you’ve managed to turn a blind eye to everything Severus does, he’s a menace — “ Sirius shook his hair, which had grown nearly to his shoulders in the few months they’d been at Hogwarts.

“I’ve never seen him do anything remotely out of the ordinary,” Remus said.

“Blimey, Remus, maybe you should get your eyes checked, the boy likes to smell Evans’s hair for Merlin’s sake,”

“They’re friends — “

“More than friends, I’d say,” Sirius remarked, and James chuckled.

“I just don’t see the point in being needlessly cruel to someone.” Remus said, scratching his lower left arm.

“God, Sirius, you didn’t hex Remus as well?” James asked.

“No. Maybe he really did develop a spontaneous wool allergy.”

Remus scratched his wrists when anxious — if he thought of it in his analytical, detached way, it was probably a projection of the same scratching he did as a werewolf.

“James!” Sirius clapped his hands. “Focus! I’m not going to bed until we think of something.”

“Right, erm, well…you know, I think the dynamic duo does have sort of a nice ring to it.”

“That’s so corny!” Sirius rolled his eyes. “The Hexing Hooligans sounds much better.”

“No it doesn’t!” James scoffed.

“The thorns in Professor McGonagall’s side,” Sirius joked.

“The Severus Snape Hate Club,” Peter suggested.

“The Future Quidditch Stars,”

“I don’t want to play Quidditch — “ Sirius protested.

“Really? You’ve never told me that. Alright, the future Quidditch star and his shaggy-haired sidekick,”

“I’m your sidekick?”

“C’mon, Sirius, we all know someone needs to cheer me on when I’m the star of the Gryffindor Quidditch team — “

“I’ll do it!” Peter interrupted.


“It’s Peter,” Peter said, looking down at his feet.

“Is it?” Sirius said disinterestedly. “Sorry, Pete.”

“The Absolute Blithering Idiots,” James suggested.


“Ouch!” Sirius pressed a hand against his chest. “You injure me, Remus, really.”

Remus looked down, his face going very red. “I’m so sorry, I can’t believe I said that. It was a joke, I don’t think that — “

James laughed. “Oi, mate, don’t worry about it. It was funny.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” James tilted his head and looked at Remus with mild amusement and confusion. “The Arrogant Prats actually, I could go for that.”

“No.” Sirius said adamantly.

“No?”

“No.”

“The Immature Toerags, as Evans called me earlier today,” James pulled a face. “I swear, if she were any more stuck up she would have her nose touching the nearest cloud.”

“Please, if she were any more stuck up she’d be looking up to heaven at the ghost of her social life once people start to realize what a prat Snivellus is — “

“Snivellus?” Remus nearly choked.

“Yeah, it rather suits him what with the,” Sirius gestured vaguely to his nose, imitating a beak, “and all.”

“Did you come up with that?”

“I did,” Sirius tossed his hair back, the very picture of modesty.
Remus tried not to laugh, focusing on his Potions homework.
“Remus, do you want any help with that?” Lily asked, walking into the common room with her long red hair wet and hanging around her face.
Remus shook his head. “No, I’m alright.”
“Peter, how long has he been working?” Lily asked, studiously ignoring James and Sirius.
“Nearly half an hour.” Peter replied.
“Alright, Remus, let me see it,” Lily said, stealing his homework. “Oh, that question. I suppose it is rather difficult. You would need to know the magical properties of the jumping bean,” she wrote a few sentences on the corner of his page in neat, curled handwriting. “Better?”
Remus nodded.
“Ooooooooooh, do I hear wedding bells?” James teased.
Lily shot him the dirtiest look she could muster and turned back to Remus’s homework.
“I’m sorry, Lily,” Remus said.
“Why? They’re just your dormmates, not your friends.” She managed a smile. “Besides, you aren’t a bit like them.”
Remus knew that all too well. But why, then, did he wish he was? “Thanks for helping me,” he said quietly.
“It was no problem. And, for the record, no matter what they say about him, Severus is a good person. The best, I think. And this potion really is difficult, don't be so embarrassed.”
“Not for you.”
“Oh, please, you’re wonderful at everything, just like those two,” she pointed to James and Sirius and pulled a face. “If you ever need any help, though, you can always come to me.”
Remus smiled politely, knowing that he could never take her up on her offer. What’s the use in refusing, Remus, she’s just offering because she feels bad for you, and look at you, you’re letting her help with your Potions homework, you shouldn’t need help— Remus sighed, mentally checking when the full moon was — just under a week away, of course. No wonder he’d been feeling so ill. “Remus, are you alright?” Peter asked as Lily walked away, giggling to her friends.
“I’m fine,” Remus said, with a weak, false smile. “Just tired.”
“You went to bed early last night,” Peter reminded him unhelpfully.
“Must be coming down with something. I do get sick quite often. Remember last month when I had to go to the hospital wing?” Remus was aware he was rambling. “You know, must be the weather, it is getting quite cold out, and I’m always ill.”
“Really?”
“Yeah. Poor immune system, I s’pose.”
“Oh,” Peter nodded. “Was that Lily Evans helping you with Potions?”
“Yeah, I couldn’t figure out a question and she told me the answer.”
“You’re wonderful at Potions! At everything, really,” Peter said enviously.
Remus’s face flushed. “Oh, er — I’m not really — I mean — thank you — but — “
“Remus…why don’t you ever talk to me…or James and Sirius?” Peter asked directly, feeling that there was no better time to demand the truth.
“Peter, I’m just better off alone, alright?” Remus snapped. He put his head in his hands and sighed. “I’m sorry. You’re really kind, Peter, I just…”
Peter nodded. “I get it. You don’t want to burden anyone. Is that it? Are you dying?”
Remus nearly laughed aloud. “No, I’m not dying.”
“Then what is it?”
“It isn’t anything, I just like to be alone. I mean…with my mum being ill and all…” this, Remus decided, would be the perfect explanation for his soon to come disappearance on the full moon. Visits to his ailing mother had to be an airtight lie, as no decent person would ever think to question it.
“Remus, that’s horrible,” Peter said, throwing his arms around the other boy. Remus held his breath, every muscle tense, until the other boy — quite sweaty, very warm — released his grip on Remus’s neck. “You can always talk to me, if you need anything.”
“Thanks, Peter,” Remus said, staring up at the Gryffindor banner on the wall. He was beginning to wonder if he belonged there at all.

“Your mum…what’s wrong with her?”

“Oh, er…I don’t really like to talk about it.” Remus awkwardly fidgeted with his hands for a moment. “Well, I’m off to bed. Goodnight.” Remus drew the curtains around his bed and sat there for a moment, breathing out a quiet sigh of relief. He was awoken late at night by James’ sudden cry of,

“The Marauders!”

Sirius woke with a start, pushing all his blankets onto the floor at once. “The what?”

“The Marauders, Sirius, it’s perfect! Remember a few weeks ago, when we knocked over a desk to nick Snivellus’s quill, and McGonagall saw? She called us the Marauders. I think it suits us.” Sirius rubbed his eyes and yawned. “What does that even mean, James?”

Remus rolled over. “Invaders, scoundrels, plunderers… can we please talk about this in the morning, I’m so tired…”

“Remus, you’re always tired. The Marauders are trying to have a conversation,” James pointed out. Remus covered his head with his pillow and groaned audibly.

“Actually, James, I’m quite tired as well,” Sirius yawned, rolling over so his back was facing the wall.

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A few days later, as James and Sirius sat on Sirius’s bed talking extremely loudly about everything and nothing, Peter piped up, “have either of you seen Remus?”

“Of course not, he’s either in the library studying for our Potions test tomorrow or in the bathroom… come to think of it, we had this exact conversation last month. Where on earth is he always going, anyway?”

“I reckon he’s visiting his mum,” Peter said. “I haven’t seen him since lunch. Didn’t you notice? He got marked ‘excused’ in Defense Against the Dark Arts, without anyone telling the professor, you know, so it must be approved by Professor Dumbledore.”

“Why would he be visiting his mum?”

“He told me she was really ill.”

“Can’t he just send his parents owls like the rest of us?” James asked. Sirius flinched. “Sorry, Sirius.”

“It’s alright.” Sirius said. He had a growing pile of unopened letters from his parents under his bed.

“A shame about Remus’s mum though.”

“Yeah, it’s a bloody shame he isn’t here to help me with Charms.”

“I can help you, James, and it’s not like you need it, you’re nearly top of the class. Besides, Flitwick loves you, if you tell him you felt ill or something he won’t even make you take the test —”

“No, I want to show up Evans, I hate her, she’s so good at everything. I’ll just stay up for a while longer.” James sighed.

“Alright, I’m going to go to bed. Wake me if Remus gets back?”

James didn’t have a chance to respond, as a high pitched scream echoed from downstairs. “GET OUT!” a girl’s voice shrieked, and there was a loud thump.

Sirius leapt off the bed to investigate and came back with a grin wider than Professor Slughorn’s potbelly. “It’s Evans.”

James smirked, abandoning his books. “Really?”

“She’s kicked out Sniffly, or whatever his name is.”

“Severus?” Peter asked.

“Snivellus, that’s right. God, I’m bad with names. I came up with that nickname, for Merlin’s sake. Anyways, he asked to see her and she yelled at him and apparently threw something at him. He’s standing there looking rather crushed,” Sirius explained.

“We should ask him if he’s seen Remus,” Peter said.

“Percy, you’re adorable. We hate him, remember?” James said with a smirk.

Peter blushed. “Er… it’s… Peter. Not Percy.”

“Sorry, mate.” James said. “What was I saying? We hate Snivelly?”
“Yeah, Pudge over there said we should ask about Remus. We can’t.”
“I’m worried about Remus, I like him.” Peter said.
“Porridge, you like everyone. And our Loony Lupin isn’t so bad, I suppose.” Sirius said, crossing his legs.
“Loony Lupin?” James chuckled.
“What? It’s as good a nickname as any.”
“Go on, hex Snivellus, will you? I’m getting bored.”
Sirius stood up and leaned over the balcony to look down at Severus standing there, looking alone, and lost, tears streaming down his face. Sirius couldn’t bring himself to do it — Severus was a prat, but he didn’t need any more tormenting.
Sirius turned back. “Er…he’s gone. I’m tired, I think I’m going to go to bed.”
“Alright,” James said, squinting. “You alright, mate?”
“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Where were you yesterday, Lupin?” Severus sauntered over to him in the courtyard after Potions, a cruel sneer on his face.
Remus looked around for someone to defend him, although he already knew there wouldn’t be anyone there. He had a few acquaintances, but no mates. He couldn’t afford to have friends for this very reason — too many questions. Remus didn’t want to deal with Severus’s suspicions — his ribs ached, his face had a long diagonal claw mark across it, it was a wonder he hadn’t torn his own eye out, although he was sure that would happen eventually.
“I was…out. Visiting my mum.” Remus’s mind flashed back to the night before.
_The sun setting… leaving before dinner…barely able to walk from fatigue…Madam Pomfrey with her arm around his shoulder, holding him up as they walked to the Whomping Willow._
_Madam Pomfrey pointed her wand at it to freeze it and watched Remus weakly crawl through, lying on the floor for a moment before staggering into the Shrieking Shack. He felt the transformation begin as soon as the sun set, his fingers starting to ache, his chest tightening, and suddenly he was in too much pain to be aware of anything._
_He woke up the next morning to scratches all over his body, bruises covering his skin, individually moving each limb to be sure he hadn’t broken anything — he hadn’t, but it had happened before._
_He tried to catch his breath, pulling up a floorboard for an extra set of robes (Madam Pomfrey kept the compartment full of clothing for after transformations — and before, if he didn’t feel like ruining his clothes — but he could rarely find the energy to disrobe before the full moon)._ He pulled the robes over his scarred and cut skin and limped through the passage and outside, where he collapsed from the pain. Madam Pomfrey tutted sympathetically and carried the boy back to the hospital wing, where he lay for a few hours as she fed him potion after potion.
“Madam Pomfrey, I should go, I have a Potions test —” he protested.
“Nonsense. You need to rest.”
“I’ll be fine. I’m used to it.”
“I know.” She sighed. “I may be overstepping my boundaries, Lupin, but try to make some friends, for your own sake.”
“I don’t want to — to accidentally hurt them —”
“Don’t be ridiculous, of course you wouldn’t.”
“It wouldn’t be safe for them. I don’t want to be a burden to them —”
“Lupin, listen to me. You aren’t a burden to anyone.”
“I really should go.” He said, climbing out of bed and pulling on his shoes. “See you next month?”
“Looking forward to it.”
“I’m not.” He waved and walked as quickly as he could to Potions — thankfully, he’d studied quite a bit two weeks before the full moon, since his fatigue often prevented him from wanting to stay up and revise.
“Lupin, do you even hear yourself? ‘My mum’s ill’ yes, I’m sure, ill for three months in a row, and you go all that way to visit her? Is she dying or something?” Severus asked derisively.
Remus shook his head. “Why don’t you just mind your own business?”

“Oh, but it is my business.” Severus’s lip curled in a sneer, and Remus wondered if he’d really figured it out. “Is it contagious, what you’ve got?”

Remus bit his lip. He didn’t know what to say, how to fight back, all he knew was that Sirius and James were completely right about Severus and he was stupid for defending him. “I don’t know what you’re t-talking about,” Remus fought back tears. His hands were shaking and he felt like he couldn’t get enough air in his lungs. He knew Severus didn’t know the truth, that Remus was a werewolf, but he couldn’t stop himself from panicking.

“I don’t know about you, but I think a lot of our parents would be livid at the fact that their precious children are taking classes with a —“

“Severus!” Lily exclaimed. “Can I please talk to you?” she touched his arm gently.

Severus shook her off.

“Remus Lupin is a bloody —“

“Is a bloody what, Snivellus?” James swept between them with ease, a smirk on his young, round face.

Severus sputtered, unsure what to say, but he didn’t have time to respond before James shouted a hex and his shoes shrunk several sizes all at once and he fell to the ground in pain, struggling to get them off, his toenails splitting under the pressure, while James and Sirius laughed.

“I’m sure he was just picking on Remus to feel better about his pathetic little life, James, there was no need to be cruel,” Sirius said, with a smirk that suggested that he’d been the one to recommend that very hex.

“He’s probably still upset about his little argument with Lily last night, of course.” Peter said loudly, tagging along behind them.

“What’d he do, Evans? Stare up your skirt?” James teased.

“Shut up, Potter,” Lily spat, her green eyes flashing.

“I don’t think I will. What’s your problem with Remus, Snivelly?”

“Nothing.” Severus said dully. “I just wanted to know where he was last night.”

At this Remus flinched like Severus had hit him.

“He doesn’t have to tell you.” Peter said, kneeling beside Remus. Remus immediately stood up, not wanting to seem weak.

“Well, I’m not going to make him, because I already know.”

“Severus!” Lily shouted.

“What do you want, Lily?” he demanded. “I thought you weren’t talking to me!”

“I’m sorry! Severus, you can’t take your anger at me out on Remus, he doesn’t deserve it —“

“Why are you defending him?” Severus demanded.

“Because he didn’t do anything to you, don’t deny it! I’m sorry Severus — look, can we go talk about this somewhere else?”

Severus nodded, frowning. “Okay.”

“Have fun with your girlfriend, Snivellus!” James shouted.

Lily glared at him as the two of them walked away.

“Remus, are you alright?” James asked, looking at Sirius. They didn’t know Remus well, but he looked upset, and the Marauders couldn’t help but feel pity for him.

Remus covered his face with the sleeves of his robe. He ached all over, the numbing affect of Madam Pomfrey’s potions already mostly worn off. He didn’t want these boys — popular, funny, attractive, all the things he could never be — to see him cry. He didn’t want to cry, period. But he couldn’t help it — Severus knew. Severus knew, and if he didn’t know the truth, he knew something, and one odd comment was enough for everyone to find out. He was going to get Remus kicked out of Hogwarts, the only place that had ever accepted him.

“I’m fine,” Remus sniffed. Please go away.

“Remus, we live with you, if you don’t tell us what he said to upset you like this now, we’ll just ask you later.”

“N-no!” Remus said loudly. “I mean…not here.”
“Then…where?”
“I don’t know. There are just…too many people here…it’s so overwhelming —” he shut his eyes tightly, a tear running down his scarred face.
“It’s okay,” Sirius touched Remus’s arm, the sleeve of his robe sliding up a bit to reveal a series of scars. Remus noticed — how could he not? Happy, popular boys should not be carving lines into their wrists.
Remus shook his head vehemently. “No…Merlin, I’m sorry, I can’t…”
“Don’t get all emotional on us now, Remus,” James said jokingly, to break the tension.
“Yeah, wouldn’t want to have to call Professor Dumbledore to sort you out, would we?” Sirius asked, his hand still on Remus’s arm in a show of comfort.
“N-no,” Remus stuttered, his face turning red under his scruffy hair. “Of-course not.”
“Come on, Marauders,” James declared, slinging his arm across Remus’s and Sirius’s shoulders. “I believe it’s time for class.”
Remus laughed, relieved and terrified to be included in a group of Marauders. A group of friends. McGonagall looked through her office window fondly and smiled. She was proud of Remus. She was proud of all of them.
By December, the Marauders were getting restless.
“Merlin’s beard, I want to go home.” James complained, squinting at his Muggle Studies homework.
“This is getting so boring.”
“I wrote that weeks ago! Blimey, James, what’s taking you so long?” Remus exclaimed.
“Nothing. I’ve been busy. Getting detentions. Writing to my parents. Trying to learn hexes so I can make that git Snivellus suffer.” James stretched out on his armchair, making Sirius, who sat beside him, shift uncomfortably.
“James, I swear, you take up twice as much space as I do,” Sirius complained, pushing James away from him on their chair.
“Have you considered not sharing an armchair?” Peter asked.
Sirius and James looked at each other as if the thought had never occurred to either of them and both shook their heads.
“You know, I don’t understand why first and second years can’t go to Hogsmeade. It’s so frustrating — look at that lot. All excited. Glowing, practically. I swear that girl just looked at me with pity in her eyes. Pity!” James exclaimed, watching a group of third years talking about the upcoming trip to Hogsmeade.
“Understandably, we aren’t allowed to go because we’re immature and we’d run off.” Remus said rationally, reading a Muggle book while his tea stirred itself beside him.
“Everyone else gets to go!” Sirius protested. “It’s not fair.”
“We’ll get to go in third year,” Peter said in an attempt to cheer him up. He felt a bit outside of the group, apart, almost.
“But third year is so far away…” James whined, tapping his feet against the floor.
“Don’t get too excited, James, there’s no way in hell my parents will sign the forms anyway.” Sirius shrugged indifferently.
“Let’s not worry about that now, you can always forge their signatures —“
“The paper will probably be charmed to avoid that, knowing Dumbledore,” Sirius rationalized. “Can we talk about something else?”
Remus could tell something was wrong with Sirius — he looked horribly upset. “Sirius, is everything alright?”
“What? Oh, yes, I’m fine.”
“Are you sure?”
“Of course,” Sirius nodded. “You know, my cousins are coming to visit for Christmas. All of them Slytherins, older than we are, right gits, etcetera.”
Sirius rolled his eyes. “I know. My entire family either is or was in Slytherin —“
“And you’re not a bit like them, are you sure you’re not adopted?” James teased.
“No, I’m the spitting image of my brother, and he’s definitely not adopted,” Sirius rolled his eyes.
“He’s starting at Hogwarts in a year, and I may die from the shock if he’s sorted anywhere by Slytherin. My parents adore him, he follows them around like a pining house elf…much like Kreacher does, I must admit.”
“Who’s Kreacher?” Peter asked.
“Our actual house elf. An absolute nutter, I swear, he’s losing his mind more and more each day.”
“What does he do?”
“Follows my mother around like a pet — he worships the ground she walks on, I think he snogs her clothing when she isn’t looking — and Regulus is almost the same way. He worships my parents, both of them, they’re his heroes…sometimes I wish I could be his hero, you know?” His voice broke a little, but he seemed to realize he’d said too much and fell silent.
“I’m sorry,” Remus said softly.
“No, it’s alright. He buys into the blood purifying cock-and-bull story my family is always spouting, besides, it’s not like we were ever close.” This was a lie. They’d been extremely close when they were younger, but recently, Regulus had wanted nothing to do with him.
“I’m sure you can knock some sense into him, Sirius. Besides, once he’s here, you can hex him without getting into too much trouble!” James said with a grin.
Sirius’s face lit up. “Nice one, James.” He leaned over and gave James an exaggerated hug, propping his feet up on James’s thighs. Everything Sirius did was exaggerated, a playact, a game. It came, or at least James thought it must, from a place of uncertainty. Not knowing if he should touch people or not, so he overacted it as a joke to make sure he wasn’t rejected. “Say, Peter, are you going home for the holidays? You don’t talk much about your family.”
“Yeah, that must’ve been it,” Remus nodded quickly, making his head pound.
“Or, you know, the Blast-Ended Skrewts.” James suggested. “But not in this weather.” He gestured vaguely to the snow outside. “I don’t want to go out for Care of Magical Creatures and find the rare Peter icicle formation.”
The Marauders all laughed, and Remus stood up and stretched, starting for bed.

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“Peter shrugged, glancing at the snow falling outside. “My dad isn’t around much, and my mum is kind of overprotective, because I didn’t show any signs of being magical when I was younger… but I have some dogs, so that’s nice. I do miss them.”
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“Do you want some tea?” Peter asked, seeing the grimace Remus tried to pass off as a sneeze.
“No, I’m alright.”
“It’s no trouble, I was going to brew some anyway.” Peter said. “You seemed rather stiff today. Did you pull a muscle in Flying Class?”
“Yeah, that must’ve been it,” Remus nodded quickly, making his head pound.
“Okay. I’ll bring it to you, you can go up to bed if you like.”
“Thanks,” Remus yawned, crawling into his bed and lying stiffly on his back. The cold always made his bones ache, sometimes too much to move in the mornings. Thankfully, James was a morning person and was always dragging him out of bed.
Peter returned from the kitchen and handed Remus a cup of tea. Remus winced silently every time he moved, and Peter watched him silently. He wished he knew a spell to make Remus feel better — he wished he was good at something, wished he could be useful. Instead he was quiet, sipping his tea and eventually falling asleep. James took his teacup from his outstretched hand and set it on the nightstand, tucking the blankets over Peter’s shoulders as the boy curled into a round ball around one of his many teddy bears.

“Sirius, aren’t you going to bed anytime soon?” James asked as he wrapped himself in a blanket. Sirius shook his head. “No.” His voice was oddly choked.
“Did something happen today?” James asked, walking over to Sirius’s bed and sitting down on it next to him.
“No.”
“You look like you’ve been crying.”
“I have a cold. Probably caught it from Remus, he’s gotten sick every month since September —“
“You don’t have to lie to me.”
“James, I’m just going to go to the bathroom, alright?” Sirius stood up. He was shaking a bit, and James noticed upon glancing under his bed that all the letters his parents had sent him throughout the year were opened.
James nodded slowly. “Alright.”
“Don’t look at me like that,” Sirius muttered, brushing past him and sprinting down the hall into the toilets.
James knelt beside his bed, glancing around to see Remus and Peter both sound asleep. He pulled out his trunk and opened it, revealing a silvery cloak — his father’s invisibility cloak. He couldn’t identify what it was, exactly, that made the cloak spring to his mind at that moment. James, however, had been taught to trust his instincts, and slipped the cloak over his head. He dashed out into the hall. He saw Sirius’s stark form disappear around the corner and ran after him. Sirius didn’t stop and walk to the boy’s bathrooms — instead, he walked to the unused girl’s bathroom where Moaning Myrtle made her residence.
Sirius leaned over the sink, his breathing unsteady, and stared at his reflection in the mirror. His hands gripped the side of the sink, and James snuck into the room just before Sirius closed the door. Sirius sat against the closed door and sobbed, tears streaming down his face. James reached out, almost as an instinct, to comfort him. His hand brushed Sirius’s sleeve, and the other boy whirled around to find the bathroom empty, not even the infamous Moaning Myrtle to keep him company. Sirius stood up, taking deep, shaking breaths, and rolled up the sleeve of his left arm.
James crept forward, looking at Sirius’s exposed wrist — he’d never seen it, he realized, all the Marauders changed clothes behind their bed curtains and Sirius had always worn the sleeves of his robes down to his fingers. There were lines of even scars going up his arms, and they didn’t quite look like Remus’s scars, they looked like he’d done them himself. Horrible and dangerous.
Sirius reached underneath the sink, his fingers meeting the familiar edge of a Muggle razor blade. He held it in one shaking hand, between his thumb and index finger. 

Do you think you’re too good for us? Do you think that as a Gryffindor it makes you any different? You’re worse than a mudblood, worse than the worst of blood traitors —

James processed what was happening in front of him just a few moments before it did and reached out, trying to stop Sirius, but it was already too late. Blood was dripping down his wrist and he was running it under scalding water, sobbing all the more loudly.
James covered his mouth with his hand and cried for Sirius, they’d been mates for only four months and he already knew what was probably Sirius’s best kept secret, he wanted to take it back, wanted to make it so it had never happened at all.
Sirius tilted his head back and grimaced in pain, washing off the blade in the rusty sink and balancing it in the spot where the piping met the wall. He tugged his sleeve down, ignoring the blood that instantly soaked through the fabric, and washed his face thoroughly, fighting tears that still stung his eyes.
James had seen too much already. He waited by the door for Sirius to open it, and eventually he did. James brushed past him, racing back to bed, his invisible footsteps echoing on the floor.
Sirius ignored the sound — he felt like he was walking in a trance, barely aware of anything, blood dripping down his arm.
He crawled back into bed, seeing the other three fast asleep, and tucked his knees up to his chest, squeezing his eyes shut to find anything, anything at all, to make all this pain go away.
As soon as his steady breathing filled the room, James stood up and shook Remus awake. “Remus, come on,” he said softly. Remus stood up unsteadily, blinking away sleep. “I need to talk to you. Can you come outside with me?”
Remus nodded, barely awake.
The two of them walked out into the hall, despite Argus Filch and Peeves roaming around just a
“Remus, I saw something today that I… I probably shouldn’t have seen. About Sirius.”
Remus had a sneaking suspicion what it was, and he tried to feign surprise. “What was it? Something about his parents?”
“Well… not exactly.”
“James, calm down,” Remus said, barely able to keep his eyes open from exhaustion. “I know.”
“You know… about…” James mimed drawing a line across his arm. “Sirius?”
Remus nodded.
“How? He didn’t tell you?” James sounded momentarily hurt.
“No. I noticed — I’m surprised you didn’t.”
“I just assumed —”
“That he was okay? With his parents? We all heard those Howlers. We know what kind of things they say to him, how no one in his family even speaks to him anymore, not even Andromeda, and she’s the most like him out of anyone.”
“No, I understand why he does it… I just don’t understand…”
“Why he does it. I get it, James. It seems… like… he should be fine. But he isn’t.”
“I saw him… you know…”
“You can say it, James. Harming himself.” Remus put his hand on James’s shoulder — he wasn’t used to initiating contact with people, so it felt slightly odd.
James’s stomach twisted. “I can’t believe he’d be so stupid…”
“It isn’t stupid. It’s not our business. I’m not sure how you managed to see it, but James, we owe it to him to keep this quiet. It’s his secret.”
“I know it is.” James sighed. “But we both know. What if he… killed himself? It’s not…”
“He won’t. We’ll keep an eye on him.” Remus promised. “Can I please go back to bed? I’m exhausted.”
“Alright,” James said, his thin face serious. “Remus? What if he does it again?”
“He will.” Remus sighed. “But he’ll only shut us out if we try to help.”
“I don’t want him to have to feel this way.”
“Neither do I. But he does, and we can’t fix that.”
“He has to go home to those people in a week. What if we don’t see him again?”
“We’ll write him every day.”
“It won’t help.”
“You live close to him, don’t you?”
“Yes.”
“Tell him he’s welcome at your house. Any time. Make sure he knows that being with you is an option if his family hurts him.”
“He insists that they love him. I don’t see how they can, they just… they don’t talk to him like a person. He’s like their House Elf, almost. Like they’re telling him to punish himself, so he does.”
“I know.” Remus yawned, trying not to move too much to avoid more extreme pain. “Goodnight, James.” Remus limped across the rooms and fell into bed, pulling the covers neatly up to his neck and falling almost instantly asleep.

“Dear Merlin this is boring,” Sirius muttered during History of Magic. “Can we all ask to go to the bathroom and hide in the Gryffindor common room?”
“The Fat Lady would tell on us,” Peter muttered.
“Fine, third floor corridors, then. No one ever goes up there.”
“What about Mrs. Norris? Or Filch?”
“Worth it.” Sirius raised his hand. “Professor Binns, may I please use the toilets?”
“Huh? Oh… yes, I suppose,” Binns launched back into his lecture as Sirius slipped outside, waiting exactly five minutes until James joined him. The newly discovered secret that Sirius wore just beneath his sleeves hung over James’s head.
“Sirius, I want to talk to you about —"
“How glad you are I got you out of that boring lecture?”
“Yes, but…”
“James, who on earth shoved a broomstick up your arse?”
“No one!” James said defensively.
“Come off it, normally you’d be all over this. What’s changed?”
“I need to tell you something.”
“Oh, well, spit it out then, we’ve only got a minute before Remus gets out of class!”
“I have an invisibility cloak.”
“You have a what?”
“My dad gave it to me.”
“Do you just walk around invisibly whenever you please?”
“Yes. You’d be surprised at the things I’ve seen.”
“James, do you understand how wonderful this is? We can use it for so many pranks, it’ll be incredible —” Sirius was too excited to consider the things that James might have seen.
“Not so incredible.”
“Are you joking? Of course it is!”
“No. Because last night I found something out that I didn’t want to know. That I wish I’d never found out.”
“You can get Remus to obliviate it for you.”
“Someone would have to do that for him as well…I told him about it immediately. I didn’t know what else to do…but it turned out he already knew…he’s very clever, you know.”
“I know,” Sirius shook his head, amused. “So what was it that you saw that’s so very clearly distressing you?”
“Nothing.” James said quickly, putting his hands in his pockets.
“You’re a dreadful liar, James, I hope you know that.”
“No, I’m not.”
“Then what is it?”
“Nothing. Merlin, what’s taking Remus and Peter so long?”
Remus slumped out of the classroom, looking pale and shaky as per usual. “Peter’s just behind me. Poor Professor Binns, he doesn’t suspect a thing.”
“He does love to hear himself talk more than he cares who’s listening.” Sirius joked, and James chuckled.
Peter stumbled out of the classroom. “I just had to burst into tears to get sent out of class,” he gasped, wiping his eyes. “Professor Binns was starting to catch on.”
“Really? It took him three people leaving class within five minutes for him to catch on? He’s quicker than usual. Must be a good day in ghost world.” Sirius raised his eyebrows. Peter burst out laughing.
“Alright, alright, let’s go before we get caught.” James said, and the four of them dashed up the revolving staircase to the third floor and ducked into an empty classroom. They all sat on abandoned, dusty desks, planning their first prank.
“I think it has to be something amazing. Incredible! Something to set the standard,” James said, speaking fast as he often did when he was excited.
“Like…hexing the Slytherin’s food so they can only eat frog eggs for a week?” Peter asked, his eyes lighting up with excitement.
“No, we’d get detention for that,” Remus shrugged. “I do have a reputation to uphold.” It was eerily like what Sirius’s parents often said to him, and Sirius flinched involuntarily.
“Alright, alright…filling the lake with bubbles, something harmless.” Peter suggested.
“Merlin, Peter, any Muggle could do that,” Sirius rolled his eyes. “It has to be perfect. Something people will remember us by over the holidays.”
“Alright…flooding the Great Hall.” James suggested.
“Wow, that’s not obvious. No, more subtle. But grand. Bonus points if Snivellus and Evans suffer for it. Dung bombs in the Slytherin common room?”
“Do we know where the Slytherin common room is?” Remus asked, frowning.
“No. But James could find it.”
“Why James?”
Sirius looked at James with wide eyes. “Can I tell them? Or should you?”
James rolled his eyes. “Alright, Sirius, go ahead.”
Sirius leapt forward. “Okay, this may come as a huge shock to you but,” Sirius pressed a dramatic hand against his chest and gasped. “James has an invisibility cloak.”
“What?” Remus feigned surprise. “No!”
“Why do I feel like everyone else knew about this?” Peter frowned, feeling the familiar pang of inferiority to his much cooler friends. It had been, perhaps, his previous friendship with Remus that had truly allowed him into the group. He was certain that otherwise James and Sirius would’ve thought him useless.
Sirius put a hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Because we did.”
“For how long?”
“Oh. Remus has known for a day, Sirius has known for maybe twenty minutes,” James sighed.
“Don’t feel bad. I usually only use it when you’re all asleep.”
Peter stuck his rather pointed nose up in the air. “I shouldn’t even be talking to you. I’m so hurt and offended that you didn’t tell me this before —”
“Come off it, Peter —”
“I can’t believe I’m still in this room with you —”
“Don’t be so dramatic —”
“How could you do this to me?”
James sighed and scooped Peter up like a baby, tickling his ribs until he kicked James in the ear.
“Wizard’s chess?” James suggested, pulling out his grandfather’s set. “Remus, come on, join me.”
“Not Wizard’s chess without Butterbeer, is it?” Sirius asked, pulling a case from under his bed.
“Where’d you get that?” Peter asked, frowning.
“Nicked it from a prefect.” Sirius said casually, opening a bottle and handing it to Remus.
“What’s in this?” Remus asked, coughing.
“Knight to E4.” Remus said, with a devious smirk. “Check.”
“Bugger!” James exclaimed.
“Checkmate.” Remus said, with an innocent grin.
James’s chess pieces were swept off the board, and all four of them howled with laughter.
“Your go, Peter, Sirius.”
Peter politely stifled a burp behind his hand.
“Disgusting, you’re disgusting, Peter,” Sirius teased, letting out a rather loud belch of his own.
“Don’t be ashamed. Flaunt it. I dare you to burp louder than I can!”
Peter blushed, opened his mouth, and belched loudly enough to wake the Gryffindors sleeping upstairs.
“Wow, mate, keep it to yourself,” Sirius said, elbowing him in the ribs.
“But — but you just said —”
“I’ve absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. Do you know what he’s talking about, James?”
“No. No idea whatsoever.”
“I —” Peter sighed, smiling despite himself. “Fine.”

The prank that followed the very next day went down in Hogwarts history as the First Marauders
Prank of 1971, renowned by staff and students alike for its complete stupidity. It involved:
1. A toad. A rather large one, expanded via each Marauder pointing their wands at it in turn and saying, “engorgio.” The toad was roughly the size of a large cat, and had been placed strategically in Severus Snape’s bed. Snape had seemed, to his dorm mates, almost to have expected it, and shrunk the toad with hardly a reaction.
2. The mysterious disappearance of all four Marauders for twenty four hours. Remus was gone for the last twelve because it was the night of the full moon, but that was irrelevant to the prank. The important part was that no one ever found out how all these things were connected, or who they were connected to — although everyone had their suspicions.
They were all caught, and received detentions scrubbing the Dungeons for a month. Remus and Peter were livid, while James and Sirius laughed about it for hours.

Three Weeks Later
“James!”
“Sirius!”
The two of them ran towards each other on the train, embracing tightly (mostly to make everyone around them feel mildly uncomfortable.)
Remus hugged Peter by picking the much shorter boy up; unlike James and Sirius, who were acting like a long-separated married couple for show, Remus’s hug was entirely genuine and full of affection. After setting Peter safely back on the ground, he ran and tackled James and Sirius together — all of them had grown over their holidays, but Remus was still the tallest by far and was able to hug both of them at the same time. His wide smile lit up his entire face, and while he sported a few fresh scars across his face and neck from three weeks before, he seemed happier than the others had ever seen him.
They all sat, laughing and smiling, in James and Sirius’s favorite compartment (this time without Severus and Lily, who were further up the train, and avoiding the Marauders at all costs.)
“Okay, okay, before we go around hexing people,” Remus was breathless from excitement. “How were your holidays?”
“Wonderful!” James exclaimed. “They bought me a new owl, you know. She’s rather nice, I’ve named her Professor McGonagall.”
“You named your owl after McGonagall?” Sirius snorted. He, on the other hand, seemed worse off than when they’d left for holidays. Much worse. “McGonagall! McGonagall, come here! Bring me my letters, McGonagall!”
James elbowed him in the ribs, and Sirius hid a grimace. He still had deep purple bruises from over the holidays that he would never mention to anyone.
“You know, I think my parents get rather lonely sometimes, I got the impression all they do is sit and mourn my absence all day.” James wrapped his Gryffindor scarf tightly around his neck. “But I’m sure that’s what you three did for the entire holiday as well.”
They all laughed.
“Sirius, what about you?” James asked. From the grave, hollow expression on Sirius’s face, his holidays hadn’t been as happy as they’d all hoped.
“Well, my cousins stayed with us for Christmas, so that was nice. My cousin Andromeda really is lovely. She and her sisters are a few years above us.” From the stiff way Sirius moved as he talked, James could tell something else had happened.
“How were your parents?” Remus asked.
“They were fine. I kept my mouth shut until they started saying half-bloods were disgusting, and I had to argue because of Remus, of course —“
“You didn’t have to,” Remus said, self loathing coloring his voice.
“Yeah I did, they were wrong, so I told them about you being one of my best friends…and my mum kinda lost it.” Sirius tugged the sleeves of his jumper down. “Remus? You seem well.”
“Oh, er, yes, my holiday was fantastic — we had a little extra money for presents and things, so we
bought some new books and fixed up the house a bit.” Remus said quickly.
“How fascinating,” James teased.
“What? The bathroom wall was practically collapsed. We finally got someone from the Ministry to come in and fix it.”
“That’s wonderful, Remus,” Peter said honestly.
“Peter, I trust you had a good holiday?” James said.
“Oh, of course. Always. Got some new robes —
“Since all the sweets you’ve been eating made you outgrow your old ones?” Sirius joked.
Peter forced a laugh, looking down at his slightly pudgy stomach and wondering if he’d gained weight over the holidays. “No, it was the glitter you covered the sleeves in while I was packing my suitcase. And James, I’m sure it was your idea, so don’t go blaming it on Remus.”
“But,” Remus said, wheezing with laughter. “It was my idea. James didn’t even know about it. I did it to his shoes as well.”
“That’s what that was? I thought it was a stray Potions ingredient.”
“Nice one,” Sirius said, and Remus chuckled proudly.
“Can we go hex Snivellus now? I’m going into hexing withdrawal, and I read about some really good ones over the holidays!” James exclaimed.
Remus rolled his eyes. “Fine.”
“I can’t wait until I’m of age and I can hex Kreacher and Regulus.” Sirius sighed. “Maybe I’ll risk a warning from the Ministry, just to do it once…”
“What if you got kicked out of Hogwarts?” Peter protested.
“Depending on the hex, it might be worth it.” Sirius said, fixing his hair, which was nearly down to his shoulders by now. “Anyway, what are you planning for Snivellus?”
“I have some ideas, but I think I’ll save them for better-deserved situations. Peter, what about you? Any ideas?” James replied.
Peter blushed, adjusting his tie. “Erm…perhaps…we could…I don’t know, I can’t think under pressure — give me a minute.”
“But Peter,” Sirius said with a smirk. “Snivellus is walking down the corridor at this very moment.”
“Merlin! Er — you know, I feel like his nose is in need of some improvement. Perhaps a shrinking charm would do the trick?”
“Peter, you’re brilliant! Remus? The honors?” Remus pulled out his wand and whispered the incantation, and all of a sudden Severus had the strange feeling that his nose was shrinking upon his face. He clutched at it, and realized he’d walked past the Marauders — “Lily!” he yelled, sure she would know how to reverse it.
Lily ran over and led him back to their compartment, walking directly into the Marauders’ compartment with blazing fury on her face.
“He hadn’t done anything to you, you insufferable prats,” she spat, clenching her fists so she wouldn’t slap James across the face.
“Oooh, she’s angry,” Sirius commented.
Lily pulled out her wand and said, very clearly, “Expulso.”
James’ shoes, which he’d set on the ground very much in the middle of the compartment, exploded with enough force to force the four of them backwards, while Lily whirled on her heel, back to Severus and his rapidly shrinking nose.
“That’s quite a shame, I liked those shoes,” James said, seemingly unconcerned. “I hope we learn how to deflect spells this term, I would’ve liked to see her face.”
“She could’ve killed us —” Peter sputtered.
“Come off it, Peter, Evans, while a prissy stuck up mudblood, is still —” Sirius said casually.
“Sirius!” Remus exclaimed.
“What?”
“You just said — Lily —“
“What, mudblood —“
“Is a dreadful word, Sirius, horrible!” James said, going red in the face.
“I thought it was just —” Sirius frowned. “Another word for Muggle-born, I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“That’s the only way you can mean it, Sirius, what we’re doing is hexing for laughs, not attacking people for who their parents are —” Remus said.

“I didn’t know —” Sirius looked down, suddenly feeling ashamed. “I’m sorry I said that, I’m used to hearing it so often —”

“It’s alright, Sirius, we know you didn’t mean to say it,” Peter said comfortingly.
Sirius sighed and glanced out the window, but didn't say another word.
The Lies Remus Told

Chapter Summary

Remus has a difficult time hiding his lycanthropy from his friends, especially when they try to find out the truth themselves.

“I have so much homework,” Peter whined, lying sideways in his chair.
“Cheer up, Peter, we’ll be second years in a few months. Then you’ll have even more!” James said cheerfully, ruffling his hair.
“Do you want help, Peter?” Remus asked Peter kindly, rolling his eyes at James.
“Yeah, you know much about Astronomy?”
“I take the class.”
“But do you use the time to learn or to sleep, is the question?” Peter asked, waggling his eyebrows. Remus shoved him affectionately to the other side of his chair. “I do try to pay attention on occasion.”
“Do you?” Peter asked, the picture of innocence.
“Yes. Phases of the moon, then?” The very words made Remus feel as if his chest was being constricted by a very large snake.
“Mm-hm. Have you done it yet?” Remus held up a neatly rolled piece of parchment and tossed it over to Peter, who copied it in his large, messy handwriting.
“Loony Loopy Lupin, you’re looking tired this morning,” James yawned.
Sirius chuckled. “Very tired. Up all night knitting?”
All four of the Marauders were currently wearing sweaters courtesy of Remus himself, which they had the decency to look embarrassed about.
“No.” Remus grumbled. “I slept all night.” This was a complete lie. He had tossed and turned for hours before falling into a nightmare filled sleep which had left him exhausted. “Can you bring me some breakfast?”
“Headache?” Peter guessed.
“Migraine,” Remus rubbed his temples. “I get them sometimes.”
“Alright, I’ll bring up some food, I can probably get something from Madam Pomfrey if I ask very politely —” James said.
“No, it’s fine, really.”
“Are you sure? You’re looking green, maybe we should take you to the hospital wing.” Peter suggested.
“Absolutely not.” Remus groaned.
“You’ve gotten quite a lot of headaches this year.” James said, narrowing his eyes.
“I’m prone to migraines,” Remus said, almost as a question.
“Alright, alright. We’ll go. Feel better.” James said gently, touching Remus’s arm.

“Hey, Remus, Peter! Sirius and I have Astronomy detention, do you mind if we catch up with you later?” James asked after classes ended.
“No, go ahead,” Remus said. “I’m going to take a shower and see if my headache goes away.”
“Okay. I have to study for Astronomy.” Peter muttered.
“Why? Can’t you just make things up like I do?” Sirius asked.
“Yeah, it’s ridiculous. I feel like I’m not learning anything.”
“You hate learning.” James reminded him.
“No. I hate homework. What I hate more is feeling like I’m doing work for nothing.”
“Well, she must be teaching you something if you have a test.”
“I wish,” Peter said miserably. “The test is on interpreting star patterns.”
“God, that sounds boring.” Sirius said. “I haven’t studied for a second. Neither has Remus, for that matter, he’s been asleep all week!”
“I’m not —” Remus yawned. “Always tired.”
“Remus, I’m pretty sure you fell asleep on the staircase yesterday,” Sirius patted his shoulder. “While walking.”
Remus shrugged weakly, trying to keep his balance. He leaned against the wall casually as if he was able to stand on his own, but he was praying he wouldn’t have to move.
“Madam Pomfrey could probably give you something for… James, what’s it called… that thing where you’re tired all the time?” Peter asked.
“Chronic fatigue. My mum has it.” James said indifferently. “And yeah, she’s got some sort of disgusting looking potion for it, I’m sure.”
“Cheer up, Remus,” Sirius said. “You’ll feel better in the morning.”
“Well, I doubt that,” Remus muttered under his breath. He could feel the full moon tearing apart his bones already.
“Why?”
“Oh, I have to visit my mum again tonight. It’s always rather depressing, you know.” Remus couldn’t find the energy to lie convincingly. “I’m going to go take that shower now.” He slumped away, his hands in his pockets, his eyelids heavy.
“You think he’ll be alright, don’t you?” James asked.
Sirius nodded. “Y’know, he’ll be fine. Come on, we’re going to miss our detention.”
They left Peter standing alone in the corridor, and he sighed, walking back to their dormitory.
“Cornish Pixies,” he said with a sigh.
“Doing alright, dear?” The Fat Lady asked.
“Hm? Oh, yes. Just thinking.”
“How so?”
“My friends all seem different since we got back from holidays. I didn’t notice it at first, but now that it’s almost Easter holidays it’s really quite obvious.”
“About?”
“Sirius…I don’t know exactly what his parents do…but they sent him Howlers at the beginning of the year, and sometimes they send him letters and he always look so sad…and Remus is always tired and ill…and James is hiding something, and I don’t know exactly what it is, but I can tell it bothers him a lot. I feel like they don’t tell me anything. I’m… I’m not as good as them, am I?”
“I’m sorry, dear,” the Fat Lady clucked sympathetically.
“Yeah.”
She swung aside and he climbed through the hole where her portrait had been, walking up to his dormitory and collapsing in his bed.
Peter was lying on his bed, writing a letter to his parents for almost an hour before he started to question where Remus was, and he walked down the hall to the dormitory showers.
“Remus?” he called curiously. He could hear water running, and only one shower was occupied, it had to be Remus — but no response. “Hey, Remus, are you in here?”
Silence. He knocked on the stall door.
“Remus, come on, I just wanted to make sure you were alright… you’re not crying, are you? If there’s anything wrong, you can tell me about it… Remus?”
Peter clambered up the door hinges with his toes balanced on the edges and peered over the top. Remus lay on the stall floor, fully clothed, unconscious. Peter jumped down and climbed under the door.
“Remus!” he tapped Remus’s face, trying to wake him. “Remus, come on, wake up —“
Remus blinked his eyes open gingerly, wincing at the bright lights of the bathroom. “P-p-Peter?” He asked, dazed.

“Merlin, Remus, I thought you were dead,” Peter exhaled in relief.

“No, I’m alright…what time is it?”

“Half four, why?”

“Alright, that’s fine…” Remus nodded, his eyes falling shut again. “No, Remus, stay awake… I’m going to take you to the hospital wing —”

Remus attempted to sit up, his head pounding. “Peter, I don’t need to —”

“Oh, then tell me what happened.”

“Nothing,” Remus squeezed his eyes shut. “I mean, I was going to shower, so I walked in here and I turned the water on…and that’s all I remember. I must’ve fallen or something.”

“Are you hurt? You must have hit your head…”

“Yeah, er, I reckon that must’ve been it.” Remus lied. “Stay here. I’ll go fetch Madam Pomfrey.”

Remus nodded weakly, his head feeling like a million bricks were piled inside it. He reached up to switch off the water and shut his eyes again.

He woke up in the hospital wing less than an hour later, the other Marauders sitting around him.

“Rise and shine, princess,” James said, raising his eyebrows.

Remus chuckled. “I’m alright, I have mountains of homework, I think I can probably go.”

He started to stand up, and the world tilted, his vision going dark. He sat down on the bed. “Er…perhaps not. You should all go, though, you’ll miss dinner.”

“We don’t mind,” Sirius said earnestly.

“No, really…I’m quite tired.” Remus looked over at Madam Pomfrey, who instantly understood. “Boys, he’s right. You should go.”

Okay. We’ll be back after dinner.”

“I’ll be with my mum by then. I’ll see you tomorrow, though?”

“Wait, you’re still going?” James asked. “You could’ve died!”

“I’m fine, James,” Remus said, with a weak and unconvincing smile. “Go.”

The Marauders all looked at each other for a moment before Peter, James, and Sirius walked away, leaving Remus alone.

“Remus, what really happened? And I know you didn’t fall, because you weren’t injured in the slightest.” Madam Pomfrey folded her arms.

“I’ve been really tired…and everything hurts…and this is going to be the worst one ever, I can feel it. I just…I got so dizzy all of a sudden, and I had to sit down…and then I woke up on the ground and Peter was telling me he was going to go fetch you…and my head won’t stop hurting —”

“Remus,” Madam Pomfrey said softly. “You’re going to be alright.”

“If I have to spend more than a day in the hospital wing everyone’s going to find out — and Professor Dumbledore will have to kick me out of school…”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Madam Pomfrey said softly.

“They’re the only friends I’ve ever had, you know,” Remus said. “ Probably the only ones I ever will have.”

“By the time you’re an adult, there will be a cure. I’m certain of it.”

“That’s…that’s hundreds of full moons…I don’t want to do this anymore, I just want to stop being tired and sore and just be able to function like a normal person…” Remus said.

“You can’t go around feeling sorry for yourself. This is how your life turned out, whether it’s what you wanted or not.” Madam Pomfrey said.

It isn’t fair, Remus wanted to scream. No one else my age has to go through this. I was five years old, I didn’t deserve it, my parents didn’t deserve it…it’s not fair. He sighed, trying to steady his breathing. “The moon’s going to come up soon,” Madam Pomfrey said briskly. “I’ll make any necessary excuses for you. If you have to spend a week in the hospital wing, you actually did get injured when you ‘slipped’ in the shower, and you have a nasty concussion. Alright?”
Remus nodded. “Thank you.”
“It’s no bother,” she said, smiling fondly at him. “Should we go?”
Remus sighed. “Alright.”
She held his arm, supporting him on their way through one of the many secret passages through the school and out into the winter air. She froze the Whomping Willow with a wave of her wand, and this time followed Remus into the tunnel, helping him sit down on the bed inside the Shrieking Shack. “Listen to me,” she sat down beside him and looked him square in the face. “You’re alright. You’re alright now, and you’ll be alright tomorrow morning, no matter what happens tonight. And I saw the way those boys looked at you. They’re not going to leave you no matter what you do or how dangerous you think you are.”
Remus nodded, tears welling up in his eyes, and he threw his thin arms around her despite the aching in his joints.
“Thank you,” he said, and she nodded, walking away and leaving him alone.
He lay on the bed, watching the dying light hit the wooden planks of the shack through holes in the roof, and sighed, feeling a tightening in his throat, in his hands, in his ribs.
It started in his eyes, in his mind, like it always did. He felt his thoughts rush away from him, replaced with words that weren’t his own. Kill. Eat. Hungry. His eyes turned from soft and green to deep hazel and blank. This was the most terrifying part, when he started to lose himself. His nails turned to claws, his bones adjusting to fit the monster that had woken from its slumber.
He didn’t remember anything else.

James, Sirius, and Peter all sat on James’s bed, helping Peter with Astronomy. “I’m going to fail,” Peter moaned.
“No you’re not.”
“You’re right, actually, you’re going to fail, because you haven’t bothered to study.” Peter said, flopping down on his bed. “I don’t know any of this.”
“Yeah, you do,” Sirius insisted. “Come on, sit up, you just have to study a bit more.”
“Study? Yes. Sit up?” Peter rolled over onto his stomach and lifted his head to look at the other two.
“Debatable.”
They all laughed.
“No, Siriusly, you need to go over this again.” Sirius smiled proudly.
Peter giggled. “I’m aiming for a good solid Acceptable.”
“I’m thinking Troll. At best.” James teased.
“Don’t be rude!” Peter scolded, staring at the diagram in front of him. “This is the, er…moon, and it represents…dark times being cast away…”
“That’s cheerful,” Sirius remarked. “Speaking of dark times, did Remus seem…more anxious than usual? I mean, he’s been pretty…well…nervous around nearly everyone he speaks to…but today…”
“I think he has some sort of chronic illness, honestly,” James said. “I mean, he’s constantly tired and in pain — more than he lets on, I’d imagine — there has to be something seriously wrong with him —”
“Siriusly?” Sirius asked.
“That’s the second time you’ve made that joke in two minutes.” Peter complained.
“I feel like we’ve reached a point in our friendship where I’m comfortable telling jokes about my name,” Sirius said, raising his eyebrows.
“Oh, sure, now we’ve reached that point, as if I haven’t known whenever you’re making ‘sirius’ puns in your head all year. I know that smirk very well, Sirius Black.”
Sirius flinched and itched his wrist over the fresh scars, hating the reminder of his family.
“Sorry. That was a very…” James smirked. “Sirius mistake.”
Sirius groaned loudly and leaned back on the bed next to Peter. “This bloke is going to kill me one of these days.”
“You and me both.” Peter complained, lazily levitating his cup and guiding it to the nightstand.
“You reckon Remus is going to be alright?” Sirius asked, propping himself up on his elbows. He’d
remembered, as he glanced over at Remus’s bed, that something was wrong. They were all going home for Easter holidays in a few days. Sirius was going to take the opportunity to use his family’s library and read about what could possibly be wrong with their friend.

“I reckon we ought to take a trip under my invisibility cloak and do a little research,” James said with a smirk and a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Really?” Peter asked.

“Why not?” James jumped off the bed and picked up his cloak, spreading it wide behind him like a pair of wings. “Come on, it’s now or never! One time offer!”

Sirius and Peter stood up and joined James under the cloak, sneaking down to the library with a lantern held out into the air.

They shut the library door behind them and sat down at a table.

“Wow, James, this must be your first time in the library,” Sirius teased in a whisper.

James elbowed him under the cloak. “Shut it. Come on, the Magical Maladies section has got to be here somewhere…” the three of them stood extremely close together, pressed shoulder to shoulder — well, James’s shoulder against Peter’s head, Peter’s neck against Sirius’s shoulder — and Peter darted out from underneath the cloak.

“It’s over here!” he hissed in a whisper. James folded up the invisibility cloak and stuffed it in the pocket of his pajama shirt in an awkward, messy ball.

They split up, searching the shelves for something that might be wrong with Remus — or his mother, but something told all of them that his mother wasn’t as ill as they’d been told.

“Remus’s symptoms don’t fit any of these.” James groaned after an hour or so of reading.

“I know.” Peter sat down and leaned against a bookshelf, a haphazard pile of books next to him. “It’s probably something really obscure. Maybe he doesn’t even know he has it.”

“No, he definitely knows. That’s where he probably sneaks off to every month — to get treatment for his mysterious illness.” Sirius sighed. “Why would he lie to us about it?”

“Maybe it’s something embarrassing,” James suggested. “Like growing worms out of his nipples.”

“Gross!” Peter hit James in the leg with a book.

“Or his —“

“Shut up.” Peter covered his eyes with his hands. “I’ll never be able to look at Remus the same way after this. He’s the ‘worms out of uncomfortable places’ bloke now. Our friendship has come to an end.”

“Oh, Peter, pull yourself together.” Sirius teased.

“You know, it might be…like…something deadly. Like something that will eventually kill him, which explains why he didn’t talk to anyone earlier this year. He didn’t want to burden them.” James said, closing a book slowly.

“Do you reckon we should ask him about it? He can’t deny there’s anything wrong, not after what happened earlier.” Peter asked.

“I don’t want to make him lie to us.” Sirius sighed.

“Why would you think he’d lie to us?” James asked.

“James, you’re really quite innocent sometimes,” Sirius looked at him with false pity. “Remus is going to lie to us because he doesn’t want us to know what’s wrong with him.”

“But if he knew we wouldn’t hate him or judge him for it — I don’t see why we wouldn’t be able to successfully ask him.”

“James, you just don’t understand, do you?” Peter asked. “Remus is afraid we’re going to leave him. Telling him we won’t doesn’t make it any better.”

“But we would never —“

“Never? What if he killed someone? What if he betrayed one of your secrets to the entire school? Would you leave him then? Friendship isn’t unconditional. Remus knows that. He’ll never risk it.” Sirius said, putting a hand on James’s shoulder.

“He doesn’t have to risk it. Whatever’s wrong with him, we’ll help him, we’ll do anything —“

“James! Not everyone is like you! Not everyone would die for their friends.” Sirius sighed, slumping down next to Peter.
“I’d like to think they would.”
“People don’t die for their friends unless those friends know things about them that absolutely must be kept quiet. That’s how it is. That’s how it works.”
“That’s how your family works, and it’s not the picture of functional.” James said defensively.
Sirius’s hands bunched into fists.
“If you don’t think I would die for any one of my family members —“
“I don’t,” James said loudly. A light turned around the hallway.
“Bloody —” Sirius swore. “It’s Filch. Cloak?”
James threw the cloak over all three of them, and Filch swung his lantern through the library, light falling over the space where 3/4 of the Marauders sat, hidden under the cloak.
Mrs. Norris fixed her lamplike eyes on the exact spot they sat together, trying not to breathe. She turned away with a loud meow.
“You don’t think she saw us, do you?” Peter whispered as Filch’s footsteps faded.
“How could she have? we’re invisible!” James exclaimed, standing up. The cloak fell to the ground in a silvery pile.
“We should go,” Peter said.
Sirius and James followed him out of the library and back to their dormitory, where they all went to sleep nearly immediately despite Remus’s empty bed taunting them, laughing.

You don’t know anything more than you did an hour ago.
You’ll never find out.
Remus’s secret remained undiscovered that night. And many, many nights afterwards.

Madam Pomfrey wrapped Remus in a blanket — he’d gotten almost too tall for her to carry him, but not quite.
“Remus John Lupin, wake up, this instant!” Madam Pomfrey shook his bruised shoulders. “Remus, come on, stay with us.”
His heartbeat fluttered weakly underneath her trained fingers. This was a twelve year old boy, a twelve year old werewolf who’d cried to her about how scared he was the night before, and she’d left him alone. As a long-numbed-to-loss Healer, Madam Pomfrey felt a detached ache, like a phantom limb.
Madam Pomfrey took a deep breath and pulled out her wand. “Episkey,” she said clearly, and the dislocated bones in Remus’s hand popped back into place.
She leaned down over his leg, which seemed to be broken in several places, and took a deep breath. “Ferula.” Bandages and a splint wrapped around his leg.
She leaned over him and said softly, “vulnera sanentur;” the gash across his face closed up and faded to a thin white scar. “Vulnera sanentur;” he had claw marks covering nearly his entire body, and was surrounded by a growing puddle of blood. “Vulnera sanentur. Vulnera sanentur.” “Tergeo,” she said, and the dried blood covering Remus’s skin disappeared.
He opened his eyes, seeing Madam Pomfrey bent over him, and sighed with relief.
“Wait…” he said, looking around. “We’re still in the Shrieking Shack…”
“Don’t worry, Remus. You were too injured for me to move you, so I had to do most of your healing here.”
“I have a History of Magic essay due today —“ he glanced at his motionless, outstretched hand and wiggled each finger individually. “I’ll be able to go to class by the time lunch is over, won’t I?”
She shook her head regretfully, helping him to his feet. He leaned most of his weight on her as they walked back to the castle.
“That was worse than before, wasn’t it?” Remus asked as she set to work healing the large bump on the back of his head.
Madam Pomfrey nodded. “Yes. It was.”
“I feel really —“ his face went slightly green, and Madam Pomfrey picked up the bin as he retched up the contents of his stomach.
“It’s quite alright. It was a strenuous transformation.” She said briskly, waving her wand to clean out
“Thank you,” Remus said, his hands shaking. “For doing all this.”
“It’s my job. You’re my patient. And besides, you have six more years here at Hogwarts, you really
don’t think I’ll be seeing you again?”
“I’m hoping I’ll get more used to it with time.”
Madam Pomfrey looked at him pityingly. “I don’t think it’s something you get used to. I think it’s
something you live with. You should go to sleep before the medicine kicks in.”
She closed the curtains around his bed, and he fell asleep staring up at the ceiling and praying that
this would never happen again.

“I’m getting worried,” Lily Evans whispered in her friend Mary’s ear at lunch. “You know Remus?
Friend of the biggest idiots at the school? He’s been gone for nearly two days.”
“Have you checked the hospital wing?”
“I’ll check during lunch. His friends seem entirely unconcerned, though, so I may be missing
something.”
“As far as I’m aware, they’re entirely unconcerned with everything.”
Lily laughed. “They’re the best friends I’ve ever seen, if they didn’t know where he was they’d be
panicking.”
“Just ask them.”
“They’ll hex me.”
“No they won’t.” Mary grinned.
“I’ll just ask Sev, he probably knows.”
“Your…Slytherin…friend?” Mary pulled a face.
“Yes, Mary, my Slytherin friend. You don’t need to look so disgusted. Sev is the best bloke I know.”
“Alright, alright,” Mary frowned in a way that clearly showed her disapproval. “Fine. Go talk to
him.”
Lily stood up and walked over to the Slytherin table, pulling Severus by the hand. She studiously
ignored the catcalls from the Slytherin table.
“Sev, have you seen Remus?”
“Oh. Do you know where he is?”
“Well, I have an idea,” Severus smirked. “But those prats would probably hex me half to death if I
told you. So no, I haven’t the faintest.” He frowned bitterly. She probably wouldn’t have even talked
to him if she didn’t need to know where Lupin was. They’d barely spoken since one of Severus’s
friends had hexed Mary MacDonald and Lily had been so furious that she’d refused to speak to any
Slytherin until Severus forced them to apologize.
“Oh.” Lily looked disappointed. “Okay.”
The Boy Behind The Gate

Chapter Summary

The Marauders are getting suspicious of Remus. By the time the boys go home for Easter Holidays, James is struggling not to admit to Sirius what he knows. Meanwhile Sirius is having trouble at home.

Remus was back in the dormitory in two days, looking worse than they’d ever seen him.

“Merlin’s beard, what happened?” James asked, his eyes wide.

“I fell,” Remus said wearily.

“Over a cliff?” Peter asked incredulously.

“No.”

“Where from?”

“The roof of my house. I was helping my dad patch it up and I slipped. It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Were you in the Hospital Wing all this time?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell us?” Peter asked indignantly. “We would’ve visited you!”

“We did take notes for you, though.” All three of them dropped their notebooks for each class on the foot of Remus’s bed.

“Really?” Remus smiled painfully. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sirius said, as though they would’ve done it for anyone. “You did miss quite the show, Snivellus and Evans were out by the lake and Peter hexed their feet to be stuck together all day. It was magnificent.”

Remus laughed, although it hurt his chest. “Nice one, Peter.”

Peter beamed.

“I think,” James said in the common room that evening. “We should pull another prank.”

“What, like last term? We nearly got caught.” Peter asked.

“Please, only McMinnie knew —” James protested.

“McGonagall?”

“Yeah, her name’s Minerva, I heard Dumbledore call her that once —”

“You’re lucky we’re good at Transfiguration — except for Peter of course, no offense — or she’d not put up with us,” Sirius said.

“She’d not, Sirius, you’re so posh —”

“Am not!” Sirius protested.

“Yeah, you are, mate,” Remus said.

Sirius sighed. “Alright, alright. How do you feel about filling up the dormitories with frogs?”

“No, we had a toad last time, we can’t let that become a tradition,” James leaned his head against the wall.

“You have a point. Perhaps torturing Snivellus and his idiot friends is in order?”

“Maybe we should stop planning and let it happen,” Peter suggested.

“But planning is all the fun, even if we end up with whatever’s most convenient.” James argued.

“But literally everyone in the common room knows now,” Sirius protested, brushing his hair out of his face.

“Most likely,” Remus shrugged.

“We do,” a seventh year boy told them as he walked upstairs to his dormitory. “Nice work with the
last one, by the way. It was so obvious, in fact, that none of us were even questioned.”

They all beamed innocently. “What last one?”

The boy shook his head and disappeared around the corner.

They headed upstairs, stripping off their robes and getting into their pajamas. Remus took his off as well without thinking. While Sirius remained hidden behind curtains and Peter covered his chest with a blanket, Remus, in his tired daze, had forgotten that he always, without fail, changed with the curtains on his bed closed.

“Remus!” Peter exclaimed.

“What?” Remus looked down at the pink and white scars and bruises that covered his chest and shoulders. “Oh.” He sat down, wrapping a blanket around himself. “Blimey, um, you weren’t supposed to see — I’m sorry —“ he was on the verge of tears. “I just forgot, you know — and I’ve never shown you because — er…”

“It’s alright.” Peter said softly.

“Merlin, no it’s not.” Remus said, pulling his hair in frustration. “I’m just going to go to bed. Let’s pretend this never happened.”

“Alright, mate,” James said softly. Remus burrowed under the covers of his bed, tears streaming down his face.

“Alright.” James threw a paper airplane at Sirius, sitting a few seats behind him.

Sirius reached into the pockets of his robes, nodding at Peter, and they each threw two dung bombs into the center of their History of Magic class room.

A cloud of something dark and foul smelling covered the class, and the Marauders all snuck out of the room, covering their noses, laughing hysterically.

“Okay, okay, we probably have two minutes before —“ Remus panted, still limping slightly. Madam Pomfrey’s magic had done a fair enough job, but it’d still been quite the injury.

The Marauders ran up to the Gryffindor dormitories, hiding under the invisibility cloak together.

“I wish we had more money for dungbombs,” James sighed. “We could’ve done the entire floor.”

“Next time,” Sirius said, shaking out his hair like a dog.

“Are your parents going to make you cut your hair?”

“More like making me move out,” Sirius shrugged.

Remus gave James a meaningful look.

James coughed. “Sirius, if things get bad at home…”

“Nothing’s bad at home, James, lots of people’s parents are like this,” Sirius insisted, his dark eyes flashing.

“If it does, Sirius, you’re welcome at my house. Any time. You can use the Floo network if you want, we’re registered.”

“Alright, alright, what’s your address, if it’ll make you shut up?” Sirius asked.

James grinned and scribbled it down on a piece of paper with his oldest quill, which was missing large patches of feathers. “I expect you to drop by at least once. Remus and Peter as well, mind you.”

“One Week Later

“James! Mrs. Potter! Mr. Potter!” Sirius rattled the gates of their house, standing outside in the rain with tears streaming down his face. “James, please let me in!”

The windows of the house were dark, but a light turned on and Mrs. Potter opened the door, her glasses crooked on the end of her nose. She rubbed her eyes and blinked at him in a confusion which he mistook for anger.

“I’m — I’m sorry, I’m so s-sorry,” Sirius sobbed, covering his face with his hands.

Mrs. Potter knelt down, smoothing back his hair like she would’ve done for James.

“It’s Sirius, isn’t it? Sirius Black.”

Sirius nodded, shaking. She took his hand gently and pulled him into the house, wrapping a blanket around his shaking shoulders and showing him to a large, comfortable sofa.
“I’ll make you a cup of tea, dear, and then you’ll tell me what’s happened, alright?”

Sirius stared off into the dark and nodded slowly. He felt detached from his own body, from his own life, and thought about how easy it would have been to just fall asleep and never wake up.

Mrs. Potter handed him a teacup and he took a deep breath, sipping it slowly.

“I’m just going to get my husband. You’ll be okay here by yourself for just a moment?”

Sirius was silent — she rubbed his back comforting as she walked past him and it made him flinch, shuddering from head to toe.

“Fleamont,” Mrs. Potter whispered, shaking her husband from a troubling dream about the Ministry, this Lord Voldemort that he’d heard so much about…

Fleamont Potter sat up, his graying hair stuck straight into the air much the same way James’ hair did. He blinked a few times. “What is it, Euphemia?”

“James’ friend Sirius is here.”

“The Blacks’ son?”

“The very same. I want to try to coax the story out of him, maybe we should go to the Ministry — “

“The Ministry doesn’t care what purebloods do to their children, Effie.” Fleamont said. “Fetch James. I’ll go downstairs and talk to our guest.”

Fleamont stood up, favoring his right leg as he often did — an old war wound, he told his son, and James’s hazel eyes would go wide as saucers, but really it was an injury from an experiment gone badly wrong — and crept down the stairs.

“Sirius?”

Sirius jumped, trembling. Fleamont sat down next to him, touching his face gently to examine the bruise on his cheek.

“You’re safe now. Don’t worry.” Mr. Potter said quietly. Sirius burst into tears again, drawing his knees up to his chest. This boy was nothing like he’d been described. James saw Sirius as being like him, reckless, maybe a bit too arrogant, but Sirius seemed small to the Potters, almost fragile.

“I’m sorry t-to j-u-st show-w up l-like thi-is-is. James said I could — he said I could come here if I needed anything, and I d-do, I n-need James,” Sirius sobbed, his shoulders shaking.

James ran down the stairs, still half asleep, and stopped abruptly when he saw Sirius.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

“Dad, Sirius and I are going to my room. We’ll see you in the morning, alright?” James said, giving a pointed look to his parents.

Mr. Potter nodded slowly. “Goodnight, James, Sirius.”

James put his arm over Sirius’s shoulder and led him upstairs. “Calm down, Siri, tell me what’s wrong.”

“J-jame-james,” he stuttered, trying to catch his breath.

James wrapped his arms tightly around his friend, who covered his mouth with his hand and closed his eyes tightly, praying that he wouldn’t cry.

“Sirius, what’s happened?” James asked.

Sirius took a shaky breath, tears gathering in his eyes again. “I’m s-sorry for d-doing this I just—”

“You’ll be okay —“

Sirius took a deep breath and started crying again, covering his face with his hands. James put his arm around his friend.

“Tell me what happened.” James said softly.

“N-no, I can’t, I’m s-sorry.”

“Sirius, you’re at my house at the middle of the night — speaking of which, why didn’t you Floo here?”

“M-my dad…was blocking the fireplace — the only way I could get out was through the door, I had to use magic to find you.”

“You could be expelled —“ James protested.

“It was worth it, I had to do it —“ Sirius said, curling his knees up to his chest.

“Why did you have to do it?”
Sirius was silent.

“Sirius.”

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Sirius sobbed. “I was so scared, and it wouldn’t stop, I just had to g-g-go.”

“I understand.”

“God, no you don’t!” Sirius barked.

James recoiled from him a bit. “What happened to your face, Sirius?”

“I fell.” Sirius said flatly.

“Merlin, you sound like Remus. That’s not true. You know it.”

“Fell into a table,” Sirius muttered.

“You just fell into a table? Really?”

“Yeah,” Sirius wouldn’t look at James.

“Why are you here at two in the morning, then? Sirius, don’t lie to me. And I do know you’re lying, please don’t do this.”

Sirius wouldn’t look at him. “I told my parents I was proud to be a Gryffindor, I told my parents I’m friends with you and Remus and Peter, I told them I thought they were wrong about everything and — and — they —“ Sirius covered his face with his hands.

“What did they do, Sirius?” James asked quietly.

Mr. and Mrs. Potter hovered outside the door. Unlike their son, they had a feeling they already knew what had happened.

“Hey, Sirius, mate, listen to me. Nothing you tell me right now leaves this room. I won’t tell Remus, Peter, or any of the teachers, or even ask you about it again. But you have to tell me what happened.”

Sirius wouldn’t look at him.

“Sirius, please.” James said in a pained voice.

“James,” Sirius clenched his fists and sighed. “I…I just…”

“What did they do to you?”

“They?” Sirius almost laughed. It seemed so impersonal. Like what had happened that night was happening to someone else, somewhere else.

“You know. Your parents.”

“They didn’t want to get their hands dirty.”

“So…” James took one of Sirius’s pale, shaking hands. It was a purely friendly gesture, and it calmed Sirius down a bit.

“You know the Unforgivable Curses?”

“I know of them, yes. They didn’t…”

“You know, I’ve heard you have to really mean it to cast the Cruciatus curse on someone. That you really have to hate them.” Sirius clenched his jaw. He had a practiced look of disinterest, and he was wearing it now, it looked to James like a mask.

“My God,” James’s eyes were wide.

Sirius laughed, bitterly. It was almost terrifying how little he seemed to care.

“They didn’t, Sirius, tell me they didn’t —“ James said, almost begging him.

“I can’t say that if you don’t want me to lie to you.” Sirius stared at the ground.

“How could they —“

“I don’t want to talk about it. I told you, okay, I told you, please don’t —“

“Have they done it before?”

Sirius was silent.

“Sirius, have they done it before?”

“They —“ Sirius sighed. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Sirius wiped his eyes roughly.

“Are you going to tell anyone?” James asked. He thought, perhaps, for a moment, that he could tell Dumbledore and get Sirius out of that house, but he knew looking at Sirius’s pale, stubborn face that
he would lose his best mate if he did. “Of course not.” Sirius shook his head. “If I wasn’t…” he took a deep breath. “Incapacitated at the moment I would obliviate it from your memory.” “They could kill you.” “They might.” Sirius said, almost indifferently. “It’s not safe there.” “Haven’t you been paying attention at all? Lord Voldemort has power. It’s not safe anywhere.” “That’s different.” “Because it doesn’t feel like it’s important yet, but when he kills someone you know, or worse, someone you love, it’s going to feel like the worst thing in the world.” Sirius said, wondering how James didn’t get it yet, because Muggle-borns were already dying -- and Sirius’s family had just laughed when they’d heard, and that made it feel so much worse. The part of Sirius that he thought was least like his family uncoiled in his chest and roared, It could happen to your friends. It could happen to anyone. Would you care? Do you care about anything? “Sirius you’re so bloody thick sometimes, don’t you get that you’re my best mate, best I’ve ever had and if something happened to you…it would feel like the worst thing in the world?” Sirius fell silent, staring at the ground, his eyes glistening. “Er…yeah. I reckon.” James would’ve laughed if the situation had been even a bit funny. Sirius was crying and shaking again, and James wrapped all the blankets in his room around his friend’s shoulders. “Goodnight, Jamie,” Mrs. Potter ruffled James’s hair as she walked back to her own room. Sirius let out a quiet sniffle. “Your mum calls you Jamie.” “Shut it.” James grumbled goodnaturedly, rubbing Sirius’s back to calm him down. “Jamie,” “I swear to Merlin —“ Sirius smirked, a bit of life coming back into his eyes. “Sure, Jamie.” “Why are you doing this to me?” “It’s my deep emotional trauma from being raised by prejudiced prats and that absolute hag of a mother, of course,” Sirius said nonchalantly. “Jamie.” “Sirius, go to sleep.” James complained. “Probably not going to happen.” Sirius admitted. “But you’re welcome to.” James remembered seeing scars lining Sirius’s wrist and decided that there were more important things than sleep. “Sirius, can I talk to you about something —“ “All this emotion is giving me a headache,” Sirius complained. “But — Sirius, remember how I have an invisibility cloak, and sometimes I see things I don’t mean to — I just wanted you to know —“ “What, did you catch Snivellus crying or something?” “Not exactly.” James said. “You know where I’m going with this, don’t you?” “No. I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. Maybe I will go to sleep, unless you plan to stop tripping over your own tongue.” “I know something I wish I didn’t know.” “Merlin, Jamie, stop being so vague.” “You know how…a lot of people…do that thing where…you know,” he mimed cutting a line across his wrist. “Mm.” “I think — I mean, I was tired — I’m not sure —“ “Can we talk about this in the morning? If you’re about to tell me someone else’s secret, I’m not sure I want to know.” Sirius said briskly. “Yeah. Alright.” James rolled over with his back facing Sirius. He’d send Remus and Peter owls the next day asking them to come visit before Sirius went home. If Sirius was ever going to be able to go home.
A Train, A Lie, A Death

Chapter Summary

The Marauders reunite on the Hogwarts Express after Easter holidays.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The boys reunited on the Hogwarts Express in a giant group hug. Peter (the shortest by far) practically lifted off his feet. They dashed into their usual compartment and sat down, James’ head in Sirius’s lap and his feet on Peter’s head. He was busy unraveling a hole in Remus’s jumper, which Remus pretended not to notice.

"How were everyone's holidays?" Sirius asked cheerfully. "James, don't answer that. As I was with you, I expect the only answer to be 'absolutely brilliant.'"

"You spent the holidays with James?" Peter asked, fighting to keep the hurt out of his voice.

"Ah, wasn't like that, don't look so offended." Sirius smirked. "I showed up entirely uninvited."

Peter opened his mouth briefly, trying to speak, but James and Sirius had begun to excitedly discuss the (admittedly completely harmless) hexes they’d learnt from Mr. Potter over the summer and were ignoring both Peter and Remus’s attempts to get their attention.

Peter cleared his throat loudly with no response. "Ahem," he repeated.

It took almost ten minutes for him to lose patience, his lower lip trembling. It was the other Marauders’ complete disregard for his attempts to speak that set him over the edge, and he wiped furiously at his small, watery eyes.

"What is it, Peter?" Remus asked, practicing a levitating charm on one of James’ socks, Peter burst into tears. The smiles faded off the others’ faces.

"Merlin, are you alright?" James asked.

Peter shook his head, sobbing.

"Peter, breathe," Remus said rationally. "Take a deep breath."

Peter inhaled shakily, wiping his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Sirius asked, his face full of concern. He waited for Peter's response as the other boy tried and failed not to cry.

"My dad — he — he’s dead," Peter sobbed. "I didn't want to tell you r-right away, but --"

James leaned over and hugged Peter as tightly as he could. "I’m so sorry."

"No, it’s not your fault," Peter whimpered.

Remus emptied his pockets looking for a few Knuts and bought Peter a Pumpkin Pasty, handing it to the other boy without a word. Peter took a bite of it and sniffed.

"What happened? To your dad, I mean?" James asked. Peter's nose scrunched up and he closed his eyes tightly.

"He was…well, he worked you know, a pretty lousy job at the Ministry, and there was a malfunction with one of the spells he was approving…and…"

"And you’re still coming to school?" Remus asked incredulously.

"I wanted — I needed to see all of you," Peter admitted. "And I was worried if I sent you an owl you wouldn’t respond."

"Peter, that's simply ridiculous." James declared.

"You lost your owl."

"Minerva is perfectly alright!" James said indignantly. "Er…whatever she happens to be, that is. I’m sure."
Peter let out a tearful giggle.

“Does your mum need anything?” Remus asked. “My parents can go to your house and check on her, if you’d like —”

“Remus, isn’t your mum ill?” Sirius interrupted with a knowing glint in his eyes. That look, Remus knew, could only mean one thing when Sirius Black was involved. He’d been caught.

“Er, yes!” Remus cleared his throat loudly. “She is. In fact. Ill. But well enough to make a visit to a family in need, I’m sure. Anyway. Only if needed, we wouldn’t want to intrude —”

“My mum would really appreciate it,” Peter said gratefully.

“Excellent.” Remus said. His drawn face was rather red, which the others tactfully ignored.

Peter had gone back to staring out the window and looking, by all accounts, entirely miserable.

“Peter, do you want to talk about it?” James asked, a hand on his friend’s shoulder. Peter shook his head.

“Not really,” he made a visible effort to stop crying and plaster a fake, forced smile on his face. “Er, did you all do your homework?”

Sirius groaned loudly. “No. Anyone willing to do my Potions homework?”

“Shocking. Sirius Orion Black didn’t do his homework and will still get, by some miracle, one of the highest marks in the class on an assignment he did five minutes before the class started.” Remus said.

“I sense disapproval,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. “Will you do it for me?”

Remus scoffed. “You’re on your own, mate.”

“Peter?”

Peter laughed. “I had Mum do it for me. Sorry?”

“James…you didn’t do it, did you?” Sirius asked.

James shook his head and lay across Peter’s lap, tilting his head up to look at Sirius. “Of course I did, Sirius, if Snivellus were to get a higher mark than me I may vomit.”

“Oh, I can’t copy off you, it takes the fun out of it. I’ll do it now.” Sirius sighed, leaning on the table in their compartment and pulling a crumpled and folded piece of paper and a quill out of the pockets of his robes. He scribbled something in neat, scripted handwriting and shoved it back into his pocket.

“Wait, hang on. Something’s missing — Snivellus isn’t here!” James said, sniffing the air like a bloodhound. “I’m hoping I’ll be able to smell the grease in his hair from here.”

“He stayed at school for Easter holidays.” Remus said.

“Damn. And here I was hoping to get a good hex in before we got to school.” James slumped dramatically. “Dreams! Dashed!”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is a really short chapter! The next one is much longer
Dumbledore's Hat

Just as spring had begun it seemed to become summer, sun warming the pinched, pale faces of the boys who had so much to be sad about and yet so much to hope for. While all the Marauders remained focused on their schoolwork, they all but disappeared for the better part of a month, working on something that no one could quite figure out. Every time anyone asked, the four of them would seal their mouths shut as if someone had cast a Silencing Charm on them. No one had the faintest idea what they were doing, or why, but it was top secret and fully planned, with detailed, neat notes and strategies, courtesy of Remus, and detailed diagrams with rather vulgar labels (courtesy of James.)

“Peter, this is your part, alright?” Sirius pointed to a section of notes. “First, you have to distract the teachers in the Great Hall during the last breakfast before summer.”

“How am I meant to —” Peter started to say, already resigned to his fate.

“Trip and fall?” Remus suggested, looking up from a neat drawing of the Great Hall.

“Peter, this year alone, how many times have you fallen in front of a teacher?” James asked. To Peter’s credit, often he’d fallen when a Slytherin had pushed him.

“Too many,” Peter sighed.

“Did even one of them look up?”

“Not after the first time.”

“Or, you know, you could hex Snivellus, or even Evans, just to get a rise out of Slughorn —“ Sirius suggested.

“No, Slughorn’s one of my favorite professors, I couldn’t do that.” Peter said. “I’ll think of something else.”

“Okay, James, your part is slightly more dangerous, you’re going to steal Dumbledore’s hat without being seen, courtesy of your invisibility cloak, of course.” Remus studied James’ face, hoping to see approval.

“Why?” James asked.

“You’ll see.”

“I’m a part of this prank! Tell me the truth!”

“And Sirius’s part is a secret.” Remus passed Sirius the paper. Sirius unfolded it, read it briefly, and burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

“What are you doing?” James asked.

“Not risking being expelled,” Remus said with a grin. “Since I planned this, I think it’s only fair.”

“You’re such a —“

“Genius? I know.” Remus gave an exaggerated wink.

James ruffled Remus’s hair.

“Okay. Get a good night’s sleep,” Sirius said, falling back onto his pillow. “Because this is going to be our best yet.”

The next morning, all the Marauders were missing at breakfast except for Peter, who took five minutes to shakily stand up, walk directly in front of the teachers, and dramatically ‘faint’ on the ground. Professor Sprout got to her feet and ran over, shaking Peter’s pudgy shoulders while the other teachers chattered on over their breakfast. Peter could’ve sworn he saw through slitted eyes McGonagall deliberately avoiding his gaze. He supposed it was nice to know that at least one teacher cared for his well being. Or perhaps he’d been overly dramatic?

He decided that was probably the case.

James snuck behind Dumbledore, hidden by his invisibility cloak, and plucked the hat off the Headmaster’s head, stashing it under his robes and dashing out of the hall as Peter complained loudly about his sore head to everyone who would listen.

Sirius saw a disembodied hand holding a tall wizard’s hat floating through the air and grinned. “Nice
one, James!”
James, although Sirius couldn’t see him, gave a dramatic wink and tossed the hat at Sirius.
Sirius had just turned around and began to run when he heard a gleeful giggle from behind him.
“No,” James hissed, hiding under the cloak.
Sirius cursed and started to sprint, but the laughter grew louder and louder behind him until it was
echoing right in his ear. “Students missing class,” Peeves, the Hogwarts poltergeist, said with a
manic grin. Sirius tried to think of a spell to get Peeves to stop but his mind was blank. “Students
with Dumbledore’s hat in the ASTRONOMY TOWER!”
“Shut up, Peeves, shut up!” Sirius hissed, sprinting up the stairs to the window in the Astronomy
Tower.
He unlatched it carefully and climbed out, trying not to look down. He set Dumbledore’s hat
precariously on top of the tower and hung there by his fingertips for a few seconds before dropping
back onto the ground. Searing pain shot through his ankle as he landed, grimacing.
“ASTRONOMY TOWER! ICKLE FIRSTIE IN THE ASTRONOMY TOWER!” Peeves
shrieked, zooming down the hall next to him.
Sirius ducked in through the window and raced down to Muggle Studies, dropping into his seat just
as the bell rang. He whistled at James to get his attention and nodded, a sly smile on his face.
“You did it?” Remus asked incredulously, as if in shock that his master plan had actually, shockingly
worked.

“Welcome to the last feast of this year at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore boomed, looking out at the Great
Hall. “Before the winner of the House Cup is announced, a few congratulations are in order. First,
for the Slytherin Quidditch team, for the most games won in a row, I award you fifty points.”
James and Sirius booed and jeered at the Slytherins, who were all grinning and patting each other on
the back and whistling.
A prefect silenced the boys with a look but they both continued to mutter insults under their breath.
“I would like to congratulate our Head Boys and Head Girls for an excellent year. May they fare
well on this, their last day at Hogwarts!” The hall burst into loud applause. “However I regret to
announce that come next year, you will have a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, as
Professor Bulstrode has officially retired.”
“Not a surprise, really, is it?” Sirius said.
“What do you mean?” Peter frowned, scraping his empty plate with his fingernails
“Andromeda says no one’s ever had the job over a year. I think Lord Voldemort jinxed it or
something,”
“That’s got to be a myth,” Remus scoffed.
Peter rolled his eyes. “Please. You can’t jinx a job.”
“Just because you can’t, Pete, doesn’t mean someone else can’t. You’re hardly the ideal of magical
talent.” Sirius said reasonably.
Peter shrugged.
“In fourth place,” Dumbledore announced, and James jumped up in his seat, pulling Sirius up after
him. He drummed his wand on the table excitedly.
“In fourth place, with four hundred and ten points,” Dumbledore said. “Slytherin!”
Everyone cheered half-heartedly, except for the Marauders, who were overjoyed and clapped until
their hands hurt. Sirius grinned.
“I don’t even care who wins now,” he whispered reverently. “Look at their faces.”
The Slytherins were all staring at the table, and a few were weeping over their empty plates. Sirius
grinned like it was Christmas all over again.
“In third place, with four hundred and thirty five points, Hufflepuff!”
The Hufflepuffs all cheered loudly.
“In second place, with four hundred and seventy points,” Dumbledore paused. Gryffindor and
Ravenclaw students sat with bated breath. “Gryffindor.”
“Bullshit!” James shouted at the top of his lungs.
“Cheating! Cheaters, every one of them!” Sirius roared.
“Sit down, Potter! Black!” the Head Boy, whose name had escaped James in his fury. Both fell silent but stood defiantly, glaring. Remus and Peter were both trying to slide under the table without being noticed, which was hard to do when James and Sirius were shouting something about demanding justice and something or other.
“And in first place, with four hundred and ninety three points, the winner of the House Cup — Ravenclaw!”
The Ravenclaw table applauded as the banners in the Great Hall turned blue and silver. Remus groaned and hit his forehead against the table.
The Marauders visited each other exactly twelve times over the summer holidays, but still ran towards each other at King’s Cross like they hadn’t seen each other in years.

James first noticed that Sirius again moved stiffly, and his eyes were hollow, Peter’s wide, friendly smile looked a little more forced than usual. When he looked at Remus he saw the pale, shaky boy he’d known a year ago under Remus’s wide smile, and James found all the research he’d done over the holidays slowly clicking together.

“How was your mum, Peter? I couldn’t tell how she was when we were at your house last month.” James asked.

“Oh, she’s doing much better.” Peter said with a smile. “She has a Muggle boyfriend now, he doesn’t know about magic…I think he’s a bit of an idiot really, but he seems to like me. Er, you know, unlike my actual dad.”

The other Marauders tried not to look too horrified.

“That’s, er, that’s great, Peter,” Remus said stiffly.

James seized the opportunity to change the subject. “You’re all as excited as I am, I suppose?” He spread his hands in the air, the future golden with possibility. “We’re second years!”

“Great. More homework.” Peter groaned.

“Cheer up, Pete, maybe we can get some clever little first year to do it for you!”

“We were clever little first years three months ago.” Peter reminded him.

Sirius snorted. “Please, the only one of us who’s anything but a stupid git is Remus.”

Remus, to everyone’s shock, turned a deep red and said, “what? No, I — I’m just — you’re all very intelligent.”

James touched his shoulder. “Sure, mate.”

Remus scuffed his shoe on the ground, looking extremely embarrassed.

“You know, I’m thinking we shouldn’t hex Severus this year.” Peter said thoughtfully as the four of them shooed a few first years out of their usual compartment.

“Not hex Severus? No. I think he’d almost be disappointed.” Sirius said.

“When was the last time he did anything — other than hex us — to deserve our eternal hatred?” Peter asked.

“Well…if you know what I mean, it’s probably his existence on this planet that really bothers me.” James said apologetically.

“I don’t know, I just —”

“Well,” Severus leaned against the door of their compartment, his greasy hair hanging limply into his eyes. “The Marauders survived the summer. How were your parents, Sirius? Or Peter’s dear old dad? Oh, pardon me, I meant dead.”

“Shove it,” James said venomously.

“And Lupin, how’s your…illness? Feeling any better? Doesn’t look like it. How long do you have?” Severus asked.

Remus flinched, his eyes flashing.

“James…Mummy and Daddy are getting on in years, aren’t they? Not too much longer, I’d imagine, before you’re all alone.” Severus grinned wickedly.

“I take it back.” Peter said, pulling out his wand. “I hate him.”

Severus turned, about to hex him, and Sirius grabbed Severus’s wand from his hands before anyone could move, twirling it in his own nonchalantly.

“Which hex should we use, boys?” Sirius asked. “I did some reading over the summer.”

“Mm…I don’t know. Remus?”

“Petrificus Totalus!” Remus had already drawn his wand and was pointing it at Severus’ throat, his expression venomous. Snape froze in place, his dark eyes filled with anger, and toppled over like a statue. “Bought us some time. What are you willing to bet Evans will come in here defending dear
Snivelly?” Remus’s hands were shaking with fury.
“Highly likely, I have to say.” James said.
Lily marched down the train, her round cheeks colored pink in anger.
James whistled. “Alright, Evans?”
“No!” Lily snapped. She tried to remember how to reverse a spell but found herself stuck, glaring, furious, unable to do anything to help Severus. “Unpetrify him. Now.”
“Ah, Evans, don’t be like that,” Sirius said.
“Don’t tell me what not to be like! I’ll do as I please!” she spat.
Not one of the Marauders made a move to end the hex.
“Fine.” Lily pulled out her wand and muttered an incantation, hoping it was the correct one. She knelt next to Severus. “Are you okay?”
“Yeah, I’m fine.” He smiled weakly at her.
“I think I may vomit.” James gagged.
“Feeling quite ill myself,” Remus admitted.
“Shove off!” Severus hissed, snatching his wand out of Sirius’s idle hand.
“Not going to happen, that.” Sirius said flippantly.
“Come on, Lily, let’s get out of here.” Severus pulled her by the arm out of the compartment, glaring at the Marauders as he walked.
“We’re going to get detention before we even get back to school, aren’t we?” Remus said resignedly.
“Not if Snivellus doesn’t tell. And he won’t.”
“He’s a git.” Peter said, his face rivaling Lily’s in redness.
“But he won’t tell, because he won’t want to get hexed again.”
“He’s not going to take this lying down, you know,” Remus said. “He’ll get us back every chance he’s got.”
“He won’t get a chance, we won’t let him,” James said, quite convinced. He leaned back and put his feet up on the table, his shoes lying on the ground.
“Anyone for sweets? I nicked twenty galleons from my parents.” Sirius asked.
“No, I’m okay —“ Remus started to say.
“Remus, come off it. Let me buy you something. Chocolate?”
“Sure,” Remus blushed.
“Peter? Pumpkin Pasties?”
Peter nodded. “I’ll pay you back if you want —“
“No need, Petey, I get a kick out of spending my family’s ‘hard-earned’ money. James? Toffee?”
“Did you memorize our sweets preferences?” James asked.
“Of course,” Sirius stood up and took a deep bow. “Now accepting kisses as form of payment for my thoughtfulness. Oh, look, it’s the trolley.”
He paid for their sweets with a grin, watching the Black family’s spare galleons be collected and put in a pouch.
“Excellent.” He took a bite of a Fizzing Whizbee. “Hey, are we almost to Hogwarts?”
Remus glanced out the window. “Mm. Probably not.”

“Welcome back to Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said. Remus got this odd shivery feeling of being at home and in the complete wrong place at the same time. “I trust you all had wonderful holidays?” Everyone cheered.
“Welcome, first years,” Dumbledore gestured to the group of small, scared faces standing to the side of the teachers.
Dumbledore carried the sorting hat over to the stool. It opened it’s brim wide and sang it’s new Hogwarts song for the year — for much too long, in James’s personal opinion.
“Black, Regulus,” McGonagall called.
“Is that your brother, Sirius?” Peter asked.
“Unfortunately.” Sirius muttered, trying to cover his face with James’ hair.
Regulus looked like Sirius, with dark hair and eyes, a pale complexion, and a casual arrogance. The
Sorting Hat had barely been on his head for a second before the hat shouted out.
“Slytherin!”
Sirius let out a small, audible groan. “Merlin.”
“Were you hoping for him to end up in Gryffindor?” James asked.
Sirius didn’t respond and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Congratulations, Reg!”
It was clear Regulus had heard him from the way his spine stiffened, but he didn’t turn to look at
Sirius before sitting at the Slytherin table, not even once. Sirius smiled lazily.
“Ah, look at that. Embarrassed by me already.”
“They all look so tiny —“ James said. “I call pushing the first one to annoy me into the Black Lake!”
“At what time of year?” Remus asked.
“Hm. Whichever time they annoy me, I suppose.”
“Even in the winter?”
“Oh, Lupin, especially in the winter.” Sirius winked.
“Great, that’s what I need. To be covering up my friend murdering an eleven year old.” Remus
sighed. “Try not to torture them because they’re tiny and innocent.”
“We weren’t tiny and innocent,” James shrugged.
“We have an obligation to pretend we were.” Sirius said, straight-faced.
“Alright, alright,” James laughed.
The Truth

Chapter Summary

The Marauders find out about Remus's condition and vow to help him.

"I have to visit my mum again tonight," Remus said during Potions, a few weeks later, pulling his damaged tie out of the burnt definitely-not-a-potion in his cauldron.

"Remus, no one really believes that. You don’t have to lie.” James said earnestly.

Remus looked down. “Oh, that's where we went wrong. It was supposed to have four frog legs, not two.”

“My fault,” James said, although it had been Remus’s, for nearly falling asleep over his cauldron.

“No, it’s alright,” Remus added the frog legs and more newt eyes. “Here, this should make it better.” The potion, which was supposed to be a bright blue, was a sort of dusty brown.

“How’s it going here, boys?” Slughorn peered into their cauldron and looked at Remus’s tired, pale face. “Keep up the good work, alright?”

Remus nodded weakly. “Yes, Professor.”

“Remus, you can sleep if you like, I’ll finish the potion.” James said helpfully.

“Knowing you, you’ll start throwing things at Sirius.”

Sirius saluted with his wand from across the room.

“Remus, you look like death.” Peter commented.

“I've looked worse.” Remus shrugged indifferently. “Come on, this potion probably needs a unicorn hair.”

James smiled. “Fine.”

“Alright, let me check your potions…let’s start with Miss Evans and Miss MacDonald.” Slughorn walked over to Lily. “Well done! In fact, it’s almost perfect.”

Lily smiled proudly. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Mr. Black, Mr. Pettigrew, quite alright! Nice work.”

Sirius looked bored, but Peter positively beamed. “Thanks!” he squeaked.

Slughorn moved around the room, applauding Severus’s work.

The Marauders all glared pointedly.

“Eh, Severus!” James hissed. “Better watch yourself. I hear if you stand in place for too long, I hear your feet may get stuck to the floor.”

“What? No one says…” Severus tried to shift positions and found the bottom of his feet stuck firmly to the floor. “You actually think you’re clever.” Severus laughed, a forced, horrible cackle. Lily hid a smile.

“I actually know I’m clever.” James said. Sirius whistled.

“There’s got to be some sort of unsticking charm —“ Severus said frantically while the Marauders guffawed.

“I hope they teach us hex reversal this year,” Remus muttered sleepily.

“Remus, are you sure you’re alright?” Peter asked.

“Mm-hm. Just tired.”

James, Sirius, and Peter looked at each other.

Remus fell asleep on the couch doing homework before dinner, a Muggle Studies book lying open across his chest. His arm was outstretched, touching the floor, and he was breathing softly. He looked peaceful, lying there asleep, and none of the Marauders had the heart to disturb him.
Peter wordlessly picked up Remus’s pile of books and carried them upstairs, while James and Sirius pulled Remus off the couch and carried him to his bed.

“God, Lupin, you’re so heavy!” Sirius grunted. Remus remained fast asleep.

It was mid afternoon by the time Remus awoke in his own bed, filled with instant panic as he felt the harsh rays of the sun setting brush his face.

“Bloody hell!” Remus exclaimed, stumbling out of bed in a blind scramble for the door. He tripped into his shoes and pulled his robes over his jumper, knocking his head against one of the posts on James’s bed.

“What? What’s wrong?” James asked, alarmed.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry —” Remus stuttered, and slammed the door behind him. A series of crashes and curses drifted up from the stairwell.

“Should we follow him?” Sirius asked.

“No, he’s probably just late visiting his mum —” Peter said.

“He doesn’t visit her. I know he doesn’t.” James insisted. “He’s a dreadful liar. He always goes all blotchy.”

“Why does he keep lying to us, then? We’re his friends.” Peter said, sounding hurt.

“Just because you’re friends with someone doesn’t mean you have to tell them everything.” Sirius said.

“Snivellus must know,” James remembered. “That’s why Remus was upset, remember, when we first became friends with him last year?”

“Bastard.” Sirius swore. “He figured out whatever it is Remus is trying to hide from us and he threatened to tell everyone.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with why Remus has all those scars?” Peter asked shyly.

“What could possibly give Remus those scars?” James asked. He’d never asked; and James didn’t often see boundaries within relationships, so the self-restraint he’d exhibited was a tribute to what a secret it truly was.

“I’m guessing some sort of accident when he was younger,” Sirius said. “He’s never even mentioned them, you know. Not once. You’d think he didn’t know he had them, except that one time…when we saw his scars and he got really defensive…”

“Sometimes he gets more, you know, he has the ones on his nose, but he came home from break with one behind his ear.” Peter pointed out.

“You don’t think his parents —” Sirius said softly, not even wanting to consider it.

“No, have you heard Remus talk about them? They love him.” James said.

“Just because his parents love him doesn’t mean they wouldn’t hurt him.” Sirius said quietly.

“They didn’t, I’m sure of it. This is something else.”

“Maybe he has fits, and he gets hurt when he falls or…something?” Peter suggested.

“Fits? Really? Once a month? At exactly the same time? I take Astronomy, Peter, I know when the full moon is.” James said.

“You’re not saying…”

“James is right, Peter, just think about it…he disappears once a month during the full moon, comes back looking ill, covered in cuts and bruises, and this happens without fail, and he lies to us about it — he gets worried about Snivelly telling his secret to the whole school — he’s always tired, gets headaches…there aren’t a lot of illnesses with those symptoms. In fact, I can only think of one.”

Sirius said, digging his nails into his palms.

“You think Remus — our friend Remus, our roommate, Remus Lupin is a werewolf.” Peter said, his mouth falling slightly open.

“We’re going to have to tell him we know.” James said, running his hand through his hair in shock.

“We have to be wrong, it can’t be true,” Sirius said, wanting to take back his words. “Werewolves are evil…and…and dangerous — Remus isn’t like that. Werewolves are hardly even human…” he thought back to what his parents had said, about all werewolves deserving death, and considered that maybe they’d been wrong about that as well. “It’s just not him. It makes sense, but…there has to be
“What other solution do you have?” Peter asked. “It’s terrifying, I hate the idea of him being one of them…but he is. He’s like that. He probably hates it as much as we do.”
“Do you even hear yourselves?” James got to his feet quickly, his voice rising. “Remus is our friend. It doesn’t matter. He probably doesn’t want to tell us for this exact reason! He thinks we’ll see him as a monster. But he isn’t.”
“How is a werewolf not a monster?” Sirius asked.
“A werewolf isn’t a monster because Remus isn’t a monster.” James insisted.
“We have to tell him we know.” Peter said.
“He won’t admit it.”
“Of course he will, if he knows we know.” Sirius said.
“How would we even bring that up? ‘Oh, by the way, Remus, we know your —‘ James paused, striking a pose on the bed. “Secret.”
“Subtlety never has been your strong suit.” Sirius sighed deeply. “Try, ‘Oh, Remus, how could you betray us like this? All we ever did was love you and you’re telling us lies, making us worry about your mother who’s probably not been ill since you were but a wee child — and you hurt us so deeply, how could we ever forgive you?’ and then wait until he starts to worry that we hate him for what he is and say, ‘not about the werewolf thing. We’re fine with that.’” Sirius grinned roguishly.
“How was that?”
James groaned.
“No, no, you’re both going about it the wrong way,” Peter said, crossing his arms across his chest.
“We wait until next month —“
“Next month?” Sirius and James demanded.
“Yes, next month, all the while dropping hints, and when he says he has to go visit his mother again, we say, “unless Madam Pomfrey is your mother, which I highly doubt, we know exactly where you’re really going.”
“Oh, Peter — innocent, sweet Peter — it’s the drama of the thing that you’re missing. Although,” Sirius mused. “That’s not a bad idea.”
“But I want to talk to him about it now,” James protested.
“You can’t. He’s a werewolf at the moment, and they’re rather dangerous.”
James glanced outside at the full moon hanging in the sky. “I see your point.”
“What can we do to help him?” Peter asked.
“We could go with him.” Sirius suggested. “To stop him from getting hurt again.”
“We’d get eaten. I did my research — werewolves don’t recognize people when they’re transformed. But we can’t leave him alone anymore.” James said.
“What can we do?”
“Do werewolves eat animals?” Peter asked.
“What if we got him a pet?” Peter suggested. “So he wouldn’t be alone anymore.”
“He could accidentally kill it — it would make him feel worse.” Sirius said. “But I have an idea.”

Remus awoke in the Shrieking Shack, splinters digging into his spine. He wiggled his fingers and toes, blinking open his eyes to find the world blurry, out of focus. Sit up, Remus, you can do this, he thought, gritting his teeth and forcing himself into a sitting position.
He was so tired…he could barely keep his eyes open…he just wanted to go back to sleep.
No! Focus, Remus!
He took a deep breath, wrapped a pair of fresh robes around his aching body and stumbled to his feet. His head spun, his vision blurred, but he had to make it outside, had to make it —
He fell about halfway through the passage, leaning against the wall and fighting to keep his breathing steady. His hands shook. He felt inhuman, that was the only word for it. He looked down at his hands almost certain they’d be claws and was relieved, as always, to see his own shaking fingers.
He sat there crying desperately, relieved but ashamed that he would walk back into class and sit
down and tell another lie to the only friends he’d ever had.

As he stumbled outside, Madam Pomfrey caught the thin boy in her arms and supported him on the way into the castle — everyone else was still asleep, for the most part, and it wasn’t as if anyone would jump to the conclusion that an injured student walking past the Whomping Willow was a werewolf.

Remus awoke in the hospital wing several hours later, three blurry, familiar faces looming over him. “Who…” he muttered, and after rubbing his eyes he froze in place. “No, no, no, no, this can’t be happening…not you, not you —”


Remus covered his face with his hands. “Remus,” Sirius said, leaning down to make eye contact with him where the young werewolf was sitting, terrified, praying that he would wake up and this would never have happened. “Remus, we know.”

“I’m sorry,” Remus said, almost like a confession. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” James asked.

Remus dug his fingernails into his palms. “Please don’t make me.”

“No. I’m serious.”

“I’m sorry for being this way!” Remus shouted, shaking with pain and fury. “I’m sorry for being alive, okay? I’ll request to be changed to another room tomorrow night — tonight if you want me gone that early, I’m sorry you’ve had to live with me this long, I don’t want anyone else having to be around me, okay, I know I disgust everyone, even…” he took a deep breath. “Even me.”

“What?” Peter frowned. “You don’t disgust us, Remus.” He took Remus’s hand and held it, carefully, like it might break in his clumsy fingers.

Remus felt hot tears coursing down his face and wiped at his eyes.

“Remus, we’re not going to stop being friends with you —” Sirius started to say.

“Out of pity? Save it. I get it, you feel bad for me, never having any friends, always being alone — I get it! It was stupid of me to think I could have friends! Werewolves don’t have friends.”

“No it wasn’t, mate. We’re here for you.” James said in a pained voice.

“Merlin, will you stop saying that? Aren’t you disgusted by the sight of me? You should be,” he was aware he was shaking.

“No,” Sirius said firmly. “We’re not going to leave you. You don’t have to go through this on your own. Never again.”

Remus started crying harder, if only because he was certain this couldn’t be happening. “You are,” he sobbed. “You are, you’re going to leave me, like everyone else does…they’re going to kick me out of school now that you know.”

“Remus! We don’t hate you!” James said, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. Remus looked up at him, his arms falling at his sides, stopping his frantic upset scratching of all his scabs and scars. “You don’t even know what a werewolf is, James, not really,” Remus said softly, tears still streaming freely down his face. “You understand what I am in theory but if you saw it you’d never speak to me again.”

“I’m going to see it. Because I’m not leaving you — none of us are.”

“I’ll kill you, or hurt you —” Remus buried his face in his arms. “I don’t want you to be hurt because of me. I’m dangerous.”

“Remus, when will you get it through your thick skull that you’re our friend?” Sirius demanded.

“We’re best mates, we love you, we won’t let you go through this alone.”

Remus shook his head, still unable to fully believe it. “I’m a monster.”

“No you’re not. You just have a problem. A furry little problem.” James joked, grinning.

“Besides, you consider knitting a worthwhile hobby, you’re hardly my worst nightmare,” Sirius pointed out.

Remus nearly laughed.
“Alright, boys, I think Remus has had enough excitement, don’t you? Don’t forget to bring his Defense Against the Dark Arts assignment.” Madam Pomfrey said, seeing how overwhelmed Remus was.

“Remus, if you aren’t feeling up to it, I can do your homework for you,” Peter suggested. Remus grinned. “No, don’t worry, I’ll have it done by tomorrow.”

“Now I really know why the Hat put you in Gryffindor,” Sirius said, shaking his head. Remus could hardly believe his ears, and turned a bright shade of fuchsia.

Madam Pomfrey turned to him. “What did I tell you?” she asked.

He looked at the ground. “You were right, Madam Pomfrey.”

She patted his back fondly.

“You’re all lucky to have each other.” She said gently.

Remus nodded. “Do you mind if I go back to class in time for lunch?”

“If you’re feeling up to it.”

“Yeah.” Remus nodded. “I’m feeling a lot better.”

“Alright, you can go, Remus.”

Remus stood up shakily, but he hardly noticed the pain. They knew his deepest secret and they hadn’t left him. They’d promised to stay. And he didn’t know if that was true, but they accepted him. It was more than he’d ever dared to hope for.

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“Professor McGonagall, since we’re talking about transfiguring animals, how would one go about becoming an Animagus?” James asked, not bothering to raise his hand during class. “Because I heard you’re an Animagus, and I was curious.”

“How, Mr. Potter, is this question pertinent to our lesson?” Professor McGonagall asked, looking at him over the frames of her glasses.

“I was just curious,” James muttered. Remus looked at him with raised eyebrows.

“And…Mr. Potter, if, hypothetically, one wanted to become an Animagus, one would have to ask for approval from the Ministry of Magic and go through an extremely difficult process of transfiguration.”

“What would that process be?”

“I’m afraid you would have to go to the library for research.”

“What section of the library is that, Professor?”

“The Restricted Section.” McGonagall said. “If you don’t mind, Potter, I’d like to continue with the lesson.”

James nodded, with a triumphant grin back at Sirius and Peter.

McGonagall narrowed her eyes at them.

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“Okay,” James whispered, climbing out of bed and waking the balled lump under the blankets that was Peter. Sirius stood up quietly, yawning, and the three of them snuck out of the room while Remus slept soundly. “Let’s go.”

“I have to know why we aren’t telling Remus about this.” Peter said. “We’re doing this for him—“

“And our Remus would never allow it. So it’s a secret.” James said cheerily, shifting underneath the invisibility cloak. It could comfortably fit the three of them and they snuck invisibly to the library, hunting through the Restricted Section for a book on the illegal process of becoming an unregistered Animagus.

“Hey, look, I found it!” Sirius hissed excitedly. “‘Processes and Potions: An Illustrated Guide to Becoming an Animagus, Volume One!’”

“Wicked!” James snatched the book off the shelf and read it aloud. “Chapter One: Preparing to become an Animagus.”

“That takes up a whole chapter?” Peter groaned.

“One of two hundred.” Sirius said, gingerly flipping through the pages. “Blimey, would you look at this! A mandrake leaf in our mouths! For a month!”

“Remember when we saw those in Herbology? They looked horrible.” Peter grimaced.
“Smelled worse,” James remarked.  
“Don’t worry about it yet,” Sirius said. “We won’t even do that for almost a year. We have to start by learning to cast a corporeal patronus.”
“A what?” James asked.
“It’s an animal embodiment of your personality. My parents cast them to entertain my brother and I when we were younger.” Sirius said.  
“What was your mother’s?”
“A snake.” Sirius said grimly. “How that hag had any happy memories to even cast one is beyond me.”
“Happy memories?” Peter asked.  
“Yeah, you cast them by thinking of things that make you happy. But a corporeal one is impossible for students on our level, we’d need extra Defense Against the Dark Arts training.” Sirius sighed.  
“What’s the incantation?” James asked.
“Oh, it’s…er…expect patronum.”
“We’ll have to get someone to help us,” Peter said.  
“We can’t. They’ll try to stop us. What we’re doing is illegal and dangerous but we have to do it.” James insisted.
“Why?” Sirius asked.
“Because it isn’t fair for Remus to have to go through this alone.”
“We could die. There has to be another way —” Peter protested.
“And I’m sure there is. But until then, this is what we’re doing, alright?” James asked.  
They snuck upstairs under the invisibility cloak and hid the book under James’s bed.
“What if the house elves find it?” Peter worried, wringing his hands.
“The house elves haven’t so much as glanced at the horror that is the space under my bed since the first month at Hogwarts,” James shrugged. “There are probably poisonous fumes down there.”
“Okay.” Sirius shrugged, crawling into bed, his head full of doubt. While this was, as the nagging voices at the back of their minds told them, a dreadful idea, they all knew it was right.
Quidditch

Chapter Summary

James tries out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

“Just a reminder that Quidditch tryouts for the Gryffindor team will be this afternoon,” McGonagall said briskly from behind her desk. An excited buzz spread through the room, dizzying squeals of excitement coming, loudest of all, from one James Potter. “I would wipe the idiotic grin off your face, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said sharply. “As second years rarely make the team.” “Please, Professor, Quidditch comes as naturally to me as breathing.” James boasted. Lily coughed loudly. “I’ve seen your flying lessons, Potter, and while you do possess some natural talent, you lack the patience to have any real skill.” McGonagall said. The excitement in James’s eyes didn’t flicker for a moment. “Please, Mr. Pettigrew, refrain from falling asleep. I realize Quidditch holds no importance for you, but perhaps some of us would like to pay attention?” “Old McGiggles is in a rotten mood this morning,” Sirius muttered under his breath. “You trying out with me?” James asked. Sirius shook his head. “Nah, sounds like work.” “C’mon,” James whined. “Remus, Pete?” “If my parents saw me playing Quidditch they would die of shock.” Remus shrugged apologetically. Peter simply shook his head and offered no explanation. “Ah, Peter, don’t be such a spoilsport.” James complained. “I’ll sit in the stands and cheer for you?” Peter suggested. “Fine,” James ran a hand through his hair as he often did. “Pettigrew, Potter, be quiet.” McGonagall snapped. “Mr. Lupin. If you would please refrain from tying Mr. Black’s shoelaces together, tempting though it may be, I would greatly appreciate it.” Remus turned around and slumped down in his chair, his face flushing pink. Sirius, however, did not remove his feet from Remus’s desk. “James,” Remus whispered. “Maybe you shouldn’t try out this year. There’s a lot of competition, I don’t want you to be upset.” James turned around and ruffled his hair carelessly. “Of course I’ll make the team, Lupin, don’t you have faith in me?” Remus shrugged. “Mr. Potter! What will it take for you to be silent and remain that way?” McGonagall asked. “Five million galleons.” James replied. “I daresay that’s true,” McGonagall said dryly. “However, as I am not, nor is anyone, in possession of five million galleons, I think a detention should do the trick.” “But Professor, it was Remus who was talking —“ McGonagall’s lips twitched up in a semblance of a smile. “Perhaps so.”

James rose into the air, steady on his broomstick, listening to the Gryffindor Quidditch captain explain the rules of tryouts. James, for once, stayed quiet throughout the whole thing, his eyes trained with focus on Alix, who was waving his hands and shouting at people. The other Marauders sat in the stands, Sirius cheering
loudly and embarrassingly while Remus and Peter tried to cover their faces with their hats and scarves.

“Alright!” Alix yelled. He seemed to like that a lot, James mused, that yelling. It was beginning to hurt James’ ears.

James zoomed ahead, lowering his body against the broomstick his parents had bought him over the summer holidays. He caught the Quaffle and passed it through the hoop — one of the Keepers trying out looked at him and glared, balling her fists. James shrugged and flew away.

“Potter! Potter! Potter!” Sirius chanted, drumming his hands on the stands. Remus rolled his eyes.

“Go James!” Peter yelled, his chubby face a brilliant shade of red.

James grinned proudly and performed a loop in the air, the wind rushing into his face and hair. The ground was so far beneath him he could barely see Alix, standing on the pitch, waving his arms at the Beaters to “force your impossibly tiny brains to function like a proper wizard!” James swept down, reaching for the Quaffle, and tossed it in despite the Keeper’s best effort. She narrowed her eyes and mouthed something — it looked like a hex, but it was muttered so crudely that it could’ve been anything.

Alix blew his whistle as M.G. McGonagall — related somewhat distantly to Professor McGonagall, though how their exact connection was unclear to James — longtime Seeker, caught the snitch.

“Alright! Tryouts are over!” James dropped to the ground, leaning on his broomstick casually. “You, you, you, you, you, and you.” he pointed to James, who didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. “You can stay. The rest of you can go.” There were a series of dejected sighs and several people slumped away.

“Alright then! I’ll see you all bright and early on Tuesday morning. Five o’clock sharp. If you’re even a minute late for our first practice, I see no issue in kicking you off the team.”

“Five o’clock?” James sputtered.

“Problem?” Alix raised his eyebrows.

“No, Sir.” James said, his eyes wide.

Sirius burst into loud laughter from the stands. “No, Sir. Hey, Professor Alix!”

Alix laughed. “You’re on thin ice, Black, I may have to kick you off the pitch!”

Sirius chuckled.

“Alright. See you all tomorrow.”

James looked down and walked into the stands, keeping a straight face until he was out of earshot. Almost immediately, he tackled his friends in a hug and repeated only, “I made it,” almost in amazement, as if James Potter had ever doubted for a moment the chances of his making the team.

“Merlin, James, you may want to calm down a bit. One might think you’d been worried!” Sirius said with an amused smirk.

James laughed, his arms around his friends. “Blimey, I need to write a letter to my parents — they’ll be so proud!”

“I’m happy for you, James,” Remus said genuinely.

James was nearly dancing for joy by the end of the day.

“We’ll miss lunch if you all don’t hurry up.” Peter complained.

“You never stop thinking about food, do you?” Sirius asked, patting Peter’s slightly pudgy stomach. Peter blushed and shrunk away. “No.”

“Fine.” James ran ahead of them, doing little spins as he walked every so often. The other Marauders shook their head at him, his happiness, and looked at each other thinking that James’s natural arrogance and naivety had to be protected. He wasn’t like them; he didn’t know suffering and he wasn’t going to if any of them could help it.

“James, mate, watch where you’re going, you’re going to trip over that enormous ego of yours!” Remus called after him. James turned around and grinned, sitting down at the Gryffindor table backwards and leaning against it.

“Potter, you look unreasonably happy this evening,” McGonagall noticed as she walked through the hall, her pointed witches hat perfectly balanced atop her head. “I gather you made the Quidditch team?”
“I did, Professor,” James said proudly.
“Yes, well, don’t get too full of yourself,” she said, straightfaced. “Nicely done, Potter.” She almost looked proud of him.
James positively beamed.
“Look at McMinnie over there, she’s so proud of you,” Sirius remarked.
“She should be, I got the top mark in her class last test.” James said.
Remus groaned. “One point more and I would’ve beaten you, Potter, I’m warning you now, I may cry next time.”
“Yeah,” Sirius joked. “You might trigger his furry little problem. He’ll attack you, claws and all.”
Remus’s face fell and he seemed to crumple in on himself.
Peter put a soft, warm hand on his shoulder but was silent. Neither of them told Sirius not to joke about such things — James and Sirius were charming and intelligent, liked by most, they could, as Remus and Peter thought, do without them.
“Oi, Remus, you okay?” James asked at length, noticing that Remus had begun to scratch at his forearms, blinking quickly.
Remus forced a smile that looked stretched and unnatural. “Yes. I’m fine.”
“Are you sure?” James asked, his eyes narrowing. He moved across the table to sit next to Remus, putting an arm gently around him. Remus was trembling, his heart pounding through his ribcage.
“You can’t joke about that sort of thing. Just because you know about it doesn’t make it yours to joke about!” Remus hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but his hands were shaking and his chest hurt, because his friends didn’t understand that it wasn’t at all funny when you had to live with it.
“Okay. I’m sorry, Lupin.” Sirius said sincerely.
Remus took a deep breath.
“It’s fine.” he told Sirius, the lie slipping easily off his tongue.
Mary MacDonald giggled to Lily, who grinned smugly.
“Ah, that’s a shame, are the four of you breaking up?” Lily asked with a smirk.
“Not at all, in fact, we were just planning our wedding. We were going to invite you, but I don’t think I’d enjoy your company.”
“Shame, Potter, I was thinking of charming your hair for the occasion.”
She pointed her wand discretely out the sleeve of her robe, muttering a short incantation. James clutched his hair, trying to pull it down into his eyes.
“Sirius! What color is my hair?”
“Green,” Sirius snorted. “I’m impressed, Evans, you know how to hex people!”
“I’m impressed, Black, I heard you apologize to Remus and I wasn’t aware you knew the words ‘I’m sorry’” Lily said, turning away from the Marauders.
James shrugged. “Someone’s in a bad mood.” He muttered, taking a large bite of chicken.

While Remus was studying in the common room, the other Marauders were hiding in the third floor corridor and practicing corporeal patronuses.
James sat on the floor, his feet dangling over the edges of the staircase, and slammed open the book.
“Apparently, you have to…think of something happy?”
“Oh, bloody hell,” Sirius rolled his eyes and pulled his wand from his pocket. “Fine.” He closed his eyes tightly, thought of his friends, and found his mind wandering, inexplicably as it often did, to Remus. He thought of a shy, bright smile on Remus’s scarred face and how brave and lovely he was and he felt something stirring in his chest, something real and terrifying, and a wispy white substance floated into the air from the end of his wand and faded away.
“Was that…” Peter asked, in awe, staring at the place where the light had been.
“Almost had it,” Sirius said, flushing pink along his high, Black family cheekbones.
James waved his wand almost lazily. Happiness came naturally to him, it always had. Wisps of light flew out the end of his wand, curling around each other and disappearing. It wasn’t corporeal, or anything similar, but it was a start.
James beamed with pride.
Peter stood up, brandishing his wand like a weapon, and said, too loudly, perhaps, “Expecto Patronum!” A faint blue spark flew out the end of his wand and disappeared. He sat down, looking at the ground, and bit his lip. He had allowed himself to imagine, just for a moment, that he was as good as James and Sirius.

The three of them practiced a few more times, not getting much more than a wisp or two of blue smoke.

Remus sat in the common room, shaking, anxiety curling around his chest. The other Marauders stumbled into the common room, giggling and half asleep, late at night, and Remus rolled over, facing the window. His eyes were full of tears for a reason he didn’t quite understand but it might have been that they offered no explanation, didn’t bother with an awkward lie — simply fell into bed and slept with the luxury of knowing they were cared about and loved.
Boys Don't Cry

Chapter Summary

The first Quidditch game of the season ends in an injury. Close to the first full moon since the Marauders found out about Remus, Remus has trouble hiding his feelings.

James snuck out of the room early Tuesday morning, strapping on his Quidditch gear haphazardly and stumbling down to the field. “Nice of you to join us,” Alix said sarcastically. “You’re almost two minutes late.”

James mumbled an apology, going very pale.

“Alright, let’s talk strategy. The first game of the season is in two weeks, and if we don’t beat Ravenclaw right away they’ll win the House Cup again.” Alix sighed. “So the plan is we train up Brown over here to be the best Keeper in the school, and Johnson, MacDonald and Potter to be great Chasers — of course, M.G. has to catch the Snitch if we’re going to win — we have a lot of work to do, I’m warning you all now. If you don’t think you can handle it, it’s not too late to drop out — at this, James and Mary glared at each other — “and if you can, let’s get practicing.”

James nodded, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

“Okay, let’s practice a bit. Everyone up!”

“Potter, how’d your green hair turn out?” Mary asked, uncaring, leaning on her broomstick.

James smirked. “It faded after a couple hours, Evans should really work on her hexes.”

“I’ll suggest hot pink next time.” Mary said, turning away from him.

“MacDonald! I’ll race you to Alix,” Alix was leading the team in a heated broomstick race around the field, and James and Mary stared at each other with deep hatred as they sped towards Alix, catching up with the rest of the team.

“Chasers, go get the Quaffle, will you?” Alix asked.

“Sure,” Johnson said, flying to the ground and throwing the Quaffle into the air. “Potter, catch!”

James grabbed the Quaffle with both hands, nearly falling off his broom in the process. He threw it to Johnson — he didn’t know her first name, hardly anyone did — who flew underneath him and tossed the Quaffle at Mary.

James slumped to his first lesson, reaching up to rumple his hair only to find it had been windblown precisely the way he wanted it.

“James, you’re back,” Remus said, eyes widening. “How was practice?”

“MacDonald — you know, Evans’s friend — is on the team, and she’s a bloody pain in the arse,” James rolled his eyes. “But it was fine. Freezing, mind you, I think my toes have frosted over — “

Sirius snorted. “Even colder in here, mate, we were trying to remember what the spell for fire is, but it’s kind of early and Remus is, well, you know — “ Remus was barely half awake, still recovering from the full moon a few days previously.

“I meant to set one this morning, sorry,” James said, pulling his wand from the pocket of his robes.

“Incendio!”

A fire crackled to life in their room’s fireplace.

“Can’t believe I didn’t remember that.” Peter sighed. “Professor Sprout would be horrified, it was the first thing we learned last year in Herbology.”

“Calm down, Peter, we’re not going to announce to the entire Herbology class that three sleep-deprived second years forgot the incantation for fire.” Sirius rolled his eyes.

Peter blushed. “Alright, alright. Say, James, pass me my gloves, will you? They’re on my bedside table.”
James tossed them to him and sat down, unstrapping his Quidditch gear and pulling on a robe.
“Anyone else starving?”
“Ravenous,” Remus said, yawning. “We should go.”
The four of them stood up, exhausted from the previous night’s work.
They sat down at breakfast, rubbing their eyes, Sirius nearly falling asleep in his eggs and James
drifting off while chewing toast.
“We shouldn’t stay up that —” Peter yawned. “ — late anymore.”
Remus nodded, trying to keep his eyes open. “We have a Potions quiz today —”
“At least we can sleep in History of Magic,” Sirius said. “Just out of curiosity, do any of you actually
remember what happens in that class?”
“Don’t remember a minute of it.” James said cheerfully. “Hurry up, will you, Remus, we’re going to
be late to Potions!”
Remus sighed. “I hate Potions, Slughorn’s assigning partners today to test our ability to work with
others —”
“Hoping to end up with Evans, are you?” James teased.
“She helped me with Potions homework last year one time, don’t get me wrong, she’s brilliant at
Potions but she hates us and we hate her, in case you’d forgotten.”
“I hadn’t,” James said coolly. “I hope none of us end up with Snivellus —”
“It’ll be me,” Peter said miserably. “Snape’s great at Potions and I’m bloody awful.”
“Not really, Peter, you just get nervous,” Remus said.
“Nervous about how terrible he is,” Sirius said. He and James burst into laughter. “Only kidding,
Sir,” he added as Filch walked by, giving the four of them a glare.
“He probably knows it was us who put the hat on the tower. D’you reckon he had to get that down
himself?” Peter asked.
“All he’d have to do would be levitate it, it’s not like he had to climb up there,” James said,
chuckling at a hilarious mental image of Filch clambering up the side of the tower like a spider and
grabbing the hat. “Besides, no one knows it was us.”
“They’re going to if you don’t keep your voice down,” Remus chastised.
“Sorry.” James ducked his head. The Great Hall was starting to clear out, and the Marauders stood
up, walking slowly to Potions.
“You’re late,” Slughorn said, rising from his desk. “Twenty points from Gryffindor.”
“Twenty!” James protested. “Professor, that’s --”
“I can make it forty.” Slughorn warned. “No need to sit down. James, you’ll work with Lily —”
“Not Evans!” James argued.
“Not Potter!” Lily complained.
“No complaints. Peter, you can work with Severus —”
Severus glared at Peter, who sighed.
“Told you,” he mumbled.
“Sirus and Remus, you two can work together.” Slughorn said. They grinned at each other.
“Today, you’ll be tested on a simple Pepperup potion.” Slughorn said.
Peter turned to Severus, who was staring at him with blatant dislike. “I won’t sabotage you if you
don’t sabotage me?” Peter suggested, holding out his hand to shake.
“How about you let me make the potion and you’ll tell your idiot friends to shove off?” Severus
suggested.
Peter shrugged. “Deal.”
“Potter,” Lily said haughtily, chopping up Mandrake root.
“Evans.” He glared at her.
“I see your hair’s faded back to normal. Shame.”
“I’d offer to do yours, but it looks ridiculous enough.” James said.
Lily laughed cruelly. “I’m sorry, Potter, have you looked in a mirror recently? My hair may be a mess
but it’s nothing compared to the large rodent you have clinging to your head at all hours of the day.”
“Thank you for noticing, his name is Rattus McGoatslugs.”
“Oh, shove off, Potter, at least she bothers to brush hers.” Severus spat.
“At least I bother to wash mine.” James shot back.
“No fighting! Am I going to have to fail all of you?” Slughorn demanded.
“No, Professor, that won’t be necessary.” Lily said quickly.
“Alright, Evans,” his eyes softened. “Get back to work.”
“Evans, I think Slughorn’s in love with you,” Sirius said. Remus laughed.
“Not with me,” Lily said, holding her head high. “Just with my potion-making skills. Something you all seem to lack.” She looked at the Marauders, three out of four of whom were actually quite good at Potions. “Potter, pass me the Mandrake roots, will you?”
“Fine.” James picked up the chopped roots and put them in her hand, careful not to even brush her fingers.
“I haven’t got the plague, Potter, and neither do the roots.” Lily said matter-of-factly. “If you drop them we’ll have to go get more, and Slughorn will lower our grade, so try not to look too disgusted.” Severus chuckled.
“Remus, for Merlin’s sake, try to stay awake,” Sirius complained as Remus slumped over their potion.
“S-s-sorry,” Remus yawned. “I was awake for a couple hours after the rest of you went to bed.”
“Reading again?” Sirius asked.
Remus shrugged noncommittally.
“Are we doing this right?” Sirius asked.
“No!” James interjected.
Remus glanced into their potion. “Provided it doesn’t explode, I think we actually are, James!”
“It won’t.” Sirius said confidently. The potion began to steam. “Er…I think it won’t.”
“It will.” Remus said.
“Don’t be so negative.” James chided.
“Yeah, well I’m a negative person.” Remus said loudly in order to be heard across the classroom.
“That’s a dreadful thing to be. Perfectly awful.”
“I came here to make potions, not get life lessons from someone who can’t tie his own shoelaces.” Remus said, grinning.
James made a rude gesture at him and chuckled.
“If we fail this, Remus, I swear to Merlin you’re dead to me.” Sirius said darkly, watching the potion bubble.
Remus stiffened. “No, no, I’m sorry — I didn’t mean — it’ll be fine, I’m sure —”
“Joke, Lupin,” Sirius rolled his eyes. Remus tried to steady his breathing and focus on stirring the potion, but his hands were shaking. “Here, let me try. You can add the Bicorn horn.”
“Mm — yeah, okay.” Remus dropped the horn into the green, bubbling mixture.
“Hey, Remus, you alright?” James turned away from his own potion, noticing that Remus was shaking.
“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay. I’m fine.” Remus said, trying to calm down. He’d known Sirius was joking — but after everything, after making these friends, losing the Marauders would be like losing a limb.
“Hey, Remus, it stopped bubbling, guess I don’t have to kill you now.” Sirius said. “Shame.”
Remus managed a laugh. “Do you think it’s done?”
“Must be.” Sirius shrugged. “Professor Slughorn!” Slughorn walked over and looked down at their potion. “Nice work, Lupin, Black. Excellent.”
“Thank you, Professor,” Remus said proudly.

“Blimey,” Sirius said. “Nearly two months at school and not one letter from my parents. Not one, can you believe it? Last year I got five in a week. They’re probably too focused on Reg to care about me, anyway, but I think this is a record amount of time in my entire life that I haven’t managed to get told off. I simply must do something to infuriate them.”
“Congratulations,” James said drily.
Remus managed a dry chuckle that sounded like a cough.
“Remus, are you alright?” Peter asked.
Remus nodded, wrapping the comforter on his bed tightly around his shoulders. “It’s…you know…
the…since it was just yesterday.” He said quietly, curling into a ball.
“Is there anything we can do?” James asked, taking the blankets off his own bed and putting them on
Remus’s.
“N-no, I’m f-fine.” Remus shivered.
James touched Remus’s forehead. “You should go to the hospital wing, your forehead is moments
away from catching on fire.”
“N-no, I’ll just sleep it off.” Remus lay down, his eyes very bright.
“Siri, Pete,” James hissed. “We should —“
Remus stirred in his bed.
“work on you-know-what, okay?” After nearly a month of practice, James could conjure a
functioning patronus, not quite corporeal but solid, a strong blue shield of light. Sirius’s patronus was
nearly as good, while Peter’s was barely a patronus at all. He practiced every chance he could get —
in the toilets, in the shower, while doing his homework — but couldn’t quite manage it yet.
The boys returned to the common room nearly an hour later, and James crawled into his bed, his
eyes bleary with exhaustion. He noticed Remus breathing shallowly, tears streaming down his face,
and sat quietly next to Remus instead of sleeping as he so desperately wanted to.
“What’s wrong?” James whispered. Remus wrapped his arms tightly around his friend, leaning his
face into James’s shoulder.
“I don’t want to cry, I’m sorry —“ Remus said shakily. “I’m so — tired — and I’m scared because
this is the first month in my life that someone other than my parents and Dumbledore and the
Ministry have known what I am and I’m scared that if you see me like that you’ll know — what a
monster I am, what a werewolf really is — I’m sorry, I’m sorry —“
“You are not a monster.” James said. “You have a condition —“
“It’s what I am, it’s all I am…” Remus didn’t know why, but he couldn’t stop shaking. “I want to
feel like a person again, James, why can’t I feel that?”
“Don’t be ridiculous, of course you’re a person, you’re one of my best mates, you’re Remus Lupin!
*Our* Remus Lupin. We don’t think of you differently now that we know. I swear it.”
Remus felt a lump growing in his throat and wouldn’t let himself speak.
James lay down beside him and waited until the boy fell asleep next to him.
Remus looked different asleep -- this was, James knew, an odd thing to think, but unconsciousness
made him look like a child -- without his ancient eyes revealing his secret, he could've been anyone.
They all stumbled down to breakfast the next morning in a tired haze.
“Potter!” Alix leaned across the table to look at him. “You ready for the game today?”
James nodded, taking a large bite of toast. “Yeah, I’m ready.”
“You all look tired,” Alix remarked. “Up all night studying?”
“Something like that,” Sirius muttered.
“Come on, James, we should go warm up before the game.” Alix said, patting him on the back.
“Yeah, alright.” James stood up and followed his teammates out of the Hall, waving a quick
goodbye to the other Marauders.
“Thank Merlin for Quidditch, we’re missing Potions,” Peter panted, struggling to keep up with
Remus and Sirius.
“Hurry up, you two, we’re going to need good seats if we want to see James — oh. Evans.” Sirius’s
eyes narrowed. Lily glanced at him.
“I’m sitting here to support Mary.” She said haughtily. She’d painted red and gold stripes under her
eyes. “Go find somewhere else.”
“Come on, Evans, there are loads of empty seats here.” Sirius complained.
Lily shifted away from him. “Fine. You can sit here.”
“Excellent,” Sirius put his feet up on the railing.
Lily rolled her eyes.
“Licorice wand, Lily?” Peter asked. He always brought sweets to Quidditch games.
Lily was about to refuse, but she did really, really like licorice wands. She accepted one and took an angry bite of it, glaring at James, who was sitting on his broomstick and doing flips in the air. He grinned at the Marauders, who all waved to him.

“Welcome to the first game of the Quidditch season, this time between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor,” the commentator announced. “I’m Katherine Jordan, your commentator for this year since Greta was hit in the head with a Bludger by the bloody Slytherins last year and was in St. Mungo’s all summer —”

“Jordan!” McGonagall hissed.

“Apolologies, Professor. The Ravenclaw team is coming onto the field, there’s captain and Keeper Bertram Aubrey, facing off against Astrix Alixander, Beater and captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. The Quaffle is released, and they’re taking off —”

“There’s James, look, right there — Peter pointed out to Remus. James turned to his friends momentarily and waved, before catching the Quaffle and passing it to Mary.

“Potter passes to MacDonald, oh, bad luck there, MacDonald —” Mary had dropped the Quaffle and one of the Ravenclaw players had caught it, pushing Mary aside in the process.

Lily stood up and cheered. “Come on, Mary!” she yelled. Mary struggled to balance on her broomstick again and she chased after the Quaffle.

“Johnson in possession of the Quaffle, she shoots — ten points to Gryffindor!”

All the Gryffindors cheered.

“Ravenclaw has the Quaffle — Alix takes a Bludger to the foot, that’s going to hurt in the morning — Potter steals the Quaffle —”

James flew towards the hoop, ready to toss the Quaffle in, and was shoved by a Ravenclaw.

“That’s a foul!” Jordan shouted into the microphone. "In his first game of the season, too, what a nightmare —"

A Ravenclaw Chaser made a dive for the Quaffle and scored a sloppy goal.

"Ten points to Ravenclaw!"

"McGonagall and Grey in a mad chase for the Snitch -- Potter and Thatcher wrestling over the Quaffle, that was a foul, for God’s sake -- oh I can’t believe it! McGonagall catches the snitch! Gryffindor wins!"

As the words left her mouth, James was unable to pull away from his inevitable crash and fell head over broomstick onto the ground.

The other Chaser stood up, dusting off his clothes, and smirked at James’ disheveled form on the ground.

“He did that on purpose, bloody —” Sirius exclaimed, outraged. “Thatcher! Get your cowardly arse over here so I can kick it!”

Thatcher ignored him.

“Hey! Arse face!” Peter yelled, his face quite red with anger. “Thatcher!”

“Please don’t verbally harass the other team, Mr. Pettigrew,” McGonagall said coolly.

“He meant to hurt James!”

Remus was silent, but his jaw was clenched, his eyes flat and dark.

“It will be dealt with. Quidditch injuries are quite common.”

“James!” Sirius ran off the stands to help James up.

James coughed. “I’m fine, relax.”

“You fell fifty feet!” Remus protested.

“Potter, you need to go to the hospital wing!” Alix insisted, favoring his foot a bit.

“I’m fine, don’t worry about it,” James said. “Just want to make sure everyone made it out alive.” He took a step forward and stumbled. “On second thought…perhaps I’ll just…sit down.”

“Wait for Madam Pomfrey. She’ll be here soon.” Peter said.

“You’re being ridiculous, I’m absolutely fine.”

Sirius sighed. “James, don’t be such a bloody martyr all the time.”

James crossed his arms. “Ridiculous. It’s just a scratch.”

“You’ve probably broken something,” Remus knelt in front of him. “Can you move all your
“Only need one, I think,” James said cheekily.
“Hilarious,” Remus grumbled. “Lumos!” the tip of his wand lit up. “Okay. Follow my wand with
your eyes.”
“Remus, you’re making me dizzy.” James complained.
“I haven’t moved it yet,” Remus said. “Wonderful. Congratulations, James, you’ve managed a lovely
head injury.”
“How fantastic,” James said faintly.
“He’s looking very green, Remus,” Peter warned.
Just as Remus stepped back, James threw up the contents of his breakfast onto his shoes.
“Madam Pomfrey,” Sirius said resignedly. “James has vomited.”
“Just wonderful.” She said briskly, helping James to his feet. “Come on, up you get—“
“He’s a bloody idiot sometimes, I swear,” Remus said, his voice warm with affection.
“Everyone is, at your age.” Madam Pomfrey said. “He’ll grow out of it.”
Remus grinned, shaking his head. “Nah. I don’t think he’ll ever really stop being our James.”
“You think he’ll do this every game?” Peter asked, wringing his hands.
“This is James Potter we’re talking about, course he will. It’ll be a game for him to see how many
bones he can break, the idiot.” Sirius said.

“I have to go, it’s getting dark—“ Remus said.
“We’re going with you, with or without James.” Peter insisted.
“It’s dangerous,” Remus looked distressed.
“We can’t leave you.”
“I live with this every month, have since I was five. It’s not the end of the world—“
“Can we at least walk you to the hospital wing?” Peter interrupted.
Remus blinked, shocked. “I— I think so.”
“Alright, let’s go, then,” Sirius said.
Remus stood up too fast and his vision went black.
“Take my hand, I’ll help you,” Peter said. Remus accepted it gratefully, and the three of them walked
slowly down the staircase, Remus, although in pain, was dazed by his own good luck in making
such wonderful friends.
“Ah, hullo, boys,” James said from his hospital bed, his forehead haphazardly bandaged.
Madam Pomfrey took Remus’s arm. “How are you feeling?”
“Merlin!” James exclaimed. “I nearly forgot! Are you going to be alright?” He looked as if he
might’ve tried to stand if he’d been able, and Peter sat on his legs to stop him.
Remus rolled his eyes. “This isn’t my first full moon, James.”
“I know. But this is the first time we’ve known about it. Take care of yourself, alright, mate?”
Remus managed a small smile. “I’ll try.”
Madam Pomfrey clamped her arm firmly around Remus’s shoulder, helping him outside to the
Whomping Willow.
“How is it, having people know?” she asked kindly.
“James is worse than my mum, he always wants to know how I’m feeling, and I think Sirius and
Peter are a little bit afraid of me being…you know…”
“Dangerous?”
“I am dangerous.” At least, tonight I am. Remus stepped weakly into the tunnel, stumbling up the
stairs. The full moon rose over the Shrieking Shack, and he was lost.

Remus opened his eyes, the Shrieking Shack blurring around him.
He took a deep breath.
I survived. I survived. He lay there on the ground for a moment, calm, and quiet with tears frozen on
his face. He liked to imagine in these moments that he was dying, that the pain he felt would end in a
moment and he would just be able to close his eyes and never have to do this again.

“Remus?” Sirius said softly.

Remus’s amber eyes flew open. “Sirius?” He sat up gingerly, twisting his back. Sirius knelt beside him, silent and serious.

Peter wrapped Remus in a blanket and handed him a piece of chocolate.

“Blimey,” was all he could manage to say. Hardly any of Remus’s skin was unmarked, his clothes were torn to shreds in a pile next to him.

“It’s been much worse,” Remus said. “I have some robes under that floorboard, just there —” he pointed, his fingers cracking as he moved them.

Sirius handed them to him.

“I should go to the hospital wing,” Remus said, gritting his teeth. He didn’t want his friends to ever have to see how much pain he was in — he was just thankful that James was still in the hospital wing and wasn’t there to fuss over him.

“Can you walk?” Peter worried.

Remus stood up, stumbling towards the door, grinding his teeth together.

“Let us help you, mate,” Sirius said, offering his arm.

Remus shook his head.

“Don’t be stupid, Lupin, you can’t do this by yourself —”

“I always have.” Remus insisted, using the wall of the tunnel for support.

“Remus —”

“Go.” Remus said harshly. “Go, I’m not going to get out of here until you do!”

Sirius and Peter exchanged a look and walked slowly out of the tunnel, leaving Remus to sink to the ground, sobbing.

—

“How is he?” James asked as he saw his friends. Sirius and Peter were both exceptionally pale.

“This isn’t a game, James, it’s not a joke.” Sirius said, his long hair falling into his face. “I didn’t get it before.”

“What happened?”

“He…he looks dreadful, and he wouldn’t let us help him —” Peter stuttered. “It was horrible.” Madam Pomfrey was tending to another patient when she overheard their conversation.

“I’ll get him,” she said, sighing. She marched down to the Whomping Willow and opened the passage. Remus was curled inside, a blanket wrapped around him, tears streaming down his face.

Madam Pomfrey knelt beside him and helped the boy to his feet.

“I don’t want them to do that again, I can’t let them — they —” Remus bit his lip. “I don’t want to see them.”

“Lupin, they care about you.”

“It isn’t their job.” Remus leaned on her as they walked back to the castle. He sat down on his usual bed in the hospital wing, trying to relax. Madam Pomfrey brought him the usual assortment of pain potions.

“Remus, I’m so sorry —” Peter said, looking distraught.

“It’s alright,” Remus shook his head.

“No, we should’ve asked first.” Sirius said.

“Don’t feel bad, you didn’t know better.” All of Remus’s anger drained away when he saw his friends’ expressions.

“It won’t ever happen again.” Peter said. “Promise.”

Remus smiled. “Okay. James, how’s your head?”

“ Barely hurts at all,” James sighed. “Madam Pomfrey, can I go?”

“No. However, Mr. Pettigrew and Mr. Black should go to class.” Madam Pomfrey said.

Peter and Sirius looked at each other and sighed. “We’ll be back at lunch,” Sirius said apologetically.

James and Remus looked at each other and shrugged.

“Want these?” James asked, shaking a package of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans. “I won’t eat them after a run in with a vomit flavored one.”
“Sounds appetizing.” Remus said, accepting the package anyway and taking one. “Disgusting.” He gagged. “Grass clippings.”
“Ugh!” James made a face. “Sorry, mate. You’ve already been through enough.” Remus laughed. “You try. This one looks alright.”

“Finally,” Sirius collapsed on James’s bunk as James and Remus walked back into the room together. “That took all day. Remus, you’re usually in the hospital wing for longer, are you feeling better?”
Remus smiled thinly. “No, Madam Pomfrey said I could stay in our dormitory tomorrow instead of the hospital wing.
“Sorry,” James said. “Madam Pomfrey was worried I’d re-injure my head if I was running around with you lot all day. It was broken, you know.”
“Don’t be dramatic, James, it was a bruise.” Sirius sighed.
“We’re glad you’re alright, though.” Peter added.
“Of course. How did you survive without your fearless leader?” James rumpled his hair under the bandaged wrapped haphazardly around his forehead.
“We did quite well on our own, today, thanks, Peter was nearly devoured by a mandrake, the idiot, and I had to pry his hand out of its mouth before anyone noticed,” Sirius said, nudging Peter affectionately.
“Snivellus made a joke about you and Remus in Transfiguration and I had to physically restrain Sirius from hexing him, McGonagall looked entirely unamused,” Peter sighed.
“Well, we’re back now,” James threw his arms around his friends’ shoulders and leaned back. “Don’t worry.” “I wasn’t.” Sirius muttered.
Chapter Summary

Remus is suspicious of what the other Marauders are always doing when he isn't around, but they won't tell him what they're up to. At the end of their second year, James, Sirius, and Peter master corporeal patronuses and begin hunting down potions ingredients.

It was a stormy Saturday evening the next time James, Sirius, and Peter managed to sneak away from Remus long enough to learn how to cast corporeal patronuses.

“I think Remus is getting suspicious,” Peter said. “Can’t we just tell him?”

“No. He’d never want us to do this for him. He wouldn’t allow it.” James said. “C’mon, we haven’t got much time.”

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, remembering the first time they’d gotten away with a prank, the days on weekends when they lay on their beds all day, playing Gobstones in the early hours of morning and Remus cutting Sirius’s hair over the bathroom sink while Sirius squirmed and complained, group hugs, coming home to see his parents and watching their eyes light up when they picked him up from King’s Cross, McGonagall giving him detention and telling him she was proud of him for his progress in Transfiguration even if he was a disruption at times, playing Quidditch and lying on the field after a game with his teammates, sneaking down into the kitchens during the full moon and bringing back food for Remus when he was too weak to go to meals, getting his Hogwarts letter... “Expecto Patronum!” he shouted, and a stag made entirely of glowing blue light erupted from the tip of his wand, prancing around the room, in the air.


James laughed in pure exhilaration, guiding the stag around the room.

“Expecto Patronum,” Sirius, looking around at his friends’ awed and smiling faces. A large dog ran into the air to join the stag, and they chased each other in circles, James and Sirius grinning at each other, their eyes lighting up like candles.

“You try, Peter!” James exclaimed.

Peter stood up and whispered the incantation, rather stuttered from happiness, with a wide smile on his round face. A small silvery rat, rather more transparent than the others, joined them in the air. The three animals chased each other in circles as their casters watched, transfixed, gleeful from success.

“We did it,” James said, his face flushed. “What’s the next step, Pete?”

Peter pulled out The Animagus and read, “mix together a potion with the following ingredients... oh, blimey, Professor Slughorn definitely doesn’t have these in his potions cabinet.” He showed the book to James and Sirius.

James smiled reassuringly. “We’ll make it work. We’ve got to.”

“We could die, this is really dangerous — “ Peter protested. “I want to do this as much as you do. But I don’t want to die for it.”

“We can handle it,” Sirius promised. “We’re not stupid enough to die, anyhow.”

“We aren’t indestructible.”

“Yeah, we are.”

“Has everyone begun studying for their Charms test?” Flitwick asked.

A few people nodded, Lily and Remus among them. Sirius examined his nails and looked, as usual, bored.
“Wel,, you had all best be getting started!”
“We’re second years, it’s not as if we’ll die if we fail,” Remus said, noticing Peter’s horrified expression. As if I’ll ever get a job, anyways, he thought bitterly.
“Yeah, I reckon you’re right.” Peter nodded.
“Poor Pettigrew, worried you’ll fail?” Severus asked, his eyes lit up and gleeful.
“Not as worried as you should be about the grease stains on your desk.” Peter said, swallowing a giggle. James and Sirius roared with laughter.
“At least their won’t be sweat stains on my chair from your fat arse,” Severus spat.
“Oi,” Sirius said, moving subconsciously in front of Peter, as if to protect him. “Sod off, Snivellus.” Severus rolled his eyes. “Don’t think I will.”
“Boys!” Professor Flitwick squeaked angrily. “Pay attention! You don’t want me to have to warn you again.”
James stifled a laugh. “Of course not, Professor.”
“Detention, Potter,” Flitwick snapped. “As I was saying, your Charms test at the end of this year will consist of three parts — write down what I’m saying, please, you’ll need it —“
The class copied notes, James doodling broomsticks and eyes and the Snitch on his parchment.

“Oi,” James said, crossing his arms and staring down at a first year sitting in his and Sirius’ arm chair in the common room. “Move it.”
The girl stood up and scampered away, cheeks burning with embarrassment, as James and Sirius sat down, legs comfortably thrown over one another.
“Blasted Flitwick and his bloody essays,” Sirius muttered. “Say, if I was to list the side effects of the Whistling Charm, would I start with whistling or steam coming out of your ears?”
“Whistling,” James said, looking up from his Potions homework. “Hey, isn’t this one of the ingredients in you know what?” he pointed to the Potion instructions for Felix Filicis.
“Century old rabbit bones? I think so.” James said excitedly.
“What?” Remus asked.
“Nothing.” Peter said quickly.
Remus sighed and ran a hand through his hair.
“D’you reckon Slughorn has any?” Sirius whispered.
“I reckon we should take a trip to his office tonight.” James said with a grin.
After Remus went to bed, three of four Marauders snuck, under the safety of the Invisibility Cloak, into Slughorn’s private office.
“Boomslang skin…newt eyes…unicorn hair…” James ran his fingers over the shelves. “Rabbit feet…rabbit ears…rabbit bones!” He grabbed the jar off the shelf and handed it to Sirius.
“Okay, let’s go —” Peter started to say.
“Running around after bed, are we, boys?” Filch asked with a devilish grin, shining his lantern in their faces. They all jumped. “I hope you have a damn good explanation for this.”
Sirius hid the rabbit bones behind his back. “Sir, we —“
“Not to me, Black. This one goes straight to Professor McGonagall. I’d reckon she’s just going to love this.”
They exchanged wide-eyed looks.
“Come with me,” Filch said, his laughter echoing down the darkened corridor.
“Absolutely disgraceful!” McGonagall hissed, wrapped in an emerald green dressing gown, her long greying hair braided down her back. “Detention for the three of you, and twenty points from Gryffindor each! You know how I loathe to take points from my own house, but I’ve never been so ashamed of my own students. I should really let Professor Slughorn deal with you, as you raided his potions cabinet — what were you looking for, anyway?” Sirius pushed the rabbit bones into the pocket of his robes.
“Nothing, Professor,” Peter said.
“Tell me you boys weren’t looking for a cure for Remus’s lycanthropy,” McGonagall sighed. “three second years aren’t going to cure Lupin’s condition, I’m sorry. I’m sure you’d like to, but there’s
nothing you can do.”
Sirius saw the opportunity arise and blinked several times, rubbing his eyes. “I’m sorry, Professor,”
he said, forcing a tremor into his voice. “We just wanted to help him.”
McGonagall looked at him over her spectacles. “Which was incredibly foolish of you.”
“I know,” Sirius mumbled, looking down to hide his growing smirk.
“Did you steal any potions ingredients?” McGonagall asked.
“No,” James lied.
“I can smell aged rabbit bones from Mr. Black’s robes.” She said coldly.
“Professor, please,” Peter stuttered.
“Please what, Pettigrew, be quick about it.”
“We’re trying to —“
James gave Peter the most threatening look he could manage.
“We’re — we’re trying to —“
“I know what you’re doing,” McGonagall sighed. “And I hope you’re aware that it’s entirely illegal
to become an unregistered Animagus.”
“Please, Professor,” James said. “We have to do this for Remus.”
“Absolutely not! It’s too dangerous. I simply can’t permit this, Potter. You can go back to the
Gryffindor tower immediately. Black, stay behind for a moment?”
He stood across from her, drumming his hands on her desk, the very picture of casual.
“I won’t report you to Headmaster Dumbledore. However, if I catch any of you out of bed after
hours again, there will be dire consequences.”
“Thank you so much, Professor —“
“You still all get detention.” McGonagall said. “Cleaning cauldrons in the Dungeons, tomorrow
night after dinner. You can meet Professor Filch here.”
Sirius sighed and walked back up the stairs to the common room.
“Gillyweed,” he said, unable to hide his smile.
“Someone’s in a good mood,” the Fat Lady said as she swung aside. He climbed into the common
room and raced up the stairs.
“McGonagall didn’t make me put the bones back.” Sirius said excitedly.
“Excellent!” James grinned. “Put them under my bed.”
Sirius stored the jar next to the cloak and smirked at it, nearly bursting with pride.

By the end of the year, they nearly had every ingredient for the potion, but were hardly focused on
becoming Animagi. If anything, most people would say they were more focused on hexing people
— strangers, first years, with an emphasis on Slytherins — and pulling overly obvious pranks than
any tests they might’ve had.
Of course, all the Marauders but Peter barely spent a moment studying and still achieved higher than
Peter could’ve dreamed.
“Lily,” Peter said. The other Marauders looked up from trying to enchant the fireplace to turn the fire
purple.
“Yes, Peter?” she replied, her green eyes wide and shocked. Mary and Lily’s other friend Marlene
giggled.
“Er… I was wondering if you could help me study for Transfiguration…”
“Oh, Pete, you should really know the answers to those questions by now.” Sirius said.
“Why can’t Potter help you?” Lily asked.
“He thinks it’s stupid that I’m not good at Transfiguration.” Peter muttered.
“Because it is,” James said.
“Remus can —“
“He’s out. Visiting his mum.”
“Oh. Is she ill?” Lily said, momentarily concerned despite herself.
“Yes. Very,” Peter said, his face turning red. “Please, it’s only this one question I’m struggling with.”
“Alright, alright. Swear you won’t hex me.”
“I swear.” Peter said solemnly.
“We don’t.” James and Sirius said in unison.
“Pets into water goblets?” Lily asked. “We learned this earlier this year!”
“I know,” Peter said. “You don’t have to make me feel worse about it.”
Lily laughed. “Oh, come off it, Peter. Here,” she reached for Marlene’s cat. “Just tap it three times.
One, two, three, *vera vert.*” The cat turned into a large silver goblet.
“Oh — okay,” Peter said. Lily tapped the cat and it changed back, looking disgruntled and confused.
“You try.”
Marlene started to stop him, but decided to watch instead. She hoped she’d have her cat back in one piece, but, on the other hand, it was a furry pain in the arse.
“One, two, three,” Peter said, “*vera vert.*” The cat transformed into a slightly furry water goblet.
“See, you’ve almost got it!” Lily said encouragingly. Mary and Marlene both applauded, and Peter blushed. “James and Sirius are being idiots. You’re not stupid for not knowing the spell, don’t worry.”
“Thanks,” Peter said. “Marlene, can I keep practicing on your cat?”
“Sure,” Marlene said, running a hand through her long dark hair. “His name is Whiskers, by the way.”
Peter picked up the cat, covering a sneeze as its fur tickled his nose.
“One, two, three, *vera vert,*” Peter said. The cat turned back into a furry goblet, this time complete with whiskers.
“You’ll get it, Peter,” Lily promised.
Peter grinned shyly. “Thanks, Lily.”

“Jamie!”
James dashed off the Hogwarts Express, Sirius, as always, close behind him. Mr. and Mrs. Potter embraced their son, thrilled to see him.
The Marauders exchanged goodbyes and left, splitting three ways, this time, instead of four. The Black parents were waiting for Regulus at the station and didn’t acknowledge their older son’s presence except to turn up their noses as if they could smell the blood traitor on him.
“Have you talked to your brother at all?” James asked quietly.
“Not once. He feels guilty about not talking to me.” Sirius shrugged nonchalantly. “But my mum and dad are…well…you know. They’re pureblood.”
“So are you.”
“I’m a blood traitor. I don’t mind it.”
“Of course you do,” James said softly. “How could you not mind it?”
“Because I’m not a prejudiced arse.”
“Just a regular one,” James teased, and Sirius laughed.
“Boys, not so loud,” Mr. Potter chided, a twinkle in his eyes.
“Can Remus and Peter come over for dinner tomorrow?” James asked hopefully. Sirius made a begging expression.
Mrs. Potter sighed indulgently. “I suppose so.”
“Blimey, thanks Mum! Come on, Sirius, race you off the platform!”
“Thanks Mu — Mrs. Potter,” Sirius said, sprinting after James.

Peter stumbled through the Potters’ fireplace later the next evening, covered in soot, but he didn’t bother to dust off before hugging Sirius and James as tightly as he could manage.
“Oi, Petey,” James said in an exaggerated stage whisper. “Guess what?”
“What?” Peter sighed.
“Come on, let me show you.”
“Oh…okay…?” Remus frowned. James dragged him upstairs by the hand and ducked into his closet.
“Look.” James whispered, pulling out a jar.
“Is that…no. Can’t be.”
“A stillborn dragon, born on the full moon? Yes, it is,” James grinned proudly, messing up his hair. Remus, at a loss for words, stared down at the jar and shook his head. “Where did you get this?”
“Borgin and Burkes, of course. Dad was picking up something yesterday. The Ministry thought something might be one of Lord Voldemort’s things and had to confiscate it. Sirius and I saw the dragon and begged my mum for it —”
“You didn’t tell her —” Peter’s voice momentarily filled with panic.
“Obviously not, I’m not an idiot —”
“Debatable.” Sirius interjected.
“Bugger off,” James laughed. “I think there are some words you’re searching for, Pete, and those words are thank you James and Sirius, you two are the absolute best, the only reason that we’ll ever achieve our goal of becoming Animagi which, aside from helping our best mate aside from each other, will be really bloody cool.”

Peter giggled.

“Hello —” Remus said, walking through the doorway. James pushed the dragon into his closet and smiled innocently. Remus let out a sigh. So it’s going to be like it is in school. Them always lying to me.

He forced a returning grin.

“Boys! Dinner!” Mrs. Potter yelled up the stairs.

“Race?” James suggested.

The Marauders sprinted down the stairs, Remus nearly tripping over Sirius’s feet and Peter coming in dead last, huffing and puffing with a sheen of sweat on his pale, pudgy face.

Mr. Potter chuckled. “Good evening, boys,” he said affectionately.

“Evening, Sir,” Remus said politely, holding his breath. Sirius gently touched Remus’s arm, as if to say, he doesn’t know. You’re safe.

“Good to see you, Remus,” Mr. Potter patted his back fondly. “And Peter! You’ve grown!”

Peter puffed out his chest proudly. “Five centimeters, sir.”

“Listen to these boys, calling me Sir, Jamie, what do you call me? Dad…Father…food-provider…”

He ruffled his son’s hair. “Remus, Peter, you’ll call me Fleamont of course.”

“Thank you, Si — Fleamont,” Remus said.

“Well, sit down, it’s good to see you all. Peter, Remus, how have your holidays been?”

“Excellent,” Remus said animatedly. “Mum and Dad both found jobs, finally, so we’re doing really well at the moment.”

“That’s great, Remus. And if your family ever needs anything, don’t hesitate to ask. It isn’t as if we haven’t got enough galleons lying around.” It was true: just moments before, Peter had found a galleon under the cushion of his seat and had immediately pocketed it. Remus’s eyes widened considerably. “No, Sir -- Fleamont, I mean -- that really isn’t necessary! Really! We’re perfectly alright!”

James snorted. “Yeah, sure, Loopy.”

Remus glared across the table.

“Anyway, Peter, I trust your holidays have been excellent?” Mrs. Potter said. “I’m so sorry about your father.”

Peter looked down at his hands. “Yes, er, they’ve been wonderful, and…well, you know how it is when someone dies, it’s difficult to get used to. But it’s all fine, of course, I’m fine.”

“For Merlin’s sake, don’t make the poor boy talk about his father over dinner,” Mr. Potter said sternly. “Sirius, have you heard from your parents?”

Sirius nearly choked on his dinner. One couldn’t miss the irony in his words — switching from one painful topic to the next without a second thought. “No, no Sir, as long as I’m still welcome I think I’m here for the summer.”

“Of course, son, stay as long as you’d like. Merlin knows Jamie could use the company.” Sirius, Remus, and Peter sniggered, while James looked mildly horrified.

“Yes, I know Jamie loves having me around.” Sirius guffawed.

“Say, Jamie, did you do our Transfiguration homework?” Peter asked.
“Dad, we agreed you wouldn’t call me that anymore — I’m thirteen now, you can stop —” James protested, going red.

“But you’ll always be my Jamie,” Mrs. Potter said, ruffling his hair.

“Um — er — do you lot want to go play Quidditch out back?” James suggested, his cheeks burning. He stared at his parents with narrowed eyes.

Remus was the only one to take pity on him. “Alright,” he paused. “Jamie.”

“Even you, Remus?” James asked, sighing melodramatically. “Such treachery!”

“Sirius is rubbing off on you,” Mr. Potter commented offhandedly. “Ever the dramatic one, Siri is.”

“Siri?” James burst into louder than necessary laughter. “HA! REVENGE!”

“Sorry, Jamie, Reg’s been calling me that for years.” Sirius shrugged apologetically. “How about that Quidditch, eh?”

“Have fun, boys!” Mrs. Potter called after them as they dashed out the door.

“Alright, we don’t have enough for a full team, but we have a Quidditch set, so I’ll be Chaser and Beater, Remus, you’ll be Seeker and Keeper —’’

“I’ve never…er…played…Quidditch…I mean, aside from Flying Lessons, but Madam Hooch hasn’t taught us how to play really…” Remus looked embarrassed.

“It’s alright, here look —” James held up a ball. “It isn’t really a Snitch, just a ball charmed to fly away from you, but it’s the same idea. You fly after it and we win if you catch it. Siri and Pete, you can be on a team too, choose your positions —”

“Seeker and Keeper,” Sirius said excitedly — he really did like Quidditch, always had, but he loathed the thought of training day and night as James did.

“Blimey it’s hard to play with only four people,” James said. “So, Pete, you have to be Chaser and Beater, best of luck with that — ready, boys?”

“Sure, alright,” they rose into the air, Peter wobbling dangerously; he’d never had the best balance. James threw the makeshift Quaffle into the air and jumped onto his broom. “Going to have to catch me, Petey!”

Peter flew after him, high into the air, towards the hoop Fleamont had built when James was eight. James threw the Quaffle through Sirius and Peters’ hoop, Sirius missing the chance to deflect it. Sirius swore loudly.

“Ooooooh, bad luck, Siri! The Quaffle in Peter’s possession — and he drops it, the damn fool — ooh, James in possession, Remus and Sirius on the hunt for the Snitch — WATCH OUT FOR THE LOVE OF MERLIN, PETER, I DON’T WANT TO BE PICKING UP SHATTERED PIECES OF PETTIGREW AFTER THIS! DO YOUR JOB!”

Peter hit a Bludger away from him, his face red.

“Sirius spots the Snitch, Remus is momentarily distracted by a cloud shaped like my lovely face — “ James yelled.

“Shove off!” Remus joked.

“NEVER!” James exclaimed. “Oooh, another point to Rames! Sirius is a bloody awful Keeper, but who really cares about that —”

“Rames?” Remus sputtered. Sirius dove after the Snitch.

“Can’t say Gryffindor, Remus and James takes too long. It was either Rames or Jemus, which sounds odd.”

“Rames,” Remus repeated, laughing. It was stupid, of course, but something about it, being part of a team, made him feel warm and special and loved. His earlier disappointment at being lied to faded.


Peter blushed.

“James, Bludger!” Remus yelled.

James sent the Bludger spinning towards Peter. “We could really do with another Beater!”

“Merlin, I’d get myself killed if I did it!” Remus exclaimed, blocking another one of Peter’s badly aimed shots.
“True, you’re more uncoordinated than Peter,”
“I bloody know!” Remus said, as Sirius nearly knocked him off his broom. “Catch the Snitch and let me put my feet on solid ground before I vomit, please.”
“Gladly,” Sirius smirked and zoomed after the Snitch, catching it and rolling sideways onto the ground.
“Peter and Sirius win,” James sighed dejectedly. “Good game, though. Ready for another go?”
Peter and Remus vehemently shook their heads. “No!”
“Fine.” James moved to pull his wand from his robes when he remembered that his wand was in a drawer upstairs. “Bloody underage magic rules! I just want to collect the brooms without having to walk, is it too much to ask?”
“James, you’d be a public menace without underage magic rules.” Remus said affectionately.
“Hexing everyone in sight, of course. Peter, you’d better get a good job, because you’re going to pay James and Sirius’ way out of Azkaban multiple times.”
“Why can’t you do it, you’re brilliant!” Momentarily, Peter had forgotten about Remus’s condition. Remus cleared his throat loudly.
“What?” Peter asked.
“Furry little problem, Pete,” Sirius said, clapping Peter on the back.
“Oh, yeah, sorry, Remus.”
Remus bit his lip. “It’s alright. Don’t worry about it.”
“Dessert, anyone? I think we have licorice wands in the cupboard.” James suggested.
“Excellent!”
“Potter,” Lily said coldly, walking past him the Gryffindor common room. She’d grown over the summer, it was the first thing James noticed. Her dark red hair was now barely past her shoulders, and it made her face seem more sophisticated somehow. She hadn’t miraculously become beautiful, she just looked… different. She still had round, red cheeks, and was still short and stocky, her teeth were still slightly crooked — but she was, nonetheless, not at all similar to the sassy, snobbish girl James hated.

“E-Evans,” he stuttered. “Didn’t see you on the t-train.”

“Wasn’t in the mood to have my brains hexed out.” Lily said flippantly. “What’s wrong, Potter?”

“She cares about me, look at that,” James said to Sirius, his face turning red.

“I am concerned, as your face is a rather alarming shade of fire engine. If we weren’t in the common room, I’d think Sev had hexed you. Nice work on the toads in his trunk, by the way. Really clever.” Her voice dripped in sarcasm.

“Ah, Evans, you don’t mean that.” Sirius said, pressing a dramatic hand against his chest.

“As you’re wearing James’ jumper, I presume you two have been spending a lot of quality time together? You know, most parents don’t want two extremely irritating sons. One is enough, I’d assume.” Lily stalked away.

“N-nice hair, Evans!” James yelled after her. He leaned his forehead against Sirius’ shoulder.

“What IS WRONG WITH ME. WHAT. WHAT?”

“It’s pretty simple, Jamie,” Remus looked up from his seat. “You’re in love.”

“With Evans? Gross! No I’m not!”

“You tripped over your tongue when you talked to her,” Peter shrugged. “And your face is red.”

“I AM NOT IN LOVE WITH LILY EVANS!” James roared.

Everyone in the common room laughed.

“Yeah, mate, you are.” Sirius said.

“Am not!” James protested. “She’s not pretty, she’s just —”

“She is,” Peter piped up. “Pretty. Not like the older girls, but she is. And you fancy her.”

“DO NOT! She’s a snobbish know-it-all!”

“So am I, and you seem to like me all right,” Sirius said, patting James on the back.

“We’re talking about this upstairs!” James exclaimed, dragging Sirius by the sleeve.

“Sirius, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Sirius said, failing in his efforts to sound truthful.

“Follow me upstairs, boys,” James said in an odd, empty voice. Sirius was barely able to breathe, but he did as James had said.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked as James shut the door behind them.

“Nothing, I’m fine.” Sirius spat. “It’s James who has the problem.”

“Okay…” Peter muttered.

Sirius sat down. “History of Magic! Er, yes, essay — three sides of parchment — History of —“

“Calm down,” Remus said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I am absolutely calm, Remus,” Sirius hissed, his hands shaking.

“Remus, Peter, can I have a moment alone with Sirius?” James asked, still in that horrible fierce voice.

“Yes, of course,” Remus said, dragging a protesting Peter outside the door, where they crouched, listening intently.

“What was that about?” James demanded.

“What was what about?” Sirius asked casually, leaning back onto his pillows and flicking his hair out of his face.

“Don’t lie.” James said harshly, sitting down on Sirius’s bed.
“Nothing’s wrong.”
“When I grabbed your arm you reacted like I’d stabbed you. Tell me the bloody truth.”
“I’m fine.” Sirius said, tense with anger.

James arched an eyebrow, almost as if he hadn’t heard him.

“I’M FINE! NOTHING’S WRONG, I’M FINE, AS ALWAYS!” Sirius roared suddenly. He had to shake James’s facade of calmness, had to make him understand —

And James had taken his hand, and gently rolled up his sleeve — he wouldn’t look down at his own wrist, suddenly, couldn’t bring himself to do it. James ran his hand up Sirius’s arm, over lines and lines of scars. It was comforting, somehow, but Sirius wanted to cry.

“How long have you known?” Sirius asked.

“Too long.”

Sirius couldn’t stand to see James looking at him like that, with so much pity and disappointment.

“Don’t look disappointed in me, you don’t get to be disappointed, you’ll never understand!”

“I do.” James said, sitting next to Sirius and leaning his head against his friend’s shoulder.

“You don’t, how could you?” Sirius laughed. “You don’t know what I’m really like.”

“Yeah, I do.” James said.

“No.” Sirius turned away from him. “I don’t have to explain this to you.”

“You’re right. But Siri, I’m worried about you —“

“Stop worrying! I can take care of myself!” Sirius was breathing heavily, shaking from head to toe.

“No you can’t! Merlin, isn’t that obvious?” “I. Am. Fine.” Sirius gritted his teeth. “Leave me alone.”

“No. Sirius, we have to talk about this, something’s the matter with you and I don’t know what it is!” James insisted. “Why don’t you trust me?”

“Don’t tell me to trust you!”

“I thought you did — we’ve been friends f—for years —“ James felt as though he’d been slapped.

“I KNOW! PLEASE, JAMES — JUST STOP, STOP, I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT THIS ANYMORE — I CAN’T TALK ABOUT THIS ANYMORE! PLEASE — PLEASE JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!” Sirius shouted.

“No.”

“James, I don’t want to talk about this.”

“You nearly cried when I touched your arm, something’s off with you — look what you’re doing to yourself, Merlin knows how long you’ve been doing it — from what I saw two years ago, a bloody long time —“

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“You need help, Sirius.”

“If you tell a single person I will never speak to you again.” Sirius said harshly. “This stays between us.”

James’s face burned bright with guilt.

“You told someone.” Sirius said dully. He was watching his world crumble, and he was almost sure it wasn’t happening, that it was all a dream, that he would wake up in only a few moments.

“Remus. He already knew.” James said, as if somehow that made it better.

“You didn’t talk to me about it first, James. Don’t you see what’s wrong with that?”

“I was shocked and I didn’t know what to say to you — I still don’t know what to say to you —“

“Don’t say anything.” Sirius said. “Forget it.”

“I CAN’T! IT KILLS ME, SIRIUS —“ James felt like crying. “I CAN’T STAND TO SEE YOU DO THIS TO YOURSELF.” “I AM NOT GOING TO STOP! NOT UNTIL I’M DEAD!”

Sirius screamed, his voice strangled in his throat. He dashed out of the room, hitting both Remus and Peter with the door.

James sprinted after him.

“James?” Remus asked, rubbing his now-bruised forehead. “What’s happening?”

James shook his head. “Did you see which way he went?”

“That way,” Peter pointed.
“He left Gryffindor tower?”
“Must’ve,” Remus said. “James —“
James meant to run after Sirius, really, he did. Instead he sunk against the wall next to Peter. “I’ve fumbled this one,” he muttered.
“Mm?” Remus asked. “Remember that thing about Sirius?” James said meaningfully.
Remus froze. “Yes.”
“What is it?” Peter asked. “Tell me!”
“Sirius is angry enough as it is.”
“James…” Remus said.
“Okay,” James took a deep breath. “Pete, you know…Sirius always wears long sleeves. He doesn’t roll them up, you know, like everyone else does.”
“Well, yeah, but so does Remus —“
Remus unbuttoned his sleeve and pulled it up to reveal an enormous purple bruise across his forearm. His face went pale as he did it, but points had to be proven and Peter was still looking at him expectantly, so Remus pretended the wolf was something that hurt him, an entity separate from the Remus Lupin the Marauders knew, instead of the part of himself that tried to kill him every month. Peter nodded, going slightly green.
“You must know what I’m trying to say.”
Peter shook his head.
“Blimey, you’re slow,” James teased.
Remus shifted, vaguely uncomfortable.
“I’m sorry, I just don’t —“ Peter went a deep, embarrassed red. “I don’t know — he’s not a werewolf, obviously, but…”
“SIRIUS WISHES HE WAS DEAD, IS THAT ENOUGH FOR YOU?” James yelled, bursting into tears. “He’s my best mate and he wishes he was dead and I can’t do anything about it and I — I just wanted to know why he does this to himself!”
Peter’s eyes widened. What he was hearing could not possibly be true, because Sirius was the happiest, most carefree boy he knew…Sirius slumped to his classes five minutes late with his hands in his pockets and mouthed off to the teachers, and earned laughter from everyone, and he hexed Severus in corridors and turned first years’ shoes into hats and watched them walk barefoot to class, wondering where all the hats in the Gryffindor common room had come from. This wasn’t the Sirius Black he knew. Of course, he knew there was something wrong with Sirius’s family, that was obvious from the way Sirius talked about his parents about their pureblood mania…but this, of course, couldn’t be enough to make Sirius do something so unspeakable. Remus wrapped his arm around James. “He’ll forgive you. Give him some time to calm down.”
“I don’t want him to feel like that…” James bit back tears. “I don’t want anyone to feel like that.”
“There isn’t anything you can do,” Remus said. “He’ll be back.”
James waited for hours, sitting on his bed and casting sparks from his wand. At dinner, Remus and Peter went downstairs together and James stayed upstairs, staring at the ceiling. He tried conjuring a Patronus out of boredom, but he couldn’t think of anything happy enough.
“James, have you even moved?” Peter asked when they got back from dinner.
“Not at all.” James muttered. “I’m worried sick. You don’t think something happened, do you?”
“No, McGonagall would come get us of anything was wrong.” Remus said firmly. “He’s fine.”
“We should go look for him.” James insisted.
Remus sighed. “Alright, James.”

Lily was walking up the stairs to the Astronomy Tower to pore over every detail of her sister’s cruel letter from earlier that morning when she heard sobs echoing down the corridor.
“Hello?” she called cautiously. There was an abrupt silence and a sharp intake of breath.
“Don’t be afraid,” she called, thinking it was a distraught first year. “It’s Lily, Lily Evans, I’m a third year —“
A snort.
“Potter, if that’s you, I swear to Merlin —“
Sirius stood up and swaggered out of the empty classroom, his face puffy and red but an arrogant
smirk on his face. “Oi, Evans, isn’t it a bit past your bedtime?”
“I’d say the same, Black,” Lily crossed her arms across her chest, clenching Petunia’s letter in one
hand. “What are you doing up here?”
“Thinking. I do that sometimes.” Sirius muttered bitterly.
“Hadin’t noticed.” Lily replied.
“Well, this has been a lovely chat, but as I was here first…”
“You want me to leave?” Lily raised an eyebrow in disbelief.
“Yeah, actually.”
“No. You can leave.”
“Ah, Evans,”
She frowned.
“What’s that in your hand?”
“Oh, I dunno, what’s that on your face?” Lily pointed to a shiny tear stain on his cheek.
“I won’t ask if you won’t.” Sirius said.
“This never happened.” Lily stuck out a hand.
Sirius reluctantly shook it. “Agreed.”
“Black —“
Sirius flinched. The name sounded foreign yet familiar, as it had been his all his life, his birthright,
the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, getting blacker every day. His own last name no
longer felt like a part of him.
“Evans,” he stammered. “What is it?”
“My sister hates me.” Lily said softly. She wasn’t sure why she confessed it, but she got a thrill from
saying what she knew she shouldn’t.
“I hate myself.” Sirius admitted quietly. In this empty classroom in the Astronomy Tower, the place
both of them went to think, they’d found something in each other. A kinship that only comes from
being hated by those who are supposed to love you.
“Want to talk about it?” Lily asked, sitting down and patting the chair next to her.
“Alright. This never leaves this room — you say one word about it, and Snivellus gets all his
underwear permanently stuck to the ceiling in the Great Hall.”
“You say one word about it — even to your friends, mind you — I’ll tell everyone I know about you
and your mates trying to become illegal Animagi.”
“You know?”
“Merlin, Black, if Peter wasn’t spouting questions about it every minute in Transfiguration, I’d still
know because Professor Dumbledore told us never to go into Slughorn’s private storage cabinets
again and of course everyone knew it was you four.”
“How’d I miss that?”
“You’re bloody stupid.” Lily said. “Anyway.”
“Who’s that letter from?” Sirius asked.
“My sister. Petunia. She’s a Muggle. Why were you crying?”
“Wasn’t.”
“Liar. I heard you.”
“I don’t like talking about it.” Sirius muttered. “Tell me about Petunia.”
“She’s jealous, that’s what Sev always says, he doesn’t want to hear about it. She said…she said she
didn’t want to see me again…over the summer she wouldn’t speak to me at all…” Lily didn’t cry,
not at all, instead, she wrapped her arms around her knees and stared at the ground.
“How do your parents feel about it?” Sirius asked.
“They’re proud of me. Merlin, this is so weird…I never even speak to you!”
“Who else are you going to talk to about this? Not like Snivelly gets it.”
Lily looked away.
“Oh, he does. That’s interesting.”
“I’m not here to talk about Severus.”
“You’re free to leave at any moment, then. I’d much rather be alone.”
“Why don’t you talk to Potter about whatever it is that’s upsetting you?”
“He tried to ask me but…it’s none of his business and I got angry and…Evans, if he never talks to me again I don’t have any idea what I’m going to do.” Sirius admitted, tugging on the hair that fell into his eyes.
“I understand.” Lily said. “I feel the same way about Petunia.”
“You know my brother Regulus?”
“Yeah. He and Sev are mates.”
“We were close when we were young…but now he barely wants to talk to me, because I’m a Gryffindor and my whole family’s been in Slytherin.”
“Why does it matter? They’re just houses, it’s not the end of the world.”
“They’re pureblood. It’s a betrayal.”
“The hat put you in Gryffindor because it thought that’s where you belonged! You didn’t have any choice —”
“I did.” Sirius said under his breath. “I asked not to be like them and now they hate me.”
“They don’t hate you.”
Sirius stood up. He was exhausted and anxious and wanted to cry again, but instead he took off his robe and pulled up the back of his jumper, showing Lily a large red scar across his back. “My mum did this when I was sorted into Gryffindor.”
Lily wanted to vomit. “Merlin. Sirius, I’m so sorry —”
“Doesn’t that look like she hates me to you? She didn’t even do it on purpose. The things she’s said on purpose have been worse.”
Lily was too shocked to pity him. “That’s dreadful.”
“It could be loads worse.” Sirius looked her in the eye. “Why don’t you tell me about Petunia?”
“Alright,” Lily sighed, unfolding the letter. “Lily, I want you to know that any relationship we might’ve had in the past is now over. As far as I’m concerned, your condition makes you inhuman and therefore no longer my sister. Don’t feel the need to respond to this letter, as I will not be corresponding with freaks at any time. And I wouldn’t bother coming home for holidays, as I won’t be speaking to you. I don’t have a sister.”
Lily burst into tears. “I can’t believe she s-said that — she’s my s-s-sister and she doesn’t want t-to talk to m-me anymore!”
“She’ll come around.”
“She doesn’t trust me. She thinks I’m not human.”
“You are. You’re just not a Muggle.”
“That’s close enough for Tuney.”
“That’s awful.” Sirius said.
“You didn’t come up here to think, Sirius, did you?” Lily asked, noticing his sleeve riding up to show a deep red cut.
Sirius sighed and walked over to the open window, looking out at the Hogwarts grounds. “No.”
“What exactly were you thinking of doing?” Lily asked.
“None of your business, Evans.”
“We’re not doing that. I’m not fighting you for information. Tell me or don’t.”
“Won’t.”
“That window’s kept closed, you know. You must’ve opened it.”
“I did. Needed air.”
“Sirius, were you going to jump off the Astronomy Tower?”
Sirius stood up and walked away, leaving Lily curled up on the ground, weeping, with her sister’s letter clenched in her fist.

“Sirius, blimey, we were looking all over for you —” James said when he saw Sirius.
Sirius’s eyes filled up with tears. “James, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have shouted at you, I’m so sorry —”

James threw his arms around Sirius. “Don’t worry about it,” he said roughly.

“Sirius —” Remus started.

“Lupin, I’m okay. I really am.” Sirius said.

“Why do you always lie to people?” Peter asked.

“I’m telling the truth.” Sirius said quickly.

“Sure. Yeah.” Peter said.
The Boggart

They brewed the potion from the Animagi book over the next few months in Myrtle’s bathroom, taking every available moment after classes to check on it. They’d sworn Myrtle to secrecy, and while she hadn’t shrieked it through the castle as Peeves would’ve done, she hadn’t exactly been quiet about it.

“Myrtle, for Merlin’s sake, will you shut up?”

Myrtle groaned dramatically. “You come into my toilets just to make fun of me,” she whimpered. “I could tell everyone about your little potion, you know. I’d do it.”

“And I’d start playing throw-things-through-Myrtle, is that what you want?” Sirius snapped.

Myrtle flew headfirst down the bathtub drain with a loud shriek.

“Blimey, she’s annoying,” James muttered. “Newt eyes?”

Peter handed them to him.

“Is the potion meant to be this color? I thought we were going for black, not green.” he worried.


“Absolutely,” James said. “My father — inventor of Sleekeasy’s potion, you know — taught me everything.”

“You’d think you’d have neater hair having him as a father,” Sirius said.

“Please, it’s not like I haven’t tried. It’s too much hassle, and besides —” James flipped his hair out of his eyes. “I like it this way.”

Sirius sighed dramatically, flopping onto Peter’s lap and looking up at the other boy. “Blimey, Pete, that’s got to be the most unflattering angle I’ve ever seen you at. I’d hate to be shorter than you.”

Peter frowned.

“Only joking, it isn’t your fault you’re not as dashingly handsome as I am.”

“That would be an unfair standard to hold anyone to,” James remarked.

Sirius laughed.

Peter stood up and looked in the mirror, pinching his chubby cheeks with a frown.

“Hey, Pete, we’re only joking.” James said.

“Yeah, mate, you look fine, no need to cry about it.” Sirius added.

“No I don’t. I look like someone cast a stinging hex on me.” Peter said self-consciously.

“Now that’s just not true. You’d be all red and at least five times as swollen.” James commented.

“James!”

“Couldn’t resist.” James grinned cheekily.

“I don’t like it.” Peter muttered.

Sirius looked up.”What was that, Pete?”

“I don’t like it when you make fun of the way I look!” Peter’s face was flushed.

“Could’ve just said so, mate, didn’t have to yell,” Sirius said pointedly.

“Oh — okay?” Peter looked flustered.

“C’mere, you idiot,” James said, patting the ground next to him. Peter sat down, flushing with excitement. “Hand me the dragon.”

Peter handed over the jar.

“Alright, try not to screw this up, Pete, open the jar.” Peter twisted open the jar, the tiny, preserved dragon curled inside. He lifted it out delicately, marveling at the way the pale scales felt under his fingers.

“Who’s least likely to vomit when extracting internal organs from this dragon?” James asked. “Not Pete, as I can tell from his expression. Siri?”

“Mm.” Sirius frowned. “Perhaps not.”

“Oh, c’mon, you know how squeamish I am.” James sighed, pulling out his wand and cutting the dragon’s chest open with it. He reached in to the green slime and pulled out a frozen, shriveled heart,
covering his nose with his robes. “Gross.” He dropped the heart into the potion.
The potion sizzled and turned a deep, shiny black.
They toasted to becoming Animagi, and to Remus, and to an uncertain future they knew was
beautiful, no matter what happened.
“Tastes like death,” Peter grimaced.
“Hey, at least we’re getting somewhere with it. What’s the next step, Siri?”
“I hate it when you call me that,” Sirius muttered, flipping open the book. “Oh, you’re not going to
like this.”
“What?” James leaned towards him.
“We have to hold a mandrake leaf in your mouths. For a month.”
“That’s not that bad —“
“We can’t take it out. Not to eat, not to sleep, not to brush our teeth, not unless we want to start
over.”
“Bet you a round of butter beer I can do it without messing up!” Sirius said cheerfully.
“Merlin! You’ve just reminded me!” James exclaimed, nearly knocking over the cauldron.
“What?”
“We’re going to Hogsmeade this year!”
Peter squealed with excitement, ignoring Sirius’s prolonged sigh.
“Can’t.” Sirius shrugged. “My parents will never sign the permission sheet.”
“We’ll convince them, don’t worry.” James said.
“Don’t be stubborn.”
“It’s one of my best traits, Sirius, I can’t just stop being stubborn!”
“Believe me, I know,” Sirius rolled his eyes. “Alright, alright, we can sneak down to the Greenhouse
for Mandrake leaves tonight.”
“I’ll bet they’re bloody disgusting.” Peter complained.
“I’ll bet we’re doing this so Remus never has to be alone on the full moon again.” James sassed.
“I’m not saying I don’t want to, James, it was just a comment.”
“Right.”
“McWhiskers will have our heads for this.”
“We’ll have to tell her.” Peter sighed.
“She barely let us get away with the rabbit bones. She can’t let us do it, it’ll risk her job. She could
be sacked!” James said, looking concerned.
“Don’t be ridiculous, Dumbledore would never sack her.”
“Sacked!”

“Mr. Pettigrew,” McGonagall tapped her wand sharply against his desk. “What is the proper term for
transfiguring an object’s color without compromising its shape?”
“Um…er…um…plerin…pfflemug…”
“Speak clearly, Pettigrew, what’s the matter with you?”
“Pfll grealsj…”
“Are you even trying, Peter?”
“He had a cough and I tried to cure it, Professor, made his tongue swell up.” Remus piped up, with a
confused glance at Peter.
“Oh. Well. Lupin, I trust you have the answer?”
“It’s alius color,” Remus said.
“Correct.”
“Know it all,” Severus coughed under his breath.
“Excuse me, Potter, are you alright? You look as if you’ve swallowed something rather distasteful.”
McGonagall said.
“Mm,” James pulled a face. “I wish,” he said around the leaf.
“Detention,” McGonagall said briskly. “Black, I suppose a cat has gotten your tongue as well.” She
smiled slightly.
Sirius made a derisive, slightly strangled sounding noise at the back of his throat.

“Welcome to third year Defense Against the Dark Arts,” their teacher said, walking casually around the room. “I’m Professor Smith, and I’ll be your professor this year. We’ll start off the lesson by talking about boggarts. What exactly is a boggart, you ask? Well, I’ll show you.”

“Bloody —” Remus started to swear.

“What?”

“A boggart transforms into your biggest fear. And yeah, we do have to do that in front of the whole class.” Remus said, looking ill.

“All of us?” Sirius asked around his mandrake leaf. Remus recoiled a bit.

“What have you been eating?”

“The hearts of my enemies.” Sirius said without missing a beat. “Do we really have to do this? It seems cruel.”

“Think so.” Peter said miserably.

“Er…um…Potter, be ready to catch me.”

“Yes, sure,” James said. Sirius pretended to faint, falling into James’s arms and lying there limply. No one even looked up.

Sirius stood up and dusted off his robes. “Damn. They’ve seen it too many times. Nearly choked on the leaf doing that, mind you.”

“Lower your voice, will you?” James said, exceptionally loudly.

“Leaf?” Remus asked.

“Nothing!” Peter said quickly.

“Line up!” Professor Smith said briskly. They fell into line, somewhere in the middle. “Miss Evans, you’re first. When the Boggart comes out of the cupboard, it will transform into your greatest fear.”

Lily’s face turned white. “O-okay, Sir?” she said weakly.

“And I want you to picture something funny.”

“Funny, Professor?”

“Yes. And say, Riddikulus!”

“Your fancying Evans is ridiculous,” Sirius said. James shoved him.

“Do not!”

“Sure,” Peter snorted.

“Sod off!”

Remus tilted his head and grinned apologetically. “Don’t think we should. Won’t until you and Evans are happily married, I shouldn’t think.”

Sirius whistled, which sounded more like a squeak around the leaf. “Nice one!”

James’ face was still steadily turning red, but he hadn’t stopped looking at Evans as a tall, thin, blonde-haired girl stepped out of the closet with a sneer on her face.

“You’re a freak, Lily! Everyone thinks so!”

“Shut up, Petunia,” Lily growled.

“Freak! Why would I want to go to your freak school? I’m not jealous!” she shrilled. “You’re pathetic!”

“Riddikulus, Evans,” Professor Smith reminded her.

“Sorry, Professor,” she said, sweat beading on her forehead. “Riddikulus.”

Petunia found herself with her hair tied in knots and wearing a clown outfit — she’d been forced to by her parents for Halloween. Lily had never gotten over the sheer hilarity of it, and Petunia had never quite recovered from the trauma.

Lily giggled and walked away, leaving Marlene standing behind her, face to face with an enormous rat. She shrieked,

“Riddikulus!”

“Reckon that means she’s scared of you, Pete?” James asked, elbowing him in the ribs.

Peter frowned, confused.
“Blimey you’re slow. Because your *patronus* is a *rat,*” James rolled his eyes.

“Oh. Ah, yeah, I reckon.” Peter nodded.

“Can’t wait till fifth year when she’ll get to see it. Five galleons says she screams.”

“I won’t take that bet.” Sirius said.

“I will.” Peter said bravely.

“Excellent. I’ll have enough for five boxes of Honeydukes chocolate.” James rubbed his hands together excitedly.

“You don’t even like chocolate,” Remus reminded him. “And what’s this about a patronus? You haven’t cast one yet —”

“Right!” Peter exclaimed, pressing the leaf against the roof of his mouth. “We haven’t!”

“Mm-hm.” Remus said suspiciously. “Well, is that why you all smell like Mandrake leaves.”

“Nonsense.” James waved him off. “Oh, excellent, it’s my turn,” he stepped up to the boggart with a confident smirk. “You know, Professor, I’m not actually afraid of anything — “

The boggart changed shape, and James’ eyes widened. In front of him were three dead bodies. Sirius. Remus. Peter.

“Merlin,” Remus said softly.

Peter had to grab onto Sirius’s robes to stop him from running towards James.

James, to his own shock, burst into tears and covered his face. The dead bodies were still there — they didn’t do anything, not threaten to attack him, not spontaneously reanimate — no, they were dead, and that was all.

“Crybaby, aren’t we, Potter?” Severus yelled from the back of the room.

“Hey, why don’t you shove your wand up your —” Sirius proceeded to shout, in excruciating detail, exactly how and where Severus could shove his wand. He blew Mandrake breath over the class, making a few people wrinkle their noses in disgust.

“Ten points from Gryffindor! Ten points from Slytherin!” Smith yelled, his face red. James tried to stop the Boggart, but he couldn’t see through his tears. “Potter, go to the hospital wing.”

“Alright there, Potter?” Severus yelled.

“Another five points from Slytherin!” Smith shouted. “Evans, take him to the hospital wing!”

Lily looked disgusted, but James could hardly protest as the next student stepped up and he was led away gingerly by the arm, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Good show, wasn’t that?” James asked, a bit of his arrogance back. He was shaking and leaned on her for support.

“Shove it, Potter, you starting crying in Defense, there’s no coming back from that.”

“Please, it was only an excuse to get out of class.”

“Didn’t look that way.”

“What about you, eh? Your sister calling you a freak is your biggest fear?”

“Don’t talk about what you don’t understand.”

“Don’t pretend you know me.”

———

“Pete, go in front of me,” Remus said, falling behind him without asking.

“Why?”

“You know what it’ll be, I’m hoping class will end before I have to go up and everyone sees it.”

“Okay, okay,” Peter stepped up, wiping sweaty palms on his robes. The boggart twisted into one person, exactly as he looked in life.

James.

“As if we’d ever be friends with you.” He was colder than the real James; his hazel eyes didn’t hold any warmth behind them. “Fat, stupid, ugly Pettigrew. It’s pathetic, really, how trusting you were that we’d ever care —”

“*RIDDIKULUS!*” Peter yelled, the mandrake leaf flying from his mouth and landing on his shoe. He picked it up hurriedly and scampered to the back of the line, wiping at his eyes.

Sirius walked forward, not confident like James had been, because confidence had been James’ downfall and James was probably still crying. There was still a natural arrogance about him, a
haughty, bored air that lingered on his person at all times. The boggart then turned into the most horrible thing Sirius could possibly imagine, and he nearly collapsed on the spot. Standing in front of him was his family.

They didn’t say anything at first, thank Merlin for that. Sirius stared defiantly into their disapproving faces, hoping he could find the courage to yell, “Riddikulus!” and let it all be over. But just as he was in real life, he was too petrified to stop them.

“Mr. Black, what exactly is the —” Smith started to say.

Remus stood behind him, watching Sirius tug at his sleeves and refuse to look anywhere but at the Boggart. He jumped in front of Sirius, and the Boggart turned into a full moon. “Riddikulus!” he yelled, too full of a need to stop Sirius from being hurt to be afraid. It dropped to the ground, a cockroach waving its sticklike legs.

Remus grabbed Sirius’ hand. “C’mon,” he said gently, pulling the other boy to the back of the line. “Are you alright?” Peter asked immediately. He’d been slowly sneaking out of line to witness the scene, but would never admit it.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Sirius waved his hand. “We’re not talking about this.”

“Sirius.”

“I said no. There are things we don’t talk about. We’re best mates, but there are lines. Do not cross them or I swear to Merlin I’ll kill —” His voice broke.

“Siri,” Peter said softly.

Sirius glared at him until he looked away.

“Merlin, this class has got to end sometime,” Sirius muttered, shaking out his long hair like a dog. Remus looked at him with the utmost concern, a soft, unfamiliar expression in his eyes. Sirius stared at the ground defiantly. At length, Remus suggested, “Hospital wing?”

“James didn’t go there. Bet you ten galleons he’s in a broom cupboard snogging Evans.”

Peter pulled a face. “That’s disgusting!”

“True, I’m guessing.” Sirius said.

“She hates him!” Remus protested. “Don’t have ten galleons, but I’d take the bet if I did.”

“True, but he loves her.”

“She’d beat the hell out of him if he so much as touched her.” Remus said.

“Ah,” Sirius said. “I suppose we’ll have to see about that.”

“Madam Pomfrey called it a…a panic attack? She says Remus gets them.” James said. His hair was even more ruffled than usual from repeatedly running his hands through it. “Spat the leaf out too,” he whispered, as Remus began a conversation with Madam Pomfrey.

“Same,” Peter nodded.

Sirius looked incredulous.

“Merlin, I’m so embarrassed,” James said. “I don’t even want to go back to Defense. I’ll never go again if I can avoid it.”

“Don’t you want to save the world or something?”

“Well, yeah, but I’d find something else.” James said, his cheeks burning. “Imagine what people are going to say.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, James, it’s not as if no one’s every cried in class before.” Remus said.

“Yeah, but that sort of thing doesn’t happen to me.”

Remus glanced at Peter, who stubbornly glared back, as if to say, don’t you dare tell him.

“James, it doesn’t matter, just set someone’s books on fire and everyone’s bound to forget it. Besides, we have Remus to worry about tonight.”

“Merlin, it isn’t the full moon?” James exclaimed.

“Quiet!” Remus hissed. “Yeah, it is.”

“I thought you looked ill earlier.”

Remus was getting better at hiding pain now that they knew, but every step was agony, James could tell.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m really okay.” Remus promised. This was not at all true, he’d fallen asleep
standing up three times during Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Peter was the only one who’d noticed and had nudged him to wake him up.

“Okay, mate. Oi, Madam Pomfrey, can I go?” James asked.

“Any chest pain?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“No.”

“Dizziness?”

“A bit.”

“Drink a bit of water and have something to eat. You’re free to go.”

“Thanks!” James hopped out of bed and dashed down the hall, full of energy. Sirius dashed after him, long hair flopping into his eyes. Peter stretched out an arm for Remus and helped him down the hall.

“You don’t have to, really —“

Peter smiled and pulled Remus down the hall after him.
“Evening, Professor,” James and Sirius sat down in her office, James drumming his hands against the edge of her desk while Sirius attempted a strangled, Mandrake-choked whistle. “Potter, Black” she said curtly. “I assume you know why you’ve gotten yet another detention. I hope you know that you and your friends are the sole reason that Gryffindor is going to lose the House Cup this year.” “Professor Whiskers, I’m not that bad at Quidditch —“ James protested. “What did you just call me?” “Professor, ma’am, Professor McGonagall,” James scrambled backwards, putting his hands in his pockets and glancing about the room. He nudged Sirius sharply in the ribs; the other boy looked as if the mandrake leaf in his mouth might fly out and hit McGonagall in the face at any moment. “Have a biscuit, Potter. Black, I see you’ve already taken the liberty.” Sirius was studiously chewing around the leaf, every muscle in his face tense. James took one and bit into it, grimacing slightly. “Something wrong?” “No, Professor.” James said, swallowing the biscuit and grimacing at the taste of the mandrake leaf. “I have a few things I would like to speak to you two about. Sirius, first of all, I got a visit from your Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.” “Oh, I’m sure you did.” Sirius rolled his eyes. “Black.” McGonagall said sharply. “I heard about your Boggart.” “What, being my family?” Sirius barked a forced, short laugh. “Professor, plenty of people are afraid of their family.” “I hear that Potter’s parents took you in for a time over the summer? I trust they know your situation?” “Does James really have to be here to hear this?” Sirius asked coldly. “Unfortunately so. Some of your professors have noticed your odd behavior.” “Such as?” “I won’t fight you on this, Black. But I would recommend that you have a bit of tea with me, as your Head of House, every Saturday afternoon. Just to discuss some matters.” “No thanks.” “These meetings are not optional.” McGonagall arched an eyebrow. “Saturday at four will do.” “Fine.” Sirius muttered. He was struck by the desire to spit his mandrake leaf into the tea on her desk, just to get him out of this dreadful situation. “In addition, and Potter this does concern you, so if you can bear to draw your attention away from the window for just a moment, please.” “Mm?” James looked up, ruffling his hair as he did so. “Sorry. First years doing flying lessons, you know, all very fascinating how bloody useless they are.” McGonagall’s lips twitched. “Mm. As I was saying, all of your professors have reported some strange behavior. Such as not speaking anything but muffled gibberish for almost a week.” “A Slytherin hexed us,” Sirius said smoothly. “From behind, the bloody coward. Remus managed to find a countercurse for it, good bloke.” McGonagall looked unconvinced. “And this, I assume, has nothing to do with the fact that both of you — and Pettigrew — smell perpetually of the Mandagora?” “Scientific name,” James commented. “Very nice.” McGonagall didn’t dignify this with a response. “I have an idea of what you’re doing, and I implore you to tell me I’m mistaken.” James inhaled sharply, while Sirius remained perfectly still. “Well, I can’t say I’m surprised.” McGonagall said. “And I appreciate what you’re doing for Lupin,
“You don’t understand.” James exclaimed passionately.

“I do,” McGonagall said firmly. “Becoming an underage unregistered Animagus is entirely illegal and I, as your teacher and head of house, cannot permit it.”

“You could just…pretend you don’t know about it?” James suggested weakly.

“Spit out the mandrake leaf, Mr. Potter.”

“No, I’ve already spat it out four times!”

“Potter. This is not personal. You boys are wonderful students, if a bit disruptive, and I would never do anything to — “

James knew what he had to do. “But, P-p-professor,” he said. “I can’t let Remus do this by himself anymore — “

“Drop the act, Potter, you’re not a very good liar.” McGonagall snapped.

“Alright.” James sighed.

“I assume you’ve already drank the potion?” McGonagall said.

“Yes, Professor,” Sirius said, staring at the wall.

“You realize that means you can’t stop the process without putting yourselves in serious danger?” Sirius snorted. “Yes.”

“Have another biscuit.” McGonagall pushed the bowl towards them.

James took one. “Have you changed your mind, then?”

“No. I’m still obligated to stop you.”

“But you just said — “

“Potter, if you stand up, walk out of my office, and have the past thirteen days of homework from you and your friends sitting on my desk in a week, I won’t tell Professor Dumbledore. However, I will not help you.”

“Really? Thank you Professor, I won’t let you down!” James leaned over the desk as if to hug her.

“Potter.”

“Right!” James dashed out of the room.

“Remus! Peter! You won’t believe this — “ Sirius and James burst into the Gryffindor common room to see something was entirely wrong. Their friends were kneeling on the floor, someone was lying there…”What happened?” Sirius demanded.

Remus looked up at him with a wild kind of fear he must have felt before, it looked foreign to Sirius but natural on Remus’s face. “It’s Peter.”

“What?” James ran forward, saw Peter lying there shaking and pale, his eyes closed, his lips blue. “Is he choking or something — Merlin, Peter, what’s wrong?”

“Snivellus hexed him.” Remus said, panicked. “We don’t know exactly what it was — wasn’t one of our hexes, he must’ve come up with it himself — but I had to carry him up here and I don’t really know what the hex even did…”

Peter was gasping and struggling for breath, trying to sit up to look at James. “Merlin’s pants, Peter.” James said shakily. “You really ought to go to the hospital wing — Evans, hey, Evans!”

Lily ignored him.

“Lily,” Remus begged. “Do you know what kind of hex this is? Severus hexed Peter and we want to make sure he’s going to be alright — “

Lily looked over, her green eyes widening.

“Looks like one of Severus’s. He’s been practicing them with his mates.” Lily said, rushing over to Peter without thinking. “I’m not sure what it does, but I think it involves compressing your lungs until you suffocate.”

“That’s awful — “ Sirius protested.

“Please, any one of you would do it to Severus.” Lily said, leaning over Peter, who was turning blue.

“But we didn’t,” James protested. “I hate the slimy git, sure, but I don’t want him dead. Come on, Peter, breathe — we have to get him to the hospital wing — “

“He won’t live that long,” Remus said frantically. “What’s the fastest way to the hospital wing from here?”
James and Sirius exchanged a conspiratorial look.
“James, time to use your Quidditch training,” Sirius said, shaking Peter’s shoulder to keep him awake. James jumped to his feet and sprinted to the castle.

“What’s he going?” Remus asked.
“We found a secret passage about a week ago. Leads almost directly to the hospital wing,” Sirius said. “Come on, Peter, you can do this, stay with us —”

Peter’s struggling was getting weaker and Sirius had to stand up to keep himself from throwing something. “I swear to Merlin if he dies, Evans, listen to me, if Peter dies I am going to kill Snivellus.”

“You make a lot of threats,” Lily said, dumping her glass of water over Peter’s head and shaking his shoulders. He barely moved in response.
“I intend to keep nearly half of them.”

“Sirius, he isn’t breathing —” Remus stuttered.

“Peter? Peter!”
Madam Pomfrey burst in, her hat askew. “Finite incantartem!”

Peter gave a little shuddering gasp, the color slowly returning to his face.

“Who did this?” she demanded.

“Severus.” Peter muttered blearily. “Sorry, no, forget I said that!”

“Severus Snape? Why?”

“He’s a prat.” Peter coughed.

“Language, Pettigrew.” Madam Pomfrey said, checking his heartbeat. “I’m reporting this incident to Professor Slughorn.”

“Don’t!” Peter said. “It’ll only be worse if you do —”

“Pettigrew, I’m sorry this boy has inspired such fear in you, but I assure you nothing is going to happen to you.”

Peter looked down. “Madam Pomfrey, I’m alright, really.”

“Nonsense. You nearly died. Potter, get him some water.”
James jumped up.

“What are you, a Muggle?” Sirius asked.

“What? Oh, yeah — Accio!” A glass of water flew into his hand, and he passed it to Peter. Peter sipped gingerly, trembling. His three friends sat down next to him, their arms around his shoulders. Lily asked if he was alright and muttered her excuses to leave, storming out of the Gryffindor common room with sheer fury in her eyes.

“I swear, I could murder Snivellus.” James said. “What’d you do to make him hex you?”

“He said our breath smelled.”

“Well, it does.” Remus pointed out. “What have you people been eating?” He knew of course — he had to, they’d been so obvious. But he played oblivious and didn’t question them further.

“Hey, Pete, did you manage to keep that leaf in your mouth while you were suffocating, or…?”

Sirius whispered.

Peter stuck out his tongue to reveal the green, slimy leaf attached to it. “Indeed, I did.”

“Nice one, Pettigrew!” James said enthusiastically, spitting out his own leaf in the process.

“How much longer do you have to do this? Our room smells like a Mandrake dealing den.” Remus complained.

“There’s only a slight chance it causes hallucinations, why do people —”

“More for the smell.”

“That disgusting, Greenhouse Two smell?” James asked incredulously.

“The natural scent of the Mandrake is something some people find enjoyable.” Remus said, slipping into his reading-aloud-from-a-textbook voice subconsciously.

“Where’d you read that one, Loopy, bored werewolf weekly?” Sirius teased.

“Our herbology textbook in second year,” Remus replied icily. “And can we not use the ‘w’ word in public?”

“We’re just in the common room, no one else is here…in fact, where are they?”
“Ha ha,” Remus said dryly. “Oh, hello, Marlene,”
“Hullo, Remus,” Marlene sat down on her usual chair and opened a book, folding her legs beneath her. “Merlin, what is that smell? Have you been chewing mandrake leaves?”
“Well, I haven’t,” Remus shot a direct look at the other Marauders, who had the good grace to look (at least slightly) guilty.
“Why on earth are you chewing mandrake leaves?” Marlene demanded.
“Oh, you know…health benefits.” Peter muttered. Marlene laughed. “Like purple ears? Or orange fingernails?”
“Sure,” Peter managed.
“Peter? A word?” James pulled the Marauders up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories.
“Look, McKinnon isn’t stupid, Evans wouldn’t be friends with her if she was — she’ll figure it out, Evans already has.” Sirius said.
“Evans knows?” James sputtered.
“Reckon so.”
“I’m not surprised, she’s very clever, you know.” Remus said. “She won’t tell anyone.”
“How did you find out, Remus?”
“Well I don’t know what you’re doing it for. But I can smell it from across the castle.”
“What about her precious Snivellus?” Peter hissed. “She tells him everything.”
“Don’t worry, Peter, if he knows the only thing we can do is kill him, just returning the favor of what he tried to do to you.”
“He went too far this time,” Peter muttered. “I could’ve died.”
“We’re glad you didn’t, mate,” James said. Peter beamed.
“Actually, I was thinking you could do the honors of exacting our revenge. What’ll it be, Pettigrew?” Sirius asked, with a devious smirk.
“Actually, before we talk about that…I mean, I was dying so I wasn’t really paying much attention to be honest…didn’t you say you found a secret passage inside Hogwarts?”
“Did indeed,” James said proudly. “Just the one, but I’m sure there are more.”
“Want to go exploring?” Sirius asked, with a devilish grin. They pulled the cloak over their heads, their ankles showing, and snuck out into the corridor.
“What are we even looking for?” Remus hissed.
“Secret passages, you dunderhead.”
“What exactly would a secret passage happen to look like?”
“Oh, I don’t know. Just walk into things and see if a door opens.”
“As fun as giving myself permanent brain damage sounds —“
“Hey! Boys! Found one!” James hissed excitedly, darting out from under the cloak.
“How…” Remus shook his head in amazement.
“Look, see here — there’s the statue of the One-Eyed Witch, hell if I remember her name — and she’s kind of turned, so you can’t see her hunchback. Don’t you think that’s odd?”
“Not particularly,” Sirius muttered.
James ignored him. “Anyway. If you climb behind her and —“ he tapped on her hunchback with his wand. To his shock, nothing happened.
“Oh, I’ve read about this sort of thing.” Remus said. “Dissendium!” The hump slid aside to reveal an extremely narrow passageway. “Aha! Told you so.” James said, sounding relieved. “Good thing I noticed that.”
“Good thing Remus actually picks up a book once in a while, mate.” Sirius said, slipping into the passageway. “What do you reckon happens if we get trapped in here?”
“Sirius!” Peter whined. “You know I don’t like small spaces —“
“Only because you’re big as a house — joking, Pete, don’t look so hurt!” Peter laughed self-consciously.
“Bet there are loads of these all around the castle!” James exclaimed.
“It’d be so much easier to hex people if we found all of them, maybe one leads to the Slytherin
“common room!” Sirius said delightedly. “Hey, look the passage ends here —“ James put his hand out in front of him, feeling a sharp, stony wall.

“Lumos,” Remus muttered, shining light into the passageway. There was a small wooden door in the ceiling just centimeters above their heads. They pushed on it as hard as they could until a dark, warm room came into view.

“Should we —“

“I think so.” Remus said, helping Sirius lift James through the trapdoor and out into the room.

“Blimey,” James said, looking around.

“What is it, James?” Sirius asked.

“The inside of your arse.” James yelled back.

“And you’d know a lot about that, would you?” Sirius smirked.

“Shove off, you git, it’s the Honeydukes cellar!”

“You’re bloody joking.”

“Get your stupid arse up here and see for yourself!”

Sirius jumped up and grabbed the edge of the door, reaching for James’ hand to pull him up.

“Blimey, it is! Loopy, Pete, you have to get up here!”

Remus picked up Peter without thinking, stumbling under the boy’s unexpected weight.

“Come on, that’s it —“ Peter grabbed James’ feet and pulled himself onto the floor, leaving Remus staring up at his friends and laughing. He jumped up after them, wincing at the creaking in his bones.

“Merlin’s chest hair!” Remus exclaimed in shock. The Marauders roared with laughter.

“Anyone up for some butter beer? I think the Three Broomsticks is still open.” Peter suggested.

“Excellent idea, Peter, really brilliant…does anyone actually have spare change on them?” Sirius said sarcastically.

James turned out his pockets. “Eight galleons.”

“What is it with you?” Remus shook his head. “You always have to have money in your pockets — even when you’re playing Quidditch! You dropped five Knuts last game!”

“Shame,” James rolled his eyes.

“How can you be so irresponsible with money?” Remus marvelled, a tinge of jealousy in his voice.

“We’ve got more than enough to go around. Besides, it’s not like I was going to need five Knuts anyway, not like you, Remus —“

Remus’ face flushed.

“Sorry,” James said quickly. “Come on, let me buy you boys some butterbeers.”

He climbed the staircase with a loping grace and a smile, offering his hand to Sirius, who linked his arms with Remus’ and Peter’s and walked up after him.

“Quick, take your robes off, we don’t want them to know we’re from Hogwarts. Jumpers too, mind you!”

The Marauders pulled their robes and jumpers over their heads, and shoved their ties into the pockets of their trousers. “Good enough?” Remus asked, feeling oddly exposed without his robes on. He shoved his hands into his pockets and gripped his wand tightly.

“Hullo,” James waved. “Four butterbeers, please.”

“You as young as you look?” the bartender asked with a sneer.

“You as young as you look?” James said smoothly, deepening his voice by several octaves.

Peter stifled a giggle.

The bartender gestured to an empty table, where the boys sat down, laughing, their butter beers in front of them.

“You know, I’d bet five galleons that no other students have found this passage, or we’d have riots on our hands,” Sirius said, downing the last of his butter beer with a loud belch.

“Bet they got caught if they did.” James replied. “Back to bed? We’ve got a Charms essay due tomorrow.”

“Think Peter’s already there, mate,” Sirius said. Peter was asleep with his head on the table and a bit of a foam mustache on his upper lip.
“Wake up, Pete, for Merlin’s sake —!” James exclaimed, slumping over Peter’s sleeping form and sighing. Peter jumped. “Merlin’s pants, James, you didn’t have to assault me —“ “Come on, you great lump, let’s go.” James pulled Peter by the hand, and Sirius and Remus grinned at each other, dashing after him out of the Three Broomsticks and into the cold autumn. They dashed back through the tunnel and out of the One-Eyed Witch’s hump, standing in the dark corridor. “STUDENTS OUT OF BED!” Peeves swept through the corridor with a wicked grin on his face. “STUDENTS OUT OF BED!” “Shut up, Peeves!” Sirius snapped. “I see the STUDENTS OUT OF BED have found the SECRET PASSAGEWAY!” “SHUT UP!” James yelled. “Make yourself useful and tell us if you see Filch, would you? I’ll bring you a ball of chewed gum to stick in the doors if you’ll just be quiet.” “Two,” Peeves said, swooping towards James’s glowering face. “One and a half.” “Three.” “Fine! Two!” “STUDENTS OUT OF BED!” Peeves shrieked, flying away from them. “STUDENTS ON THE THIRD FLOOR!” “Wait, we’re on the —“ “Thanks, Peeves!” James said, unable to believe their luck. “C’mon, let’s —“ A set of lamp like eyes fixed on them, and they all froze. “Run.” James whispered quietly, pushing the other three boys in front of him. “Come on, run!” They sprinted for Gryffindor Tower. “Merlin’s buttocks —“ James cursed. “What in hell is the password —“ The Fat Lady looked unamused. “You four!” Filch came hobbling around the corridor, fury in his eyes. “Why am I not surprised? It really is always you, isn’t it? ‘Allo, Fat Lady, good to see ya again.” “And you, Argus,” the Fat Lady said, as affably as she could, given it was past midnight on a Monday. “POPPYCOCK!” Peter exclaimed. All eyes turned to him. “Oh, er, I mean, poppycock is the password. Sorry. Bad time.” “You think?” Sirius arched an eyebrow. “Anyway, Filch, we’ll accept our detentions now —“ “Oh, I don’t think so,” Filch let out a slow, evil cackle. “No, this is going to Professor Dumbledore.” “We were just out of bed, it’s not as if this hasn’t happened before —“ “It has,” Filch sneered. “One too many times. Come on, boys.” The Marauders looked at each other with wide eyes. “I told you this was a dreadful idea —“ Remus hissed. “Is that what you’re going to tell Dumbledore as well? Because if you didn’t want to, you wouldn’t have done it.” Sirius snapped. “Yeah, it is, actually. I’m a bloody werewolf and I can’t afford to be expelled!” “We’re not going to be expelled.” “We can’t get anything more than detention or my entire life is ruined — not that I had much of a chance anyways —“ Remus’ breath caught in his throat. He covered his face with his hands. “Calm down, boy, they’re not going to expel you — not yet, at least.” Filch said. “Professor Dumbledore, sir!” Dumbledore descended down the staircase in majestic star-patterned robes, his long ginger beard braided down to his waist. “Yes?” he said serenely, squinting down at them. “I caught these four wandering around out of bed.” “Ah,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Detentions, I believe, are in order?” “Yes, sir!” Filch said eagerly.
“You will each spend two weeks doing whatever punishment Mr. Filch sees fit,” Dumbledore said. “And fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor. I have to say, boys, you don’t seem to care much about losing house points — although you have gained almost as many as you’ve lost due to your stellar academics.”

“Oh, stop, Professor, you’re embarrassing me,” James said, fanning his face dramatically. Dumbledore chuckled. “I’d suggest you four go back to bed before I make your punishment more severe. And Mr. Lupin?”

Lupin turned around, his eyes wide. “Don’t worry about the future. It’s not as hopeless as you think it is.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Remus said shyly, ducking his head. Sirius ruffled Remus’ hair affectionately, and the four of them walked off together.
Peter was able to spit his Mandrake leaf out within a week, finally enjoying food as it was, in his own words, “properly supposed to taste like.”

James and Sirius, of course, were extremely bitter about this.

“Another whole week…stupid…sodding…leaf…” James punctuated each word by slamming his forehead against Sirius’ shoulder where they sat in their shared armchair.

“Two more days,” Sirius said grimly.

“Why am I so bad at keeping these disgusting leaves in my mouth?” James complained.

“You keep spitting them out during Quidditch, remember?”

“Swallowed one of the things.” James said, pulling a face. “Bloody awful. Orange bubbles coming out my arse for three days.”

“Gross!” Remus nearly choked on his tea.

“Is that judgement I hear?” Sirius asked.

“Think it must be.” James remarked.

“Shouldn’t be. As our Remus didn’t have a leaf in his mouth for a lunar month.”

“Because I’m not a bloody idiot.” Remus protested.

“I feel I should be able to complain about my orange arse bubbles as much as I want, don’t you, Siri?”

“Absolutely.”

“Don’t do that!” Remus said, clenching his pale fists.

“Do what?” they said in unison, grinning at each other.

“Talk to each other like we’re not here. It’s awful.”

“Hear that, James, he thinks it’s awful,” Sirius said.

“I’ll bet he does.” James said cheerfully.

“Will you stop?” Remus asked, his voice trembling. He stood up, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Don’t shout, Remus, be quiet. “I hate — I don’t like when you talk about people like they aren’t in the room.”

“You sound like you want to scream, Loops,”

“I don’t like that either! Don’t call me that!…Please.” Remus clenched his jaw. “I don’t want to feel like you think I’m crazy.”

“We don’t think you’re crazy,” Sirius said quietly. “If it bothers you, we’ll — “

“Well, it does.” Remus’s face reddened.

“We’re just joking around, mate,” James said, the smile fading from his face. He didn’t think he’d ever wanted to laugh less in his entire life.

“It isn’t a joke, James.” Remus found his voice shaking. “My problem isn’t a joke to me. It hurts, and it’s horrible, and I just want it to stop but I can’t make it and you…” His voice broke halfway through the sentence, and James wrapped his arms around him tightly.

“Pete, you’ve been particularly quiet this evening.” Sirius noticed, the smaller boy sitting quietly in the corner.

“What? Oh I’m fine. I’m fine.” Peter said distractedly. “Just studying.”

“For what?”

“Muggle Studies.”

Remus leaned over Peter’s neatly stacked pile of notes. “Want me to help?”

“Did you already study for the test tomorrow?”

“I don’t have to, Muggle Studies is my easiest subject.” Sirius said smugly, examining his nails.

“Went over it a couple times.” James confessed. “Only because I spent the last five lessons drawing
our Quidditch team in the margins of my notes.”
“Don’t worry, Peter, I’ve studied,” Remus perched on the arm of Peter’s chair and pulled a quill out of the pocket of his robes. “Here, the aspects of modern Muggle culture include music and celebrities, people who are well known in the public whose lives are followed via something called a ‘reality tv’ and by Muggle cameras.”
“She’s going to ask us why on the test, you know.” Peter said.
“I know. It’s for entertainment purposes — like when we read books or listen to music.”
“That doesn’t even sound fun, meddling in other people’s business —”
“Muggles are weird,” Remus shrugged. “Anyways, the answer would just be ‘entertainment and distraction from their own lives’ if that helps at all.”
“Thanks, Loo— I mean, Moony.”
Remus burst out laughing, his face tinged pink. “Moony? MOONY?”
Peter blushed. “I mean, you know, the…”
A seventh year prefect walked in, drumming a solo on his Transfiguration textbook with the tips of his fingers.
“Furry little problem, you know, I thought it fit.” Peter said. “Y’know, Moony.”
From anyone else, Remus would’ve been furious. His face broke into a wide grin. “I love it. Thanks, Pete.”
“No problem,” Peter grinned. “Hey, do you guys want to go work on you know what?”
“Be a little discreet, will you?” Sirius flicked his hair back over his shoulder.
“Sorry.”
“So, what I’m getting for this — and I am a Prefect, so you’ve got to tell me the truth,” the seventh year boy said. “Is that you,” he pointed at Remus, “have some variety of mammalian pet…and it’s a bloody pain in the ass…and you’re all…training it?”
“Yes!” James and Sirius applauded enthusiastically. “You’re so brilliant, of course you’ve figured it out! Nicely done! Give yourself twenty points for Gryffindor!”
Remus and Peter both chuckled, watching the seventh year beam with pride.
“What’s your name, Prefect?” James asked, sticking out a steady hand to shake.
“Frank. Frank Longbottom.” he shook James’s hand — despite his weak chin and awkward frame, he had a good, firm handshake. “And, er, I’m allergic to cats, so if you’ve got one keep it out of the common room.”
“Oh, no,” Sirius and James grinned at each other. “We haven’t got a cat. In fact,”
Sirius smirked at Remus, who looked like he may pass out, “we’ve got a dog.”
“Those aren’t allowed —”
“Exception. For our friend Remus here, he’s a little bit hearing impaired and he needs a dog to let him know when people are talking.”
Remus looked indignant. “Sirius —”
“It’s nice to meet you, Remus,” Frank said loudly. Remus fought every urge to roll his eyes.
“You too,” Remus said at the top of his lungs, glaring at Sirius.
Sirius pointed double finger guns at him, and to Remus’s absolute horror, he winked.
“Well, anyway, we’d better be going. I’ll see you around, Longbottom.”
Frank waved after the Marauders as they started up the stairs. Remus whirled on Sirius, unable to hide his slight smile.
“What the hell was that?”
“You thought it was funny too, Moony, don’t pretend you didn’t,” Sirius smiled lazily, flopping on his bed.
“You know what it is tomorrow, don’t you boys?” James interrupted, sitting on his heels.
“No,” Peter yawned, still poring over Muggle Studies.
“Halloween,” he said with a slight grin. “And I’ve got the perfect idea.”
“Oh, Merlin, not another of your ideas,” Remus rolled his eyes.
“Hush,” James commanded. “Anyway. I was thinking something involving Professor McGonagall —”
“She’s too smart, James,” Remus sighed. “Don’t be so pessimistic. I’m brilliant too. Or maybe we could get Nearly Headless Nick to help us out with something?”

“He’d tell Professor Dumbledore,” Peter crossed his legs and lean forward. “Alright — alright, I mean, we could —”

“Merlin, you can stop now, James,” Remus grinned. “I have an idea.”

“Excellent!” James threw himself onto Remus’s bed, grabbing Remus’s hand and tapping over-excited fingers on it. It had become a habit of his to grab the nearest Marauder’s hand and tap his fidgeting fingers on their palms and wrists.

“Okay, so if we put out all the candles in the Great Hall no one would know it was us, right? Because if no one saw us do it they would never be able to figure it out, so if we put out all the candles and stole a bunch of desserts from the table and hid them on our laps under the table and then put them under the Cloak we could sneak them up here…”

“Brilliant!” James exclaimed, looking up at Remus with an enthusiastic grin. “It’d be better if we were caught, but I understand. We’ve lost far too many points for our house in the past few years.”

“My personal theory is that you have a punishment fetish,” Sirius said offhandedly. “Ooh, Professor, give me more detentions…ooh yeah…”

“Sod off,” James kicked him in the shin halfheartedly.

“Gladly,” Sirius laughed. “Moons, what were you saying?”

“Oh, Merlin, you too?” Remus gave an exaggerated groan.

“Sorry, Remus,” Sirius shrugged unapologetically. “Anyway. How do we plan to extinguish these candles you’ve been blabbering about?”

“Merlin, Sirius, don’t you read?” Peter’s face was flushed with excitement — finally, finally, he knew something Sirius didn’t.

“Not really,” Sirius said. His academic brilliance had been honed by his private tutors when he was a child and most everything magic related came naturally.

“When I was reading up on illuminating spells for Charms I found the extinguishing spell, Nox.”

“How were you reading about illuminating spells, we learned them second year —”

“That was the first you-know-when that we knew about Remus’s furry little problem, I stayed up all night that night and I fell asleep in Charms. James and Remus never learned them at all.”

“Already knew them,” they said in unison.

“Anyway,” Peter said. “Before breakfast tomorrow morning, during lunch, and after classes, we can practice. Then, by dinner, we’ll be ready.”

“Good idea,” James yawned.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter is so short!
An Evening in the Common Room

Professor Flitwick conducted a group of students in Halloween caroling while James, Sirius and Remus crept into the hall under the cloak. On the final note, which shook the lanterns on the wall, the four Marauders pulled out their wands, grinned at each other, and whispered, “Nox!”

Every light in the Great Hall went out at once, leaving them all in darkness. Several first years screamed, and the Marauders knew they had only a few seconds before the lights came back.

“Go!” James pushed his friends towards the table. They sat in their usual seats, shoved two platters of pudding and half a chocolate cake under the cloak near Peter and Remus’s feet, and burst into laughter.

“Were you even here before?” Lily asked Sirius, a knowing smirk on her face. “Didn’t see you come in.”

“Of course, Evans, don’t be stupid.” Sirius pushed his elegant black hair out of his eyes.

“Mm. So the plum pudding that was sitting directly in front of me just disappeared when the lights went out?” Lily smirked.

Sirius leaned back and rested his feet on the table, loosening his tie as he did so. “I’m afraid you must be hallucinating, Evans, don’t you think, boys?”

“Oh, definitely,” Peter said, taking a large bite of chicken leg.

“Of course,” Lily arched an eyebrow. “I’d tell a professor, but it’s better to watch you suffer later.”

“What do you mean?”

Lily smiled over at Severus, who waved at her. “You’ll see,” she gave a short laugh and turned back to her conversation with a few of her friends.

James rolled his eyes. “Merlin, she’s a nightmare.”

“James, she’s sitting right there,” Remus said quietly, biting the inside of his cheek because it really wasn’t funny at all, as Lily was hardly as bad as James made her out to be, but there was something undeniably comical about watching James glare at her with unadulterated distaste.

“So?” James grinned, the picture of messy boyish charm. It was hard not to be fascinated by the way James and Sirius shook with booming laughter without wondering if anyone was looking at them. Remus couldn’t imagine not caring what people thought so much.

“Happy Halloween,” Dumbledore boomed, raising a glass to the students. “Enjoy your meal,” he looked, almost directly it seemed, at the Marauders. “Despite our little, ah, inconvenience, I daresay this may be the most delicious feast Hogwarts has ever had.”

Frank Longbottom leaned across the table towards the chuckling third years. “He’s said that every year.”

“We know, mate,” James said, winking exaggeratedly.

Somehow Frank felt honored to be the object of James’ attention, although James was several years younger and exceptionally immature.

“Anyhow, boys, as much as I loathe to recount my tale of woe and — “ Sirius began, his eyes fixed to the ceiling and a hand pressed against his impeccably pressed jumper.

“What a pretentious arse you are?” Lily interjected with a cheery smirk, turning away before he had the chance to respond.

“I was going to say suffering,” Sirius said stonily. “But I was telling you about James and Quidditch, you know, when you two were out gallivanting doing who knows what — “

“Muggle Studies,” Peter said with a false glare. “Where you should’ve been, mind you.”


“What you could’ve done was not crash into the stands, throw your Quidditch robes at my sodding head, and beg me to finish the practice for you before Alix noticed!” Sirius said. “I swear to Merlin, you must be mental, or perhaps you think Alix is blind, which I can assure you he isn’t, as he’s just
thrown an ear of corn at my head — really witty, Alix, it’s Potter you should be tossing things at! —
anyways, I am deeply, deeply offended. I expect no less than five slices of that absolutely ravishing
cake over there as repentance for your misdeeds.” Sirius, biting back a smile, stared dramatically into
the beyond.
“Loads of big words in there, Siri, must’ve actually opened a book for once!” James applauded.
“Well done. Come on, everyone, let’s give him a hand, he’s really earned it.” A few people, Peter
and Remus included, clapped begrudgingly. James beamed.
“Are you boys coming to the party in the common room tonight?” Frank asked. “Me and some of the
prefects organized it. We’ve invited loads of friends — mostly from Quidditch, which is why I’m
inviting you lot —“
“Prefects have friends, I had no idea —“ Sirius began.
“And you can bring some of the dessert you’ve nicked,” Frank gestured under the table.
“Blast. Does everyone know?”
“Everyone you stepped on in your hurry to get to your seats, anyway,” Frank nodded
sympathetically. “Nice try, though, probably your best one yet.”
The Marauders beamed with pride.
“Oh, and wear something…interesting,” Frank added.
“Oh, no worries,” Sirius said conspiratorially. “We will.”
Frank smiled at them, a bit confused and slightly in awe. He may have been invited to a common
room party, but he’d never have friends that close. He didn’t like to admit that he was jealous.
“Shall we?” the Marauders stood, wrapping a towering pile of desserts in the cloak and pretending
not to be carrying them.
“Oi, Potter,” Severus said, a cruel smirk on his face. Lily stood next to him, hiding a grin. “Giving
birth, are you?”
“Well I was going to say ‘yeah, it’s your mum’s,’ but you know…I wouldn’t want any child to be
cursed with a nose such as yours,” James said, hoisting the desert pile onto his knee. He looked quite
ridiculous, lifting something that didn’t appear to exist.
“That’s rich, Potter, but I think you’ll find any baby of yours has enough problems with being an
arrogant prick without having to worry about their perfectly alright nose.”
“Sure, Snivellus, whatever helps you sleep at night.” Sirius cut in.
“I’ll have you know that noses are the least of your worries, when people are going to find out about
Lupin’s little secret very soon.”
“You don’t know anything,” Peter spat, quivering with fear and anger. Remus remained very still
and very silent.
“Coming from you, that’s quite a laugh. Who did your Charms essay for you this time, Pettigrew,
your boyfriend?”
“Hey, at least Peter can get a date.” James hissed.
“So can Severus!” Lily insisted, going rather red.
James hooted. “Oh, I can’t believe this…Evans…and Snivellus…this has to be the best thing that’s
ever happened! Sirius, can you believe it?” He gave a forced, booming laugh.
“Merlin, you’re not actually jealous?” Lily asked incredulously. “Sev and I aren’t dating! Someone
asked him out yesterday and he said no!”
“You’re not?” James said hopefully.
“No!”
“Oh, good,” James recovered a bit of his usual confidence. “Would you like to go out with me,
Evans?”
“Merlin, not even if you were the last bloke on this earth.” Lily spat.
James looked slightly dejected, but to his credit, hid it well. “So Severus, who’s the unlucky lady?”
“None of your business.” Severus muttered.
“Come on, Severus,” Lily dragged him away by the hand, shooting a dirty look at the Marauders.
“Happy Halloween, Snivelly!” James yelled, nearly dropping his pile of desert.
“Hey, James, you could just try a levitation charm —“ Peter began.
“Blimey, you’re right, Merlin, I’m slow today —“
“And every day,” Sirius cut in.
“Sod off,” James said affectionately. “Wingardium leviosa!” the trays, still covered by the cloak, rose into the air and followed the Marauders up to Gryffindor tower.
“Hey, you made it,” Frank waved them over. “You can put those on the table. Chocolate pie, excellent, nice work!”
“Thanks,” James said disinterestedly.
“Well, I’m glad you could make it. Firewhiskey?” He offered them each a glass.
Sirius, ever the reckless one, downed the entire glass in one gulp and immediately started coughing.
“Careful there, Black, it’s called fire whiskey for a reason, you know.” Frank said with a slightly concerned smile.
“Er, yeah,” Sirius wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. “Obviously.”
“So what are you boys dressed as?” Mary MacDonald swept past them wearing long emerald robes and rectangular-framed spectacles. Her blonde hair was swept into a shiny black wig, and she looked almost uncannily like McGonagall.
“Glad you asked,” Sirius said. “I’m Peter,” he gestured to the pillow he’d stuffed under his shirt and the floppy blonde wig he’d set on his head. “James is Remus,” James had drawn two long black scars across his face and had — miraculously, it seemed — flattened his black hair and transfigured it to look oddly grey. He still wasn’t entirely sure he’d be able to transfigure it back. “Remus is me,” Remus had covered up his scars with some clumpy makeup Sirius had nicked from a seventh year, and his scruffy hair had been expertly transfigured to near perfectly mimic Sirius’ elegant black coiff.
“And Peter is James,” Peter ruffled up his hair and grinned with false confidence, standing on his toes.
“Clever,” Frank chuckled. “Go have fun, boys.”
“Yeah, alright,” James said with a grin. “Oi! MacDonald!”
“Yes, Potter?” Mary tilted her head threateningly — made more so by the fact that she was still dressed as McGonagall.
“I see McKinnon is dressed as Dumbledore. Wouldn’t mind enacting something I have imagined happening for quite a while now?”
“Is it McGonagall and Dumbledore snogging, because that’s disgusting —“
“Nothing so crass, MacDonald, this is a party, after all.” James ruffled his hair, regretfully remembering that he’d used twelve bottles of his father’s deluxe Sleakeasy’s cream to get it to stay perfectly smooth atop his head.
“What is it then?”
“Just one quick kiss. Between McGonagall and Dumbledore.”
“Oh, I doubt that’s ever going to happen,” Mary said mischievously.
“I smell a secret. Go on, MacDonald, we’re both Chasers, you can tell me anything!”
“Okay, so,” Mary leaned towards him. “I caught Dumbledore and Slughorn —“
James pulled a face. “I need hear no more — this is a horror, a scandal, Hogwarts’ best couple has ceased to exist — McMinnie and Dumbly will never be wed…such a shame…and Horace, how could you!” James let out an enormously fake sob.
“That wasn’t what I was going to —“
“Hush. My heart is broken.” James declared.
“But nothing actually —“
“Mac, you’ve already caused me enough pain. Maybe you and Marly should go enact my fantasy. She’s staring at you, you know.”
“Git,” she said, her eyes narrowed to slits. “It’s not that, Potter. I stole her robes for my costumes and she doesn’t know yet. Oh, look, here she comes, suppose she figured it out.”
“Hello, Professor,” Marlene said, with a small smile.
Mary curtsied, something that James simply couldn’t imagine McGonagall doing. “Good evening, Dumbledore.”
Both of them giggled and walked off together.
James winked exaggeratedly at Sirius, and Sirius laughed hysterically, red faced, as the pillow stuffed up his shirt dropped with a pathetic thump to the ground.
“Never,” Remus groaned, sitting up. “Never again. I don’t care that we don’t have class today, I have homework and I can’t sodding think because, oh yeah, we thought it was a grand idea to go drink fire whiskey at two in the morning!”

“Boys,” Professor McGonagall slammed open the door and glared down at them. “I trust you can explain the current state of the common room.”

Peter was the first to react. “Of course, Professor, just give us one moment, please.”


“What are we going to do?”

James’ face went green.

“Oh, Merlin, James —” Remus said, rubbing his eyes. James doubled over and vomited on Sirius’ shoes. Sirius didn’t even wake up.

“What do we tell her?”

“Stomach ache curing potion gone wrong.” Remus suggested, looking paler than Nearly Headless Nick. “Do you lot remember the spell to get my hair not looking like Sirius’s?”

“Is it… very grater?” James asked.

“Very grater? That’s definitely not a spell,” Remus said tiredly. “Professor! You can come in now!”

“Wonderful.” McGonagall said briskly. “I’d like you boys to help me piece together what happened last night — and I don’t want to take four hundred points from Gryffindor, but if I don’t hear the entire truth I will. Do you understand?”

“But Professor!” James said.

“Potter, you sound inebriated.”

“I’d love to know what that means at a later date, Professor,” James said sloppily.

“I don’t believe this.” McGonagall shook her head. “Detention, for all of you!”

“Professor —”

“No argument.” McGonagall said, not exactly shouting, but in a steady, extremely loud voice that shocked all of them into silence. “Now, would you care to tell me exactly how the common room came to be in its current state?”

“The Quidditch team was celebrating our victory,” Sirius said, smoothing down his hair. “It got… a bit out of hand.”

“You are third years!” McGonagall boomed. “This is going directly to Professor Dumbledore.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Sirius interrupted, covering his head with a pillow.

“Mr. Black. I hope you know the damage done to the Gryffindor common room was so extreme that you, and indeed every Gryffindor involved, is at the risk of expulsion from Hogwarts?”

Remus stammered out an apology. “N-no, Professor, please, don’t expel us — nothing like this will ever happen again, I swear!”

“Oh, I’ll make sure of that, Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall said coldly. “I have to say how extremely disappointed I am in each of you.”

The rumors swirled around the school — according to a first year, the common room had gone up in flames, the entire Slytherin house was certain the Fat Lady was dead inside her portrait out of shock, and naturally, the fifth year Prewett twins had been the source of all this gossip, as both had been there and were telling embellished tales of the horrors which had gone on during the admittedly fairly tame party.

“So,” Professor Dumbledore said, folding his hands and looking at the Marauders over the frames of his glasses. “Your common room has a hole in the wall, a Gryffindor banner covered in glitter, and a broken armchair. Would you care to —”

“Professor, I’m so sorry, I swear —” Remus stuttered. Dumbledore held up a finger.

Remus’s face went white and he fell silent. “Please don’t expel us,” he whispered.
“My dear boy,” Dumbledore said, looking surprised. “Why on earth would I do that?”
“Because —”
“No one will be expelled. I simply wish to know exactly what happened in the common room.”
“We don’t know,” Sirius said, at length. “It wasn’t us.”
“I have no doubt that it was not,” Dumbledore said airily. “However, I must insist upon hearing the entire story.”
Peter sighed and stuttered out an absolute lie, glaring all the while at James and Sirius.
“Alright. You may all go.” Dumbledore said. The door slammed behind them, and Sirius burst into loud, panicky laughter.
“Merlin,” he guffawed, clutching onto James for support. “That was dreadful. Lucky we got out of that, isn’t it?”
“Is it?” Peter said icily.
“Ah, cheer up, Pete, you lie excellently under pressure.” James patted him on the back. “Back to the common room?”
“Or what’s left of it.” Remus said gloomily.

“Good morning, Mr. Black,” McGonagall said as Sirius sat across from her, taking a biscuit without prompting. “You’ve been sorely missed the past few weeks for our tea.”
“Busy,” Sirius said, chewing loudly. “And I just know you can’t live without me, Professor.”
“I suppose you wouldn’t like to talk about your home situation, for the umpteenth week in a row?”
“In that,” Sirius said, taking another noisy bite, “you are quite correct.”
“And yet here we are.”
“Quite right.”
“You realize I could be doing other — much less painful — activities during the time I take to speak to you. For example, having all my teeth pulled one by one.”
“Don’t let me stop you,” Sirius said, a wicked glint in his eyes.
“I’m afraid…” McGonagall sighed. “Unpleasant though it may be, I must request that we continue these meetings. Unless you want to be dosed with veritaserum and forced to tell the truth?”
“Illegal,” Sirius commented. “But I have no doubt you’d do it. Alright,” he sighed. “If you insist upon the truth.”
“I do.” McGonagall arched an eyebrow.
“Shall I start at the beginning?”
“Shall I start at the beginning?”
“Right. The point is my parents hate Gryffindor and all that it stands for.”
McGonagall bristled. “They would, wouldn’t they? Slytherins are so opposed to courage, true courage, that they’d disown their children for being better people than they themselves are.”
Sirius laughed. “I wouldn’t say that.”
“And what, then, would you say, Mr. Black?”
“I’m not any braver than my parents.”
McGonagall looked surprised. “Of course you are, Mr. Black. You’re a Gryffindor, aren’t you?”
“Well, I s’pose…”
“I’m afraid our time is up. I’ll see you in class.”
“Looking forward to it.” Sirius stood up and slouched away.
He felt a warm hand cover his mouth as he shut McGonagall’s office door behind him and sighed.
“James,” he said, slightly muffled. “Again?”
“Don’t move,” James whispered. “Snivellus and Evans are coming this way.”
So they were, the two of them laughing and talking as they walked down the hall.
“Evening, Snivellus, Evans.” James said, stepping out from around the corner.
“Fancy seeing you two here.” Sirius added.
“Hello, James, Sirius,” Lily said coolly. “Busy trolling the corridors, are we?”
“Indeed we are,” Sirius said with a grin. “Just waiting for a greasy-haired idiot and his apparently blind girlfriend to happen upon our hiding place. Happened sooner than expected, didn’t it, James?”
“Why, yes it did.” James ruffled his hair. “I wonder, shall we hex you or be on our way?”
Severus had already pulled out his wand, shooting a Bat Bogey hex which they easily deflected.
“Not worth it,” Evans said, sticking her tongue out at James.
“We’re not worth it? Hear that, James?” Sirius said, with an easy grin.
“Mm-hm. I think we should show these two exactly how worth it we are.”
“Is that a threat, Potter?” Severus spat.
“Oh, careful, Snivellus, I think you’ve just spat all over your robes.”
Severus sniffed disdainfully. “No, that’s just the force of your ego drenching everyone in the castle.”
“Oh,” Sirius staggered backwards, clutching at his chest. “You’ve hurt me, Snivelly, truly.”
“Well, I’m sorry, Snivellus, Evans, we must be going. More important places to go and more interesting people to see,” James said.
“What, like your Dragon Pox infected little boyfriend?” Severus asked.
“You know, I wasn’t going to hex you this time,” Sirius said, with a terrifying little chuckle. He lashed out and hit Severus square in the jaw, knocking him over. Lily made a loud noise of protest and drew her wand, pointing it at Sirius’s throat.
“Sorry to do this, Evans,” James said. “Petrificus Totalus!” He turned his back and never saw her fall.
“Dragon Pox,” Sirius said, still seething. “Dragon Pox! I’ll show him Dragon Pox —“
“It’s better than him finding out about Remus’s furry little problem, isn’t it?”
“You and your rabbit!” Frank exclaimed, strolling down the hallway. “Ridiculous, the lot of you!”
“Have you decided it’s a rabbit, then?” James asked, leaning against the wall.
“Must be.” Frank replied cheerily. “What’s your rabbit’s name?”
“Moony.” James answered.
“Nice one, James,” Sirius said under his breath.
“Any reason?”
“Well…” Sirius said, stifling a laugh. “He’s white, and round. Like the moon.”
“Ah. Makes sense. What’s the big secret about him?”
“Ah, Frank, my dear man. If we told you, it wouldn’t be a secret.” James said.
Frank nodded seriously and moved on. “Say,” he yelled back. “Why are Lily and Severus on the ground?”
“Run!” Sirius hissed, and they sprinted for the common room.
Hogsmeade

“Has everyone turned in their Hogsmeade forms?” Professor McGonagall asked, herding the students out of the castle. Sirius raised his hand.

“Yes, Mr. Black,” she said, the corner of her mouth twitching upward.

“Since we’re leaving in five minutes, I feel that your question was obsolete and an utter waste of my time.” The other Marauders chuckled.

“Thank you for voicing your opinion, Mr. Black,” she said in a monotone. “Any students who have not turned in signed permission forms will be staying in their dormitories until we return this evening.”

“Poor gits,” James said, not at all sympathetically. “Shall we?” he linked arms with Sirius and Remus, Peter tagging along on Remus’s arm.

“Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall called after him. He slumped back with his hands in his pockets, making a significant effort to whistle nonchalantly.

“Yes, Professor?”

“Be careful, Lupin,” McGonagall said quietly. “Very careful. Don’t accept anything offered by strangers, don’t mention your condition or any condition at all — Hogsmeade isn’t a safe place to have a secret you want kept.”

“I will, don’t worry.” Remus promised.

“Oi! Moons! Hurry up!” Sirius yelled. Remus smiled apologetically and dashed after his friends, his amber eyes alight. Slughorn chortled.

“It is nice, isn’t it, Minerva, seeing friendships like that?” he asked, exhaling a smoke ring from his pipe and smoothing down the bristling hairs of his mustache. “Reminds me of when I was a boy.”

“Mm,” McGonagall said, unamused. “Were you a bright student who squandered your talent tormenting other students?”

“I would say so, yes,” Slughorn said, puffing out his chest a bit. “Mind you, that was quite a long time ago…”

“I imagine.” McGonagall said coldly, following the students down into Hogsmeade. “I would like to establish some ground rules — you may buy whatever you like, but remember that any and all explosives are strictly banned at Hogwarts.”

“Grand idea, McGee! Anyone want to blow up a staircase with me?” Sirius whispered, a glint in his dark eyes.

“Wicked.” James exclaimed.

“Extra points for framing Peeves,” Remus added. The poltergeist had recently made a rude comment about one of his scars, extremely publicly, and he was still put out about it.

“Moony, you’re a genius!” James exclaimed.

“Oh, er, maybe don’t call me that while we’re here.” Remus said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“A genius? Well, you are —” Peter said.

“No. Moony.”

“Oh,” Peter said, his face going red.

“Come off it, Remus, no one’s going to figure out —” James said lazily.

“Don’t mention it, okay? Not here. Please.”

“Alright,” James sighed. “Honeydukes? If we put Peter in a sugar coma we can roll him into a snowball!”

“Hey!” Peter said indignantly.

“Don’t worry, Pete, we’d let you out before you froze to death…probably.” Sirius said. Peter squealed. “Promise you won’t do that! Promise me!”

“Alright, alright, we will…ahem…not under any circumstances…do that.”


They dashed through the neatly painted glass door of Honeydukes, jostling through a crowd of other
students. A small brass bell rang violently as they opened the door, peeling their frost-covered gloves off of pale, frozen fingers; the shop itself smelled like burnt sugar and chocolate. Remus read the prices off the sign above the witch behind the counter’s head and gave a little disappointed sigh.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“Nothing.” Remus said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Seriously, Moon — I mean, Lupin — you can’t lie to us.” Sirius looked vaguely offended.

“Oh, alright, if you must know, I can hardly afford anything. It’s fine, though, it’s my fault. If I had managed to come up with my own money for the Potions textbook this year instead of my parents buying it for me they’d’ve given me some spare galleons.”

“It bloody well is not fine!” James said indignantly. “It’s nearly Christmas, Remus Lupin, and you will have your chocolate.”

“I’m not too put out by it, James, don’t worry.”

“Nonsense. Here.” James handed Remus a pile of coins. “Consider it my Christmas gift to you.”

“You say that as if it’s the only one he’ll be getting, we all know you can’t resist wasting your parents’ gold on us.” Sirius said.

“Not wasting! If I was throwing it out to the common folk, that would be a waste. You’re my friends, my gold is yours.”

“I’d pay for things to, you know, if I didn’t highly suspect my parents got their fortune through supporting murderers and pureblood supremacists. It’s all principle.” Sirius said.

“Look at you two, talking about your inherited fortunes. Such rich blokes, taking pity on us poor, gold-less children.” Remus rolled his eyes and bought a single bar of Honeydukes’ best chocolate.

“I am not a bloody rich bloke, mate,” Sirius said defensively, doing his best to hide his educated, careful accent.


“T’ll buy my own.” Sirius said stonily, handing a pile of galleons to the witch at the counter.

“Ahh, I don’t like to spend my parents’ money because they’re both prejudiced arses and I despise them,” James said in falsetto, flipping his hair in a poor parody of Sirius.

“Drop it, James, you make a shit me anyhow. My hair would never deign to look that awful.” Sirius smoothed back his hair with one hand, making a second year Ravenclaw behind him blush and bat her eyelashes at him.

“Hey. Hey, Moons,” Peter whispered, while James and Sirius began a heated argument who was the better Sirius and whether James’ perpetual messy hair was attractive or not.

“Peter,” Remus said between clenched teeth.

“Oh, right, sorry, sorry. Lupin. I was thinking we put a toffee in Sirius’ hair.”

“Merlin, Peter, I think he’d cry!” Remus exclaimed in a loud whisper, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“He’s planning to roll me into a snowball, it’s a preemptive strike!”

“Ooh, did I hear the word preemptive? Seems as if you’ve added a brain cell to your meager collection, Pete,” Sirius said.

“Now I really want to put toffee in his hair.” Peter hissed.

“Alright. Not too high up, he’s spent ages growing it out.”

“You’re too kind sometimes, Remus.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.” Remus handed Peter a toffee from James’ pile, much against his better judgement. “Try to make sure we leave before he notices. He’ll never forgive you if it makes a scene.”

“Nah, he will, don’t worry. I’m sure there’ll be revenge.”

“You’re declaring war, you know.”

“I know.”

“Good luck, mate.” Remus patted Peter on the back.

Peter darted forward with all the courage of a threatened rat, stuck the toffee in his mouth, chewed it
into a sticky, wet ball, and pressed it shakily into Sirius’s long black hair.

“Did something just touch my neck?” Sirius asked James.

James winked at Peter. “Of course not, mate.”

“Potter! I saw you wink at Pettigrew!”

“On a last name basis now, are we, Black? That hurts.” James said jokingly.

“I’m sure it’s not as painful as it’ll be when I punch you in the face.”

“Calm down. Have a licorice wand.” James said. Sirius bit one aggressively.

“Siri, you wanted to buy some explosives for the staircase?” Remus interrupted.

“Yes, Moony, thank you for reminding me.” Sirius said cheerfully. The toffee dangled from his hair, wet and sticky and slapping against the back of his neck. “Merlin’s arse, what the hell is on my neck?” Sirius reached to pull the toffee out of his hair and found it firmly, properly stuck. “Shit! Shit, there’s something stuck in my hair. What if we have to cut it? We’re going to have to cut it. It’ll look ridiculous, I swear to Merlin if I have to go to class with my hair cut I may die.” Sirius scooped up a handful of snow and covered his hair in it. “Alright, it’s getting colder — James, look for me, is it coming out?”

“Not in the slightest.” James said, not bothering to hide his grin.

“This isn’t funny, Potter! I’m dying, Merlin, I’m dying. This is the end!” He executed a flawless collapse onto the snow and lay there with his arm thrown over his face. “My poor hair. My poor hair. I’ll need a wig — I don’t want to cast a spell on it — what if something goes horribly wrong? Do you think Madam Pomfrey has a hair growth potion?” He asked, raising his head once again and studying the other Marauders’ faces anxiously.

“Probably, but it might have some nasty side affects. Look on the bright side, Siri, you may be able to grow a beard after!” James said enthusiastically.

“Hang on,” Sirius said. “Wait just one moment — one of you absolute prats stuck this in my hair, didn’t you? Lupin you shall tell me this second! Was it you?” he roared. Remus stared calmly into Sirius’s dark eyes, nearly positive he detected a flicker of amusement.

“Don’t worry, Black, I wouldn’t dream of it.” Remus said.

“POTTER!”

“Never.”

“Then…oh, Peter…sweet, shy Peter…I would never have suspected you of all people to be the one to betray me. I trusted you!”

Peter flinched, his face burning with guilt.

“Only joking, mate. Nice one!” Sirius said, forcing a beaming, furious smile. “Seriously, though, get this out of my hair before I kill you.”

“Death is a rather strong term to be throwing around unless you mean it, these days.” The bartender of the Hog’s Head strode

“How do you mean?”

“No idea. Don’t distract me. Get this damn thing out of my hair!”

“Er…right. Here.” Peter raised his wand.

“DON’T!” Sirius shouted. Peter jumped back. “James, you do it.”

“Gladly.” James said gleefully. “Diffindo.” A neat chunk of Sirius’s hair, stuck to the toffee, landed in the snow.

“DIFFINDO! DIFFINDO? DID YOU JUST CUT THAT OUT OF MY HAIR?” Sirius yelled, hiding a laugh at the horrified looks he was getting from passerby.

“I may have.” James said.

“This is war, boys!” Sirius declared, sprinting down the hill to the edge of the fence. He stopped, anger forgotten. “Hey, look, it’s the Shrieking Shack! Apparently it’s been haunted for a couple years now, wonder what happened —“

He scooped up a large ball of snow, ready to throw it at Peter, when he recognized that expression
on Remus’ face. It was one he knew very well.
“Oh.” He sat down in the snow, rolling the snowball between his hands. “I’m sorry. I should’ve realized.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Remus said, staring at the Shrieking Shack with a hollow expression. “It’s fine. It’s weird seeing it from the outside, you know?”

“Yeah.”
Remus was aware that Sirius was looking at him, studying his face carefully.

“Anyway.” Sirius stood up and threw his snowball at Peter’s head. “Come on, Moony, don’t slack off on me now. Whose side are you on?”

“Yours.” Remus stood unsteadily, still a bit sore from the previous full moon. “Always.”

“Wonderful news! Your help will be much appreciated.”
Remus halfheartedly tossed a snowball at James.

“Git.” Sirius said, pelting another snow missile at Peter.

“I’ll show you git. Tosser.” Remus smiled, a scar on his lip painfully stretching open.

“I’m hurt, Remus, really.”

“I’m sure your ice heart just cracked a little. What a shame.” Remus responded, throwing a snowball at Sirius.

“Ah, Betrayal, how your bitter sting consumes me!” Sirius gasped, clutching his heart. He rolled a giant snowball and pulled out his wand, quickly packing ice on top of the powdery snow.

“Wingardium Leviosa!”
The snowball, roughly the size of the average first year, rose questioningly into the air. With a dramatic flick of his wand, Sirius forced it forward. It knocked Remus into the ground, huffing for breath.

James and Peter quickly started building a snow wall and crouched behind it, pelting snowballs and the occasional hex at the defenseless Remus, still lying in the snow.

“Remus! Get up!”

“You —” Remus panted. “Did this to me!”

“Did I?” Sirius asked nonchalantly as a snowball exploded in his newly cut hair.

“Yes!” Remus shoved a flurry of snow at Peter, who was eating a Pumpkin Pasty and apparently couldn’t find the willpower to stand up and fight back.

James threw himself out from behind his snow shield and tackled Sirius, tickling his sides. Sirius laughed, hitting James away from him. “Stop! — Stop!”

James rolled Sirius face down in the snow. “Never!”

“Can’t breathe!” Sirius protested.

“Sure you can.” James said, flopping on the ground next to Sirius. Sirius rolled over and looked up at the sky, seeing dizzying white clouds. His pale, frost covered cheeks were flushed. and Remus thought for a moment that it softened the harsh angles of his face — made him look kinder, more like the person he was underneath his anger.

Remus lay next to Peter where he’d fallen. He was making an effort to pretend that this was all in good fun, that he could, of course, stand up if he wanted to. In truth, the cold of the snow and the chill in his bones which he could feel were shifting and breaking already to accommodate the monster within. He was quite sure it would be impossible to stand up without help, but — and now he heard his father’s voice in his head, loud and clear and demanding attention — Lupins did not ask for help.

Remus pulled the Honeydukes bag from his robes and took a bite of chocolate — it was a bit cold but still had an instant soothing effect on him. He took a deep breath, puffing a chilly cloud into the air.

He heard crunching footsteps in the snow next to him and looked up, dusting snow out of his hair.

“Er, Remus?” It was none other than Mafalda Hopkirk, first year Ravenclaw, standing with a group of older Ravenclaw girls.

“Yeah?”

“Er…would you like to go to Madam Puddifoot’s with me? My friend Dorcas,” she pointed to
Dorcas Meadows, who was talking to Sirius rather flirtatiously. “Is asking out Sirius and Ella —“ another third year girl, sitting in the snow next to James and talking to his rear end, not his face, as his head was buried in a snow drift. “And I was just…I was wondering…”

James pulled his head out of the snowdrift he’d been burrowing into. “Did I just hear that our Remus Lupin’s got a date?”

“Yeah, you did,” Mafalda blushed, twirling her brown hair around her finger. “If he’ll say yes, that is.”

Remus suddenly found himself wondering what to do with his hands. He didn’t particularly want to go on a date with a first year — or on a date at all, but she was looking at him with wide, expectant eyes and he couldn’t bring himself to say no.

Mafalda offered him her hand, and he took it gratefully, clenching his teeth as hard as he could as he stood up.

“Are you alright? You went rather pale just now.”

Remus noted, bitterly, that she’d noticed how ill he felt before the Marauders had. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

She offered him her arm — they made a comical pair, as he was nearly two feet taller.

“Madam Puddifoot’s?”

“Er…yeah.”

Remus stepped through the door and nearly threw up on the spot. “Blimey,” he managed. Mafalda beamed.

“Isn’t it marvelous?”

Marvelous wasn’t exactly the word Remus had in mind. Perhaps exceptionally pink would have been more accurate. The room was covered in lacy hearts and smelled strongly of rose pudding and chocolate.

“Remus?” Mafalda asked, still hanging on his arm.

“Er…yeah?”

“Do you want to find a table?”

“Sure. Sure.” Remus sat down across from her. “So…how do you like Hogwarts?”

“It’s great! I love it!” she declared enthusiastically.

“That’s good.” Remus replied. This was a terrible idea.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Mafalda said. “How did you get your scars?”

Remus stiffened. “Er —“

“Because you know what people say about, them, right?”

Merlin, if she outs me as a werewolf right here I’m going to have to kill everyone in this room. The little bitter voice inside Remus’s head cackled and said,

Well, then you’ll really be a monster, won’t you?

Remus dug his nails into his palms.

“I don’t, actually,” he said conversationally, leaning his elbows on the table. He was suddenly very aware of the patches he’d sewn onto the fraying sleeves of his favorite jumper.

“Oh, well, everyone thinks you’ve been getting in fights —“

Remus barked out a harsh laugh and Mafalda peered at him over the frames of her glasses rather curiously.

“Is something funny?”

“Not at all. Go on.”

“Or maybe that your parents are…you know…”

“Hardly.” Remus said.

“That’s a relief. It’s not — not all of it — good, what they say about you, but everyone agrees that you must be very brave. And most of the worst scars you’d got are faded by now.”

Remus touched his face self consciously.

Mafalda laughed. “Don’t worry, you look really nice.”

Remus felt his face go red but didn’t mind so much.

“But…how did you get the scars?”

“Erm…” he’d been hoping she would forget her original question. “Enough about me, I haven’t
heard anything about you,” he breathed a quick sigh of relief when she seemed satisfied. “What’s your…favorite subject?”
“Charms. Yours?”
“Defense. What’s your worst?”
“Transfiguration.”
“Potions.” Remus wanted to crawl under his bed and never come out whenever he thought about the last Potions lesson, where he’d melted James’ cauldron and set his own hair on fire.
Mafalda giggled. “So. Cupcakes or cake?”
“I don’t mind.”
“If we get a cake we can share.” Mafalda said, leaning towards him with an odd look on her face.
“Erm. Sure.” Remus said. He glanced out the window and saw Sirius loping along with easy grace next to James, who was yelling insults at Severus and flirting incessantly with Lily. Peter was stumbling through the snow in front of them, Lily’s friends on either side of him. “Be right back.” Remus burst gasping from the tea shop, trying to rid the scent of pink food from his nostrils. “Sirius! Shouldn’t you be with Dorcas? James, that Ella girl seemed fascinated by you — “
“Who?” James asked distractedly. “Oh, that one. Yeah, lovely thing, wasn’t she?”
“She had hair like a mountain troll.” Sirius said rudely. “And yeah, Remus, I turned her down. There was a small voice in my head telling me she’d want to go to Madam Puddifoot’s and I simply cannot stand the idea.”
“That, my dear friend, would be called common sense, and you may want to find some more.” Remus said fondly.
“Moony, how’s your date going?” James asked mischievously.
“James.”
“Right. Remus, how’s your date going?”
“It’s lovely. She did ask about the scars but I think I managed to distract her. She’s too young for me and we won’t be having a second date, but I’ve had a lovely time.”
“Too much pink?” Peter guessed.
“Far too much pink. I think I may vomit.” Remus shuddered.
“If you do, will it be pink vomit?” Sirius asked.
“If you do, will it be pink vomit?” Sirius asked.
“Don’t be vulgar, Sirius. But if you must know, based on the food Mafalda’s been shoving down my throat, I’d say it was a fair assumption.”
“Wicked.” James grinned. “You should get back to your date then. Remember to pay for her!”
“But she ate it!” Remus protested. “That’s not fair!”
“Did you hear that, Sirius? Our Remus Lupin doesn’t know the pay-on-the-first-date rule! Ah, my young friend, you have so much to learn,” James sighed.
“Says the one who regularly tortures his crushes best friend and tormented said crush for two years before falling in sudden, inexplicable love with her.” Remus replied.
“Fair enough. Well, we’re off to Zonko’s to pick up a load of dung bombs.”
“What exactly do you plan to do with them?” Remus asked wearily.
“We’re going to fill up Filch’s office.” Peter said, bouncing on his toes.
“Good luck on your date, mate!” Sirius clapped him on the back, and they were gone. Remus walked back inside.
“Sorry that took so long,” he said with a shy smile. The couple next to them was sitting — not in their chairs, yes, on the table, kissing noisily and Remus was too afraid to look and see if the boy was, in fact, biting the girls ear. He couldn’t resist the curiosity, however, and was disgusted to find the couple chewing on each other’s hair.
Mafalda was beaming at him. “It’s no problem. I ordered you some tea.”
“You’re the best!” Remus said happily, picking up a teacup and taking a long drink. Mafalda blushed.
“Do you want to take a walk?” Mafalda asked when he’d finished his tea, her face a brilliant shade of red.
“Don’t be embarrassed!” Remus said quickly — she looked as if she may have started crying if he
didn’t answer in a few seconds. “Of course I do.” He stood up, leaving his only spare change on the table, and offered her his arm. She took it, and Remus breathed a sigh of relief as they exited Madam Puddifoot’s. Outside, he was pleased to note, didn’t smell of rose pudding and sugar. “Want to walk down to the Shrieking Shack?” Mafalda asked. Remus picked at one of the scabs on his hands frantically, his bruised hands useless. “Oh. Yeah, of course. Er, who doesn’t love the Shrieking Shack? I do!” He smiled with a painful effort, sure he looked quite deranged. “Are you alright?” “Fine! I’m — I’m fine! Wonderful, in fact! Never better!” “Remus, I don’t know how to tell you this…” Mafalda said. “I don’t think we should stay together.” She stopped walking. “What?” Remus asked, bursting into loud guffaws. Mafalda noticed that he laughed with his entire body, half doubled over. It was endearing and a bit comical. “You’re…a bit…old for me.” “I completely agree,” Remus said, straightening up and pressing his fist against his lips to hide his smile. “It was nice to meet you, Mafalda.” “You too.” She darted away, her small form stark against the snow. Remus leaned against the fence, stared out at the Shack and sighed. “Remus! Remus!” Peter plodded through a snowbank and sat down next to Remus. “We went to Zonko’s and we’re going to —“ “Don’t get too excited now, Pete,” James warned. “If you tell even one person, you’re banned from our room for life.” “Why exactly are we doing this?” Remus asked, rolling his eyes. “Well, let me tell you a story —“ James started, gesturing out at the sky. There were snowflakes stuck in his eyelashes and they made his hazel eyes look bright. Remus didn’t like pulling pranks, losing Gryffindor points, getting detention — but listening to James talk like that made even the worst idea sound like the best one. It was the sort of voice, and Remus would come to regret never telling James this, that would make people fall in love with him.
“Sirius! Wake up!” James flopped on top of Sirius early on Christmas morning and lay there, motionless and quite heavy.
“Urghfl.” Sirius groaned. “No.”
“Come on.” Remus said resignedly, pulling Sirius off the bed by his feet. Peter was already sitting under the common room Christmas tree, sorting each of the Marauders’ presents into neat piles. James ruffled his hair affectionately. “Good old Pete.”
Peter beamed. “These are yours, James, and Sirius, and Remus — “ he pointed at each pile in turn. Lily ran into the room in her pajamas, her long, dark red hair hanging down around her face. “Oh.” she said, upon seeing the Marauders.
“Alright, Evans?” James smirked at her.
“Fine. Potter.” she turned to leave, her mouth a thin, angry line.
“Oh, Evans?” Sirius yelled after her.
“What?” she snapped, one foot on the staircase to the girls’ dormitory.
“I’d stay off the third floor staircase today, if I were you.”
“Merlin. Should I even bother to ask?”
“You needn’t.” Remus told her. “You’ll find out soon enough.”
“I’m sure it’ll sweep you off your feet,” James said, and they all chuckled at a joke Lily was certain no one had made.

Lily turned to leave.
“Happy Christmas, Lily!” Peter called after her.
James groaned. “PETER!”
“What?”
“You can’t say ‘happy Christmas’ to girls! They’ll get the wrong idea!”
Peter unwrapped a gift from his mum, reverently holding the pile of photographs she’d sent him. His dad…his dogs, all smiling and running in and out of the frame…he pressed them to his chest and sighed contentedly. “What is the wrong idea, James?”
“Sirius, here, now!” James yelled.
“I’m standing next to you, mate.” Sirius reminded him. He tucked a small package labelled Regulus into his pocket, tugging at his sleeves.
“Right. As I was saying. Peter, Remus — “ the aforementioned boys exchanged a wary look, certain that whatever James was about to say would ruin Christmas for everyone. “You have quite a lot to learn about girls.”
“Merlin,” Peter groaned.
“Be quiet!” James demanded.
“James, just out of curiosity, have you ever actually had a girlfriend?” Remus asked.
James drew in a long, exaggerated gasp. “I’ll have you know that Melanie Argyle was madly in love with me.”
“How old were you?” Sirius asked.
“I’m hurt, Sirius, really. I thought we were brothers.” James said, unwrapping a hand knit sweater from Remus. “Thanks, Moons! This is amazing!” It was a deep blue, not as lumpy as the previous year’s attempt at a scarf. James put it on with a grin.
“It’s wonderful.” James said honestly. He had, Peter noticed enviously, the charisma that made him and Sirius so likable, so loved by everyone they met. It was impossible not to love people like them, because when they really meant something, it felt more real than it did with others. Being in the same room as James and Sirius made Peter feel a deep stirring in his chest. Something more primal than pride. The rodent he felt sleeping on his lungs most days suddenly, inexplicably fell asleep.
“As I was saying,” James said, entirely oblivious to the exchange between Peter and empty air, the question why aren’t I like them? I wish I could be as good as them still lingering in his brain. “You
need a lesson on girls."
“Bloody hell, James.” Sirius groaned. “Answer the question. How old were you when Melanie Argyle fell madly in love with you?”
“And five.”
The other Marauders sniggered.
“But I was a very mature five.” James defended.
“At least there’s hope for you, Moony. You know what a romantic gesture is!” Sirius said with false enthusiasm. “Jamie, answer the question.”
“Traitor.” James half-heartedly kicked him in the shin. “Alright. Alright. She lived down the road. I gave her a cat.”
“You gave her a cat?” Peter repeated.
“Well, yeah, we had a Kneazle and he had kittens with a stray cat — a regular cat! Yeah, I know, it’s madness! — and she told me she’d always wanted a cat so I gave her one.”
“I stand corrected,” Remus said, looking rather close to touched. “That’s incredibly romantic.”
“You doubted me.” James said. “Oh, look at that! Mum sent me the blanket I forgot over the summer! Guess she figured McGee couldn’t handle it — my owl named McGee, not the professor!”
he added when he saw Peter’s mildly horrified expression. “Oh, and a box of Chocolate Frogs — I don’t even like eating them. But I should show you my collection —”
“We’ve seen it, mate, we’ve all seen it.” Sirius reminded him.
“You know, I reckon they got you a gift, Sirius —” James started.
“No they didn’t, don’t be ridiculous,” Sirius said, a familiar pang of jealousy filling his chest.
“Of course they did, you great idiot, look!” James shook a box in front of Sirius’s face. Sirius grabbed it and ripped it open — for Siri, love Fleamont and Euphemia.
“Blimey,” Sirius muttered. He felt his face getting hot. “Affectionate, aren’t they?”
“Sirius, are you crying?” Peter asked unhelpfully.
“No! Of course not!” Sirius took the letter off the box — which contained a picture of a broomstick, held up by Mr. and Mrs. Potter, who were waving and grinning at the camera and holding up a newest model broomstick. Our Jimmy needs a friend on the Quidditch team. This is yours if you want it. Inside the box was an enormous pile of sweets.
Sirius looked as if he might cry.
“Are you alright?” Remus asked softly.
Sirius jumped up and hugged James as tightly as he could. “Pass it on to your mum and dad, yeah?”
James nodded, a grin splitting his thin face from ear to ear. “Of course.”
“I’ll be right back. Thanks for the jumper, Remus!”
“No problem,” Remus said, shaking his head.
Sirius ran downstairs to the Slytherin common room door. “The Great Mudblood Death Sentence of 1852.” he guessed, speaking to the blank wall.
“Incorrect.” The wall said coldly.
“Pureblood.”
“Incorrect. One more guess before the alarms are raised.”
“Oh, bloody hell. The Christmas Muggle Massacre of 1931. I had family involved with that, mind you, it wasn’t something you can use as a password on Christmas! They’re still all bloody proud of it.”
“Correct.” The wall slid open, revealing a dark, cold tunnel. Sirius pulled James’s invisibility cloak from his pocket and slipped it over his head, running into the common room. Regulus was sat there next to Severus, under a barren looking Christmas tree. Sirius leaned over and whispered in Regulus’s ear,
“Meet me outside in two minutes.”
Regulus stood up, made an excuse to leave, and dashed out of the common room.
Sirius took the cloak off, smiling at his brother.
“You,” Regulus said in disbelief.
“Thanks for the gift, by the way,” Sirius said, tapping his pocket.
“S’nothing,” Regulus muttered.
“No, really. I should’ve gotten you something, but I didn’t know if you were going home for Christmas or not.”
“Could’ve asked.”
“It’s not like that, Reg, you’re friends with Snape now, we can’t just speak to each other.”
“He’s a good bloke,” Regulus defended.
“And I’m not? I’m hurt, Reg, honestly.”
“Don’t call me that.” Regulus said petulantly.
“I just wanted to tell you happy Christmas.”
Regulus stared at the ground. “Happy Christmas, Sirius.” At length, he added, “I miss you, you know?”
“I know,” Sirius said, grabbing his brother and embracing him. He smelled like a Slytherin, like cold, wet stone and well pressed robes. “Mum and Dad would be really proud of you if they saw you, you know that? I saw you hex Mary the other day. It was very well done.”
“Thanks,” Regulus said awkwardly, pulling away from Sirius. “Maybe you should go, before anyone knows we’ve spoken.”
“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t want to ruin your reputation,” Sirius sneered.
“Where’s Potter? Better brother than I ever have been, I’m sure.”
“He is, actually,” Sirius said coolly. “See, when I was sorted into Gryffindor, he didn’t stop speaking to me.”
“I can’t help how I was raised.”
“And I can?”
“I don’t want to disappoint Mum and Dad. Sirius, I don’t want to turn out like you!”
“I…” Sirius gave up in a sudden exhale, his shoulders slumping forward. “I don’t want you to turn out like me either.” He took a deep breath. “You could be like James, James is such a wonderful person…he treats everyone better than they deserve….”
“I mean, I would kill Snape without thinking for all the things he’s done to us, but James wouldn’t do it. He can be a prick sometimes but he’s got his heart in the exact right place and sometimes I think people like us don’t have hearts at all!”
“I don’t want to be James.”
“If you were you could be my brother again.”
“I believe in Mum and Dad. They love us, I see that now.”
“That’s not what you used to think.”
“Before you were sorted into Gryffindor. Before you left me alone. It was change or end up like you and we both know which one was the right thing to choose.”
“Change and hate Muggles and Muggle-borns and even half-bloods? Remus is half, and he’s wonderful!”
“I don’t care about your stupid friends.”
“I came here to end this fight. I wanted to tell you happy Christmas and I forgive you, Reg, I do!”
Sirius shouted, sweeping a pine nest of fairy lights off the staircase where it landed with an unsatisfying thump.
“We’re too different. I can’t support the things you support.” Regulus said calmly. “I miss you but I miss my brother, and you’re not him anymore, Sirius.”
Sirius did the only thing he knew how when faced with someone who wasn’t going to change their mind and see the way things really were. He ran before he got hurt. He sprinted up to the astronomy tower for the first time that year, sobbing, clutching the jumper Remus had given him.
“Good to see you, Black.” Lily said. She was sitting by the window, tears on her face. “It has been a while since we’ve both been up here. Family trouble?”
Sirius covered his face. “Yeah.” He murmured into the sleeves of his jumper. “I thought I’d come up here because James knows the other place I go when I’m upset and I didn’t want him to find me.”
“What happened?”
“James’s parents sent me a present,” Sirius said, swallowing the lump in his throat. “So did my
brother. First time in our lives, you know.”
“That’s really lovely, Sirius.”
“I know. I was so happy that I thought… I thought maybe if I just talked to Regulus we could fix… we could just — I’m so stupid, I’m so stupid!” He dug his nails into his palms. “Petunia, again?”
“You remembered her name.” Lily said, surprised.
“Well?”
“Yeah. She sent me everything from my room for Christmas. Everything I own. She says I’m not welcome anymore — I mean my parents, they love me of course, but…” she wiped her eyes. “I’m being silly. I should talk to Sev about this, he’s always good with this sort of thing. But I don’t want him to think it’s all I talk about.”
“In my experience, it’s that and Potions. Congratulations on highest mark on our last test, I reckon you made James cry.”
Lily grinned at this. “Really? Potter has feelings?”
“You should see him talk about you, Evans.” Sirius chuckled.
“What?”
“I reckon the boy’s in love with you.”
“Are you serious?”
“I am, actually.” Sirius smirked, pleased with himself.
“I meant are you bloody joking? We may speak to each other but you’re still a pain in the arse, you know that?”
“I’m not bloody joking. What, was his declaration of love not enough for you?”
“I thought he was having a laugh.”
“Of course not.”
“You look surprised,” Lily commented. “As if James would never pick on some unsuspecting girl just to have a laugh.”
“He would do that to just about anyone, but not you, Evans. Pretending to fall in love with a friend of Snivellus’s is the ultimate shame. You must’ve known it was real.”
Lily rolled her eyes. “What did Regulus say to you?”
“He said…” Sirius took a deep breath. “He said he never wanted to turn out like me — and he’s right, of course, I don’t even want to be like me.”
“Sirius,” Lily said softly.
“I should go talk to James and Remus and Peter. They’re more of my brothers than he’s ever been. Petunia doesn’t hate you, you know.”
“You’ve never even met her.”
“Yeah, Evans, I haven’t. But I know these things. She’s just afraid of what you are.”
“And what am I?”
“A witch.”
“I hate that word.” Lily said. “Wizard sounds so much better. Witch makes me sound evil — I guess she thinks I am, doesn’t she?”
“No, she just doesn’t understand. She’s so jealous of you Lily, I don’t know a single thing about her but I know she’s jealous.”
“You called me Lily,” she said softly.
“Yeah, well…don’t tell anyone about this. My previous threat still stands.”
“Mine too.”
“Don’t your friends know?”
“Not as much as you do. Can I tell you something?”
“Depends.”
“I like talking to you, Black. You’re a prat, but you’re not the worst kind.”
“And you’re a stuck up know-it-all, but I could learn to live with it.”
“I’ll see you around?”
Sirius stood up, a hollow smile on his face. “Maybe.”
“Siri!” James tackled him onto the bed, all sharp elbows and knobby knees.
“Ouch, Merlin, James, you don’t have to attack me, I’ve been gone for an hour!”
“You missed breakfast.” James reprimanded.
“James, you’re worse than my mum,” Remus complained.
“Damn right I am.” James said proudly. “Sirius, I nicked you some toast. Eat.”
Sirius took a reluctant bite, glaring at James.
“What happened with Regulus?” Peter asked softly, putting a hand on Sirius’s shoulder.
Sirius looked at him in surprise. Peter, while silly and slow and very shy, had a way of catching people off guard with direct but kind questions.
“He said he hated me. That’s all.”
“I’m so sorry,” Remus said. So soon after the full moon, his presence in a room was somewhat muted, but more dangerous. The way he shifted on the bed spoke of pain and exhaustion but it was in this time that everyone was the more afraid of him.
“And, don’t look at me like that, Lupin, it’s not the end of the world.” Sirius grinned. “Come on, boys, let’s blow up a staircase.”
They ran out of Gryffindor Tower laughing hysterically, James’s tie half-tied and Sirius’s being used to hold his hair back. Remus sighed and limped after them, up the staircase.
“Okay. Thirteen of these firecrackers laid out from top to bottom. We get a Slytherin, or some other arse who I’m not bothered to hex, to go up the staircase and then — “ James mimed an explosion.
“We could kill someone!” Peter exclaimed, looking quite alarmed.
“Nonsense. It’s just an explosion. At the worst, someone loses a limb. Maybe we’ll blow off Snivelly’s greasy nose!” Sirius said enthusiastically.
“You’re bloody mad, you know that?” Remus asked, sitting on the staircase and laying a row of firecrackers.
“Yeah, probably.” Sirius pointed his wand at the staircase and fastened the firecracker to it.
“Someone could actually get hurt, and we’d probably be expelled,” Peter said. “We’re on thin ice with McGiggles as it is.”
“You’re right.” James sighed. “We should do it anyway. Just blow up the staircase without anyone on it, I suppose. Not as dangerous that way.”
“Not as fun,” Sirius said. “Do you dare me to stand on a broomstick above the staircase while it explodes?”
“That is a —” Remus began, worry for Sirius spilling out his throat in a choked demand to please, please stop.
“Wonderful idea, Siri!” James exclaimed.
“No it’s not, what if you fall?”
“I’ll always have you to catch me though, won’t I, Remus?” Sirius asked cheekily.
Remus blushed. “Well yes, I suppose you will. Alright, Sirius, I’ll go fetch you a broom.”
“You needn’t, Remus,” James said, “Peter can do it.”
Peter nodded with the utmost excitement and dashed off.
Remus gently tugged Sirius to the side, while James worked on sticking the firecrackers to the stairs.
“The broomstick thing is a brilliant idea, Sirius, really, it is.”
“Thank you,” Sirius puffed out his chest.
“But,”
“Blimey. The broomstick you’ve got up your arse just started speaking for you.”
“Shove off,” Remus said affectionately. “You have to promise, Sirius, that you’re not doing this because of Regulus.”
“Who cares if I am?” Sirius said in an odd, cold voice that wasn’t really his at all. It was the well-educated, trained voice of the pureblood son of rich parents. This was Sirius Black, not Sirius, and they were very different.
“Because I know, Sirius, that if you’re doing this because of Regulus you’re doing it so you’ll get hurt.”
Sirius scoffed. “Listen to me,” Remus begged. “If you’re doing this because you’re upset I’m not going to let you.”
“Well, someone’s got to, it’ll be hilarious.”
“Yeah, I’ll do it for you —"
“Moony, you can’t.”
“I’ll fall, of course, but I won’t jump like you would.”
“I wouldn’t jump,” Sirius made a disparaging noise at the back of his throat.
“Yeah, you would.”
“What are you lot talking about?” James asked, lying on his stomach across a step.
“Nothing,” Remus said fondly. “Go back to work. I just need to help Sirius with something.”
“What is it?” James asked, absently mussing his hair.
“His technique for standing on the broomstick.”
“You ever stood on a broomstick, Moony?” James asked, chuckling.
“Is that a euphemism for something?” Remus asked.
“Don’t be vile, Moons. It was just a question.” James grinned, waggling his eyebrows.
“No, James, I have not.” Remus said. “Sirius, I meant what I said.”
“Oh,” Sirius smirked. “Would you say that you were Sirius about it?”
“Oh, Merlin.” James groaned.
Sirius grinned.
“Sirius,” Remus said.
Sirius rolled his eyes. “Don’t be melodramatic, Moony, I’m not going to die.”
“That’s debatable.”
Peter came huffing back up the stairs carrying a secondhand broomstick. “Will this work?”
“Ooh, Pete, that one…it’s kind of…temperamental.” James said.
“More of a challenge,” Sirius declared. “Lunch ends in fifteen minutes, which means the staircase below us will start to fill up and they’ll be able to see the grand spectacle.”
“Bloody brilliant!” Peter exclaimed, rubbing his hands together.
“Now we wait?” Remus suggested. James sat casually on the staircase next to Sirius, his legs casually sprawled over the multiple explosives in front of him.
“Now we wait,” he agreed.
When the first Slytherin stepped onto the first floor staircase, James pulled out his wand and set the staircase on fire.
“Go go go go!” James shouted, shoving the other Marauders in front of him. One by one, each step on the staircase from the third to the second floor was obliterated by a ball of fire.
A few first years burst into tears, while Prefects yelled and the other students laughed as the staircase went up in a series of rapid-succession fireworks.
“Sirius, your go,” James said, pushing him lightly to the edge of the stairs. Sirius jumped on the broom and flew towards the ceiling, standing up and balancing on the broomstick for a total of four seconds as the staircase exploded beneath him.
The other Marauders held their breath as Sirius toppled towards the ground, limbs flailing, robes flying out behind him.
“Mum’s going to kill him,” James groaned, watching with sick fascination.
“You lot are bloody awful in a crisis, I swear,” Lily said, pulling out her wand. “Arresto Momentum.” Sirius’s fall slowed and he dropped to the floor, looking rather faint. James burst into loud applause, encouraging the first years on the staircase below to join in.
“Happy Christmas, everyone!” Sirius yelled at the top of his lungs, standing up and wobbling slightly. Everyone cheered.
“Alright, we’ve got to go before Filch sees us,” Remus said.
James shrugged. “You have a point there, mate. Sirius, don’t just stand there with your mouth open, that was very impressive, now move!”
“I did it,” Sirius breathed. “I actually —"
“Yes, yes, that’s all well and good,” Remus said irritably. “Filch.”
They ran down an empty corridor, their footsteps echoing too loudly on the floor. “Broom cupboard,” Peter gasped out, his breath coming in short little whines, almost like a dog.

“There’s not —“ James said, without looking.

Remus threw open the door and dashed inside, pressing against the wall next to Peter. James and Sirius sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by brooms and buckets.

“This one of Filch’s cupboards?” Sirius asked, drumming his fingers against his legs.

“Must be.” James whispered. A flurry of footsteps passed the door. “I’ve circled this entire castle from top to bottom at least ten times and I’ve never seen it, though.”

“I’ve read about it —“ Remus said excitedly, his animated hands flying out and hitting Peter in the face.

Peter gave an indignant, muffled squeak.

“Sorry, Peter. I read that there are loads of rooms and the like around the school that appear and disappear depending on who you are and if you know how to get in, maybe this is one of those —“

“Interesting.” James ruffled his hair, his knobby elbow knocking sharply against the wall and making a hollow clanging noise. “Bloody hell!”

“James, I think we may be able to escape this troubling situation more easily if you stop trying to impale your arm on every surface in the cupboard.” Remus said rationally.

“Not fond of small spaces, are we, Peter?” Sirius asked. Peter was pressed against the door, struggling for air.

“Not in the slightest.” Peter said tightly.

James opened the door a crack and slipped out, leaning nonchalantly against the wall. “Clear.” He muttered against the hinges of the door.

The Marauders slipped out, creeping back up to their dormitory.

They made it halfway up the staircase before a familiar cackle swept through the air.

“Peeves,” James cursed.

“POTTER AND PETTIGREW AND BLACK AND LUPIN OUT OF BED!” Peeves sang delightedly, giving up the difficult task of sticking gum in every keyhole on the first floor.

“Shut up shut up shut up —“ James hissed desperately. The Marauders looked at each other for a single, horrified moment and ran for their lives.

“What’s the password?” Peter panted.

Sirius stopped in his tracks and turned, his dark eyes wide with shock. “I don’t bloody know,” he muttered, almost to himself. “I don’t know the bloody password. Bloody hell. Jamie James, this is up to you.”

“Jamie James?” James repeated. “My mum calls me Jimmy sometimes, if that’s any better.”

Remus burst into loud, wheezing laughter, leaning on the Fat Lady’s frame for support. “It is,” he chuckled. “It is so, so much better.”

“Remus Romulus Lupin I hereby forbid you from —“

“That’s definitely not my middle name,” Remus interrupted.

“Oh, er, I just went with the mythology. What is your middle name?”

“It’s John.”

“That’s so boring and generic. It’s Solinia now.” James declared.

“Solinia?”

“No, because sol means sun…” Peter piped up helpfully.

“Shut up, you idiots, we’re going to be caught,” Sirius hissed. “Password?”

“I don’t know. None of us know.”

“Fat Lady,” Peter begged, getting down on both of his rather large knees. “Please open the door. You know us.”

“Never seen you before in my life,” she protested.

“Yeah, because sol means sun…” Peter piped up helpfully.

“Four perfect strangers telling lies and untruths! I should yell for Argus!”

“Argus…Filch?” Sirius grinned wickedly.

“I know that grin, Black,” the Fat Lady snapped. “I mean…person whom I have never met!”
“Correct use of whom, Moony, would you look at that, you’re practically glowing with pride.” Sirius patted him on the back rather hard, making him cough. Remus muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “bloody pure-bloods with your bloody governesses and disregard for the beauty that is the English language.” “Just let us in, Fat Lady,” Peter whined. “I don’t want to run anymore.” The Fat Lady cackled. “Should’ve thought of that before you went knocking about the castle, shouldn’t you?” “Perhaps that would’ve been wise,” James admitted. “How did we all manage to forget the password?” Remus muttered, pacing back and forth. “Password…password…bloody hell.” “Want a sugar quill?” Peter asked, chewing on the end of one. “I swear, Peter, you have more sugar quills than you have actual quills —“ James said. “Didn’t I just lend you one for your Herbology essay yesterday?” “So what?” Peter asked. He snapped his sugar quill in half in his rather sticky hand. “Alright!” the Fat Lady exclaimed. “You’ve guessed it! The password was sugar quill!” She swung aside. “I’d better not see you even one more time today!” “We have to go to the feast, of course!” James protested. “What are you going to do then?” “I suppose I’ll ignore you.” The Fat Lady said petulantly. “Lovely.” Sirius grumbled, climbing through the portrait hole and collapsing in his and James’ shared armchair. He noted with dismay that there was a charred patch missing from the sleeve of the jumper Remus had knitted him and vowed silently to stitch it himself.
“You know what this seems like a good time for?” James asked, in one of his grand, rhetorical declarations.

Loud groaning followed his question. “No bloody idea, James, but if it involves blowing anything else up I’ll have to pass. Still recovering from earlier, you see.” Remus said apologetically.

“I was going to say sneaking down to the kitchens for some food.”

Remus shook his head vehemently.

“Alright then, Sirius and Pete will go with me and we’ll bring up some snacks for you.” He gave a direct look at them, gesturing for them to follow him from the portrait hole as the Fat Lady shrieked after them.

“We ought to work on you-know-what,” James hissed, glancing over his shoulder.

“Wait, we’re not getting snacks?” Peter asked disappointedly.

“We most certainly aren’t. We have work to do.”

“Don’t remind me, we’ll have to ask good old McGiggles about this step.” Sirius groaned.

“Do we have to?” Peter whined. “She scares me.”

“McGee wouldn’t hurt a fly, she’s practically family.”

“She hates me,” Peter moaned miserably. “Every time you help me with my work, she looks at me as if I’ve done something wrong.”

“You’re just absolute rubbish at Transfiguration, mate,” James said reasonably, pulling out his wand and lazily drawing shapes out of light in the air.

Peter made a vague noise of agreement.

“Peter, I can help you if you want —” The three of them opened the door to the empty Muggle Studies classroom.

“Don’t bother,” Peter sat on a desk, staring miserably out the window. “I’m useless.”

“Nah, don’t say that.” Sirius ran a hand through his hair, his feet resting on a chair. “If you were useless we wouldn’t keep you around.”

“I like useless things, besides, so I’ll always be fond of you.” James said.

Peter sighed and managed a quivering smile, turning back to the Animagi book. “I suppose we’d better get on with this, yeah? I’ve still got a Charms essay due tomorrow, and I think I’d be best off turning it in on time.”

“Unless you want Flitwick to fly over his desk and attack you.” James said, remembering an unfortunate incident in which Flitwick had become so enraged at Sirius and James for not doing their homework that he had jumped over his desk in order to reach them and effectively tell them off.

“He didn’t attack you, James,” Peter said.

“You were sleeping on your desk, how would you know?” Sirius asked.

“Because you would talk about it until Dumbledore sacked him. Remus and I were placing bets on whether you, James, or Flitwick would wet yourself first.” Peter said in a rush of proud words, knowing he’d won the argument before it had begun.

Sirius chuckled, leaning back on James’s legs where they rested on his desk. “My money would be on Flitwick.”

“You’d be wrong,” Peter said mischievously. “It was James.”

James stood up faster than Sirius while the latter laughed, and wordlessly dragged Peter off his chair and onto the ground, where he lay loudly protesting his plight.

James sat casually on Peter’s large stomach, crossing his legs and leaning forward.

“James. I simply must know, how are your desperate attempts to seduce Evans going?” Sirius asked, writing a summarized guide of the next few steps in becoming an Animagus and ignoring Peter’s struggle to escape.

James covered Peter’s complaining mouth with one hand. “I sense a bit of sarcasm there, but I’ll choose to ignore it.” He said pointedly. “Quite honestly, I think I should write her a full book of
poetry."

“James!” Sirius gasped in mock surprise. “You know how to write?” He studied James’s face in the moments before his response, hoping to gage a reaction.

James chuckled. “No, it’s all a form of incoherent runes that you understand with your extremely large brain, obviously.” This last part was tinged with bitterness — Sirius had outstripped James’s Transfiguration marks by one point on their last test.

“Sirius does have an extremely large brain,” Peter said, his voice muffled by James’ hand.

“Thank you, Peter,” Sirius said proudly.

“Alright, alright, this conversation about the size of Sirius’s brain has gone on long enough,” James said.

“Don’t be vile,” Sirius scolded.

“What?” A cheeky grin lit up James’s face. “I was just — “

“Insinuating. Well, you flatter me.”

“Not hard to do,” James said. “Alright, Pete, you’ve suffered enough.” He stood up, dusting off his clothes and leaving Peter panting on the ground.

Peter used the chair next to him to get to his feet, panting. He neatly pressed his hair down and sat next to Sirius, narrowing his eyes at James.

“That was torture. Pure torture. James, I see it now, you must be planning my death.”

“Don’t say such things. I would die before laying a finger on you.”

“You sat on me!” Peter exclaimed, quivering in disbelief.

“All in good fun.”

“I could have suffocated!”

“Ah, but I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“I imagine I’ll have nightmares for a week.” Peter said resignedly. “And it’ll all be your fault!”

“If you can’t sleep, go down to the kitchens and get a house elf to make you some pudding, that’s what I always do.” Sirius said wisely. “They’re quite fond of me down there, they call me Master Sirius and there’s not a hint of sarcasm.”

“None that you’re aware of, anyway,” James said under his breath.

“You’re just as posh as I am!”

“You know, you can always tell how posh someone is by their middle name,” Peter reasoned.

“This is revenge, I swear.” James shook his head. “Peter, don’t you dare say it.”

“Hang on, we’ve all been best friends for three years and only Peter knows your middle name?” Sirius demanded. “I’m slightly hurt, but I can’t believe Peter was able to keep a secret that long.”

“It’s not a secret!” James said defensively. “It’s just not something I go around telling people.”

“His middle name is Fleamont!” Peter blurted. James slapped him across the face, which was much more painful for James than it was for Peter.

“Your middle name is Fleamont? As in, after your father, Fleamont?” Sirius asked delightedly, as if he’d just been told that there was going to be a second Christmas.

“Yeah,” James muttered.

Sirius’s face lit up. “Jimmy Fleamont Potter! I love it! This has got to be the best thing I’ve ever heard! Your middle name is Fleamont...think of the jokes, the pranks...oh, we’re going to have a lovely time.”

“Yeah, yeah, Orion,”
“You’re both so posh,” Peter teased.
“What’s your middle name, then?”
“Joseph. And Remus’s is John, you see what I’m getting at here?”
“Your mums both like the letter ‘j’?”
“No,” Peter rolled his eyes.
“Mm. I see your point.” Sirius said, examining his fingernails. “Well, I’m going to find the love of my life and ask about a transfiguration spell.”
“If you’re talking about Professor McGonagall —” Peter said. Sirius was already gone.
“Professor McGonagall!” Sirius stopped her in the hall, emerging from the classroom.

She arched an eyebrow. “Mr. Black. Was that a greeting, or do you require my assistance?”
“I have a question.”

McGonagall nodded, balancing a pile of transfiguration books in her arms. “Well, ask away, then.”
“Actually, never mind, my first question is why aren’t you using a Hovering Charm on those books?”
“Because I wouldn’t want to hit a wandering student in the head with a stack of books. For you, however, I may make an exception.”

It took Sirius a moment to realize she had told a joke, and he let out a shocked sort of laugh.
“I wouldn’t look so alarmed, Mr. Black. Despite what you may believe, some of your professors do have a sense of humor.” The corner of her thin mouth twitched up.
“Right. Er, actually, I wanted to ask about something for Transfiguration.” Sirius said, bewildered by the strangeness of their conversation.
“If it’s about the transforming of owls into desk chairs essay I’ve set for you, I assure you that you can answer your question on your own.”
“It’s not.”
“Go on, then.”
“Okay. How, exactly, would one go about transfiguring oneself into an animal?”
“If the one in question happens to be an underage third year student, I’m required by law to tell you that one would not go about transfiguring oneself into an animal because it happens to be illegal.”
“But, professor —”
“However. Hypothetically, if one needed, for the sake of a friend, shall we say, to transfigure oneself into an animal, one would start with a N.E.W.T level Transfiguration textbook from eight years ago.”
“And where would one find such a textbook?” Sirius asked, unable to believe his luck.
“Perhaps the library? I trust you know where to find it.” McGonagall said.

Sirius had the grace to look mildly offended.
“Is that all?”
“Yes, Er, Professor?”
“Yes, Mr. Black.”
“If…if one was doing this to become an Animagus, and something were to hypothetically go wrong…I expect one’s Transfiguration teacher would make sure Remus…I mean, one’s regretfully afflicted werewolf friend…was safe?”
“Hogwarts is always safe, Mr. Black.” McGonagall reminded him.
“Right.” Sirius said smoothly. “But, hypothetically.”
“Yes, Mr. Black, I daresay one’s Transfiguration teacher would be very sure that one’s unfortunately ill friend would remain in safe hands.”
“Thank you, Professor.” Sirius said, dashing downstairs to the library. Madame Pince glared at him as he ran in and asked breathlessly for the Transfiguration section.

He picked up all the N.E.W.T Transfiguration textbooks in the library, piling them into his arms haphazardly and dashing up the stairs, reckless, dancing effortlessly over the missing stair without looking down. He burst into the common room with a pile of books, dumping them into James’ lap with an expression of extreme delight.
“Got it.” He said excitedly.
“Do we have to read all of these?” Peter groaned, pulling his jumper over his head.
“Damn right,” Sirius grinned.
“Did Old McGoogly slip something into your pumpkin juice?” James asked, opening a textbook and flipping through it.
“She would never!” Sirius exclaimed. “She could’ve done it during our weekly tea.”
“How was the last one, by the way? Forgot to ask.”
“Miserable,” Sirius said brightly. “Well, we’d better hope Remus doesn’t come downstairs for another few years.”
Peter dashed up to check on him. “Remus is studying,” he hissed down at James and Sirius. “We have to be quick.”

“POTTER SCORES!” The cry rang out over the Quidditch pitch. James pulled back on his broomstick, a smirk on his face underneath his shock of disheveled black hair.
“Come on, James!” Sirius yelled, jumping to his feet. Remus studied the game with analytical detachment through his goggles, mouthing encouragement at James.
Mary missed an easy pass, and Lily, to everyone’s shock, jumped up and shouted, “YOU CAN DO THIS, MACDONALD! PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!”
Mary dodged a Bludger and zipped after the Slytherin chaser, laughing at Lily.
Slytherin scored a goal and James drew back on his broom in disappointment, raking fingers through his hair.
“It’s okay,” Peter cheered supportively. James managed a weak, one-armed shrug, looking disappointed — Regulus was the Slytherin seeker, there was no possible way that Gryffindor would get the snitch this late into the game.
When Regulus did, eventually, catch the snitch, Sirius was the only Gryffindor clapping, hiding his love for his brother under his coat, close to his chest.
Regulus noticed despite Sirius’s best efforts, and nodded briefly in acknowledgement.
“SLYTHERIN WINS!”
“No hope there, I suppose?” Remus said, trying to get Sirius to look at him.
“No.” Sirius said coldly.
Remus struggled briefly for something to say and settled upon, “well, you’ve got us.”
“I know.”
Remus sighed — Sirius was, as expected, a lost cause. He turned to Peter with a pink flushed face.
“You lot are avoiding me.”
Peter dropped the pumpkin pasty he was chewing on. “What? No! Of course not, why would you think —”
“A week ago Thursday,” Remus said pointedly. “You ran up the stairs to our room, looked at me, and yelled down to James and Sirius, “don’t worry, he’s studying.”
“I did nothing of the — okay, well I did but it isn’t what you think.”
Remus arched an eyebrow.
“Okay, maybe it is what you think, we are avoiding you, but —“
“Peter!” Sirius hissed.
“It’s nothing, I swear!” Peter finished. “Look, there’s James, we ought to go.”
Remus sighed, feeling dejected. They had been doing it for months, slowly, surely excluding him from their conversations, turning away from him.
He only realized when he was lying in bed later that night that it had all started when he told them what he was, and the thought made him curl unhappily around a pillow, trying to fill the hole that the thought had torn through his chest.
“We’ve got to tell him what we’re doing.” Sirius said, lying distressed on the floor of the common room. Remus had gone to speak to Dumbledore about the work he’d missed during the full moon. “He thinks we hate him, doesn’t he?” He threw a scrap of Peter's shredded attempt at a Transfiguration essay into the fire, watching the paper crumple and burn. “No he doesn’t,” James said indignantly, leaning back in his and Sirius's usual chair. “We’re the Marauders, we don’t waste time with hating each other.” “He asked me about it,” Peter said miserably. “I felt dreadful lying to him.” “I beg your pardon,” James gasped in mock horror. “I must ask you who, exactly, are we doing this for?” “Moony.” Peter and Sirius said in unison. “And why are we doing it?” “Because we love him,” they deadpanned, both glaring at James. “Which is why we’re lying to him,” Sirius muttered under his breath. “And why can’t we tell him?” James continued, kicking Sirius sharply in the ribs. Sirius flinched. “Because he wouldn’t let us do it, as he’ll talk us out of it with his worry and logic the way he always does.” Sirius responded before Peter had a chance to. “Exactly!” James touched his nose and pointed at Sirius, his finger waving about. “Exactly why we can’t tell him!” “He’s not an idiot —“ “Sh,” Peter said. “He’s coming.” Remus climbed through the portrait hole, his hair a wild mess on his head from scratching at it in frustration. His normally pale face was flushed a blotchy red. “Didn’t go well with Dumbledore?” Sirius inquired, getting up from the ground and stretching. “I suppose it could’ve been worse.” Remus said, burying his face in his hands as he sat, looking small and fragile. What happened?” Remus exhaled tiredly. “It wasn’t Dumbledore — he excused me from all my lessons and let me make up the Transfiguration test I missed. But…on the way there —“ “Oh, just spit it out, Moons,” James said lazily, not grasping the severity of the situation. Remus was doing his best not to shake where he sat on the couch, quite apart from the other Marauders. “Avery and Mulciber.” Remus said, his face going all of a sudden very white. “No,” Peter stood up, knocking over a few books. His chubby hands balled into fists. “What did they do?” “Merlin, control yourself, Peter,” Sirius said. He heard the tremor in Remus's voice, and said, a bit more kindly, “go on, Remus.” “It was just a hex,” Remus said, biting his lip. “It was really nothing!” “What happened?” James demanded. His eyes flashed with anger. “You don’t have to worry, I can handle it.” Remus closed his eyes. “It was a spell I’ve never heard — they said Snape came up with it, I’m so — I’m sorry,” he said, his voice breaking. James, Sirius, and Peter exchanged a look, and James moved closer to Remus, putting his arm around him. Remus leaned his head on James’ shoulder, trembling. The misty evening air frosted the windows, making everything outside the warm, fire lit room seem cold. “What kind of hex was it?” Sirius asked at length, after bringing blankets to wrap Remus in. “Sirius,” Peter warned under his breath. Sirius held up his hand as Remus seemed to consider the question.
“It was — I don’t know exactly, but I was standing there and they were telling me they knew what I was —“

“Merlin, Remus —“

“They don’t know, don’t worry. I just — I was trying to get to Dumbledore’s office when they hexed me, one moment I was standing there and the next I was in the air by my foot and they were just laughing at me,” he shook his head. “I suppose it sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it?”

“Of course not, mate,” James said softly. “It sounds awful.”

“Slughorn walked by and they dropped me,” Remus stared into the fireplace with glassy eyes. “They locked me in a broom cupboard and I was too scared to leave. I didn’t even fight back, I’m so sorry —“ he squeezed his eyes tightly shut. “I’m sorry,”

“Why?” Sirius asked.

“I don’t deserve to be called a Marauder. You never would’ve done that.”

“That’s not true —“ James protested.

“It is. But there’s enough of James and I in this group to go around,” Sirius said. “We lov — like you, too scared to stand up for yourself or not.” He attempted a deep cough to cover his mistake.

“Even Peter would’ve done something,” Remus sighed.

“Now that’s just not true,” Peter said, curling into a round ball on the couch next to Remus. “I would’ve done exactly what you did.”

Remus chuckled. “At least we can be cowards together.”

“Nah, you’re not, don’t say things like that,” James slung his arms around Remus and Peter’s shoulders. “Come on, I have an idea.”

The black lake had iced over that winter, and as spring drew nearer it showed nary a sign of melting. James dragged the Marauders, most unwilling in all cases but Sirius’s, to the edge of the lake with a near devilish expression of glee.

“Trust me.” James threw a handful of powdery snow into the air, letting it land in his messy black hair.

“What hideous plan have you for us this fine afternoon?” Remus asked, lying down on his stomach next to Sirius in the snow.

“Your lack of faith is appalling,” James said, grinning in a manner that could only be described as manic. “You’ll see.”

“I don’t want to see,” Peter complained.

“Why do we let him drag us to places like this?” Sirius asked in Remus’s ear.

“Because he’s mad.” Remus whispered back.

“I can hear you!” James shook his head. “We’re here to go skating.”

“We’re what?” Remus asked.

“Nothing cheers you up faster than watching Sirius and I do something stupid, so here we are, about to skate on a frozen lake!”

“That’s a bloody terrible idea,” Remus protested.

“The absolute worst,” James said cheerfully. “Shall we?”

“I suppose so,” Peter said, resigned to their fate. They stepped onto the ice all together, James taking a running start and falling with a crack onto the ice, lying on his back laughing.

“You’re such a bloody idiot, James!” Sirius yelled, laughing, spinning around on the ice — years of dance lessons from his tutor had taught him an elegant grace that James and the others couldn’t hope to possess. Peter lay on his back on the ice, arms and legs waving, while Remus skated around, clutching James’s arm to keep from falling.

“This is so stupid,” James chuckled, sliding from one edge of the lake to the other.

“It was your idea!”

“Still stupid. Come on, I’ll race you all across the lake.” They lined up next to each other, all exchanging a look with glittering eyes before shooting across the ice, stumbling in an attempt not to fall.

“Siri, the ice is really thin there —“ Remus warned. Sirius went skating over the ice with an ease that
should’ve been impossible.

“We’re not going to fall, don’t be ridiculous,” Sirius said, laughing. “You’ll never beat me,” he added, striding ahead of the others. James scrambled after him, while Peter stumbled behind them, Remus skating along beside him, all long limbs and awkward stumbling.

“And Black wins!” Sirius took a dramatic bow. “I expect applause.”

Peter clapped enthusiastically, entirely unaccompanied.

“Thank you, Peter,” Sirius said, tossing back his long hair.

“Can we get off the ice now?” Remus complained, his pale, slim fingers white and cold.

“You look cold, Moony,” James commented. “Maybe we should tackle you.”


Laughing, James, Sirius and Peter surrounded him in warmth, knocking all of them to the ice. Remus looked at the ice surrounding them, the tiny fractures leading to a bigger crack threatening to split apart the ice. It was their permanent state, Remus thought, a familiar ache opening in his chest. They were always clinging to each other, but he thought as he looked at James and Peter and Sirius — most especially Sirius — that one day, the ice was going to crack and they were all going to fall through.

Chapter End Notes

I had so much trouble writing this chapter and i'm a bit stuck, I hope it didn't show too much. I'll try to plan the next chapter a bit better, sorry!
“James!” Sirius shook the other boy awake, bouncing on his toes. “James, come on, wake up!”
“What?” James asked groggily, rubbing his eyes and blinking at Sirius’s blurry face.
“James, James, look!” Sirius pointed to his black hair, which looked to James oddly…misshapen.
“Erm…what exactly am I meant to be looking at?”
“No, no, no, look.” Sirius lifted up a part of his hair, which was strangely unattached and scruffy.
“Siri!” James sat up, alight with comprehension. “You’ve got — does this mean —”
“It worked. The transfiguration spell we got from those books, it worked!” Sirius grinned, his newly sprouted dog ears standing straight upon his head.
“Wake Peter and let’s go down to the kitchens to celebrate.” James whispered. “If Remus wakes up, what do we tell him?”
“Nothing,” Sirius said decisively. “He’s better off not knowing. C’mon,” he pulled James to his feet, kicking Peter awake. The three of them stumbled tiredly down the stairs, sneaking into the kitchens.
“As the house elves made them a large treacle tart, they drank butter beer and toasted to their success.
“You’re lucky, Pete,” Sirius said around a large bite of treacle tart. “You’ve got a tail. You can cover it up, at least. What am I to do about these?”
“Er,” James gestured to the small but definitive antlers sprouting on his head.
“Ah, just spike your hair up more than normal and no one will be the wiser,” Sirius laughed. “I, however, will have to wear a hat.”
“You’ll actually be in full uniform for once,” Peter said.
“Have you ever seen a soul wear those ridiculous hats?”
“Only the first years,” Peter said wistfully, thinking of his own wizard’s hat which was collecting dust at the back of his wardrobe. “It’s a shame, I like those hats.”
“Mad, this one,” Sirius chuckled.
James snorted. “As a hatter.”
“What happens when we transform fully? What if we can’t turn back?” Peter changed the subject, burning with embarrassment.
“I suppose it’s in the book, isn’t it?” Sirius asked, arching an eyebrow. One of his dog ears raised along with it.
“Enough of that,” James set down his glass with a loud clunk. “We’re here to celebrate.”
“When I sprout whiskers, that’s when I start skipping class,” Peter vowed. “Blimey, this tail’s annoying — “ it hovered in midair behind him, lashing back and forth and nearly hitting a house elf in the face.
“But we did it,” Sirius said reverently. “We did it.”
“Not yet,” James raised a finger. “But when we do, what are we going to tell Remus?”

Remus woke up to find himself quite alone in their room — and though he scoured the space for a note of explanation, none was offered. The Marauders had plainly and simply disappeared.
Perhaps, he thought, feeling a pang of wild desperation. Perhaps they’ve gone downstairs to the common room? Perhaps there’s been an emergency and they didn’t want to wake me — perhaps, perhaps — Remus sank to the bed and put his head in his hands, only one thought in his mind, the whirl of panic calmed to a horrible sinking feeling. They’ve gone.
“Well,” he said, aloud, to no one. “I suppose I might as well just act as if nothing has happened.” He stood, putting on his robes slowly, every movement weighted with worry. He sat alone in the common room while the other Gryffindors went to breakfast and composed a letter to his parents.
Dear Mum and Dad,
Everything is
"Terrible," Remus said to himself, biting his lip. He scribbled a line through the word on the parchment.
wonderful here. My friends haven’t abandoned me at all, and I definitely
"Don’t have friends anymore," he said despairingly, writing the words slowly. "No, I can't write that
--"

Still have friends. Every part of me --
"Doesn't want to be here." The quill scratched a thick line of ink across the page.
loves it here. I’m having such a --
"Horrible," Remus shook his head. "Horrible."

wonderful year. I miss you terribly and hope everything is well at home. I’ll be coming home in the
spring for holidays, though, so it won’t be too much longer until we see each other again.
Love,
Remus.

Remus sighed, crumpling up the letter in his hand. He quickly tossed it into the fire when he heard
footsteps behind him. “Morning,” he said dully, without looking.
“What’s wrong, Remus?”
The voice, he was unsurprised to find, was Lily’s.
“Oh,” he looked up. “Sorry, Lily. Don’t worry about it, I’m fine. Just not feeling well.”
“Really?” Lily walked around the couch, sitting next to him with an expression of great concern. She
waved to Marlene and Mary to go on to their room without her.
“I’m fine,” Remus said half-heartedly. “Really.”
“It’s about James and Sirius, isn’t it?”
“And Peter,” Remus nodded.
“What’ve those idiots done now?” Lily asked, going red with outrage.
“If you must know,” Remus sighed. “They’ve been avoiding me like I’ve got the plague.”
“Severus thinks you have,” Lily laughed. “Sorry, I’m sure that’s awful. Have you tried talking to
them?”
“I have,” Remus ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “It hasn’t helped. They’re just lying —
and badly, so I know there must be a reason. I don’t expect you to understand —”
“I do,” Lily said earnestly. “You’re not a bad bloke, Remus, not like they are.”
“They’re not —” Remus said loyally.
“Would you ever do what they’ve done to you to them?”
“Oh of course not.”
“Don’t accept anything less for yourself, then. It’s simple. Tell them that either they treat you like
you deserve to be treated or they shouldn’t speak to you.”
They are treating me how I deserve to be treated, Remus thought, but only thanked her and retreated
back to his room.
The Marauders burst into the room mere minutes later, Sirius wearing a large and ridiculous hat,
James’ hair nearly vertical upon his head, and Peter walking with his hands clasped firmly behind his
back and an odd lump in the back of his trousers.
“Where have you been, then?” Remus said, trying and failing to sound as if he barely cared for the
answer.
“Kitchens,” James said flippantly. “Why?”
“You didn’t leave a note.”
“You’re not our mother, it’s not as if we’d died,” Sirius said, rather more cruelly than he meant to.
“I’m not angry,” Remus lied. “I just wish you’d told me where you were going before you left.”
“Does it even matter?” Sirius demanded.
“No,” Remus felt his face go hot with tears. “No, it doesn’t matter. Not at all.” He stood and raced
downstairs to the common room, sitting at a table alone, head buried in his arms.
Lily, Marlene, and Mary came and sat with him after a while, and he told them while covering his
tearstained face what had happened.
He sat with them at lunch, and again at dinner, and during every class they had together. The other
Marauders sat very near to him, but they wouldn’t speak to him — clearly he was overreacting,
Sirius thought. Peter felt nothing but overwhelming guilt, while James found himself entirely
indifferent to who was right or wrong. Of course, he knew, as he once against covered his antlers with his hair, that Remus deserved an explanation. But still they refused to tell him the truth, so the silence between the Marauders grew louder and louder until it was nearly deafening.

“Mates with Evans, then, are you?” James asked casually.

“Yes. Problem?”

“Nothing,” James said. “I would’ve thought you’d rather be alone.”

“She and Mary and Marlene have been kind to me.”

“And we haven’t?” James asked, a trifle hurt.

“Not particularly, actually.”

“You’re angry because we didn’t tell you where we were. That’s ridiculous, mate.” Sirius said, tipping his overlarge wizard’s hat — the ears had shown no signs of disappearing, but had grown more prominent as the day had worn on.

“I’m not your mate,” Remus said furiously. “You’ve all been avoiding me for months. But before that, you never would’ve just left without telling me where you were going — or gone anywhere without me. I’ve put up with it for too long, I didn’t mean for this to happen. I don’t want us to — to fight, I don’t — “ He closed the curtains around his bed abruptly, sitting behind them and staring at the ceiling with tears filling his eyes.

“Hey, Evans!” James yelled at breakfast the next morning.

“Ignore him,” Remus said in a low, choked voice.

“Leave her alone, Potter,” Mary threw a piece of toast at his head. He barely ducked in time to avoid it being skewered on his rapidly growing antlers, which he’d been forced to hide under a ridiculous hat like Sirius’s.

“Ah, Macdonald, you’re just jealous. Evans!”

“What do you want?” Lily asked, her bright green eyes cold.

“To ask you if you’ll go to Hogsmeade with me next winter.”

“There isn’t enough gold in the world.” Lily said, turning firmly away from him.

James hit the table in frustration.

“Whoa, Jamie,” Sirius said with a smirk. “Don’t worry about it. She’ll say yes…eventually.”

“You’re right,” James said, drumming his wand against the table. “I just have to keep asking until she has to say yes.”

“Good idea,” Peter said unconvincingly.

Remus glanced over at the other Marauders, who forced themselves to laugh hysterically at a joke no one had made when they saw him looking. Remus glared down at his bruised hands and sighed.

“Don’t worry about them,” Marlene said, her steady hand settling on his shoulder. “They’re idiots.”

“Yeah, I know,” Remus said. “But they’re my best friends, and I hate this.”

“Hey,” Lily said fiercely. “You don’t need them, d’you hear me? You don’t need them.”

“I do,” Remus sighed.

“We’re your friends, aren’t we?” Mary asked.

“Of course,” Remus managed a weak, unconvincing smile.

“See? It isn’t as if you’re alone.”

Remus wanted to shake them and scream, I am, I am, I’m so alone.

“I miss him.” Sirius said as the train pulled away for Easter holidays. None of them had much wanted to stay after what had happened with Remus — they all wanted to be apart, have time to think. James had offered his hospitality to Sirius once again, but Sirius had declined, saying he wanted to reconcile with Regulus. Really, he’d rather face his parents than have to be there when James’s parents found out what they’d done to Remus. He didn’t care about his parents’ disappointment, but James’s parents — it would be more than he could bear.

“I do too,” James sighed, leaning his head against the window. A few compartments away, Remus, Lily, Mary, and Marlene laughed, but the Marauders were silent within their own compartment.

“Why don’t we just apologize?” Peter asked, slumping in his seat. Over the weeks, he’d shrunk
nearly a foot in height, and had been doing his best to hide it. His face was looking distinctly more rodent-like than usual, while Sirius was looking a bit furry, and James’s feet had turned nearly entirely into hooves.

“We can’t,” James said, sighing. “It’s better off if we finish becoming Animagi and then tell him.”

“That could take another year — or more —” Sirius protested.

“Then we wait that long! We can’t tell him.”

“We’ll lose him.”

“Then we’ll get him back.”

“And it won’t be worth it, will it? We won’t be the Marauders anymore, without Moony —“ Sirius’s voice broke. “We need him.”

“I know,” James said finally.

All Peter could think was that if he was the one who’d left the Marauders, they wouldn’t be trying so hard to get him back. The thought was painful but not unfamiliar. He sighed, shifting uncomfortably, and decided it would never matter — so long as he didn’t test his theory.
“Welcome home, son,” Mr. Black said, sounding nothing less than hateful as he greeted Sirius, who had returned home by the Floo system from a wizard home near King’s Cross, as his parents had flatly refused to take him home alongside Regulus. Sirius dusted off his clothes, glaring at his father, and dashed up the stairs to his room.

Sirius slammed the door, fixing the peeling edges of his Muggle posters with a degree of pride. 

“This was such a bad idea, he thought. Really awful, what was I thinking?

“Sirius! Come downstairs for dinner!” Mrs. Black screeched.

“Sure, Mother,” Sirius muttered. “Old hag.” He didn’t take his wand out of his pocket and put it somewhere safe, like he would at James’ house. He kept it on him — better to be expelled from Hogwarts and disowned from the family than to be hurt again.

“So, Sirius,” Mr. Black said, folding his hands and giving his son a calculating look. “How goes life in the blood-traitor house? Do they all wear such ridiculous hats?”

“Oh, it’s absolutely lovely. Ridiculous hats are highly in fashion.” Sirius snapped, adjusting his hat on his head. “How goes being an ignorant self-righteous prat?”

“Sirius!” Walburga snapped.

“At least I don’t embarrass my family with my very existence!” Mr. Black boomed. Sirius flinched.

“Sirius, you can go have dinner upstairs!” Mrs. Black shouted.

“Fine!” Sirius snapped, grabbing his plate off the table and storming up the stairs. He sat at his desk and glared at the wall.

He fell asleep at his desk, and dreamed of Moony. “I’m sorry,” Regulus heard Sirius mutter in his sleep, as he hovered in the doorframe, wondering if he should wake his brother. “Moony, I’m sorry!”

“How’s Moony?” Regulus asked.

Sirius woke with a start. “No one. A friend.”

“How can she be no one and a friend? A girlfriend?”

“Moony’s a guy.”

“Oh,”

“No! Not like that!” Sirius said, flustered. “I mean — kind of like that! I don’t know! Why are you still talking to me?”

Regulus smirked. “Contrary to popular belief, you are actually my brother.”

“And we hate each other.”

“Nah, I only hate you a little bit.”

“Thanks.” Sirius said dryly.

“What happened with this…Moony?”

“James and Peter and I are keeping a secret from him, he was angry at us and he’s not talking to any of us now.” Sirius confessed. “He’s become friends with the girl James likes as well. It’s a mess. I wish we hadn’t lied.”

“What were you lying about?”

Sirius repositioned his enormous hat on his head. “Absolutely nothing. I think you should go, actually —“

“Sirius.”

“Reg, I swear —“ Sirius cursed under his breath. “Look. I can’t trust you with this. You’re friends with Snivelly and I don’t want this getting out. Alright?”

“I’m your brother.”

“Haven’t been acting like it, have you?” Sirius gestured for Regulus to leave, pushing the door shut after him.

He lay down on his bed, listening to Muggle rock music and looking at the photographs he had of the Marauders, running his finger over the edges. The laughing boys in the photograph dashed in and out of the frame.
“It was simpler then, wasn’t it?” Sirius asked. There was no response — only more laughter. “I thought so.”

When Sirius woke the next morning, something felt changed. He leaned towards his mirror, confused, and froze upon seeing his reflection.

This is bad, he thought. Bloody hell, this is bad.

“Sirius!” Mrs. Black shoved open the door with one hand, the other resting on her hip. “SIRIUS BLACK! YOU HAVE GOT SOME EXPLAINING TO DO!”

The large black dog that currently rested on Sirius’s bed lowered its head.

“WHY IS THERE A DOG IN YOUR BED?” she shrieked down the stairs. Regulus came sprinting into Sirius’s room.

“He’s gone. He isn’t anywhere.”

“What do you mean he’s gone?”

Sirius, still stuck as a dog, leapt off the bed, a destructive rage within his chest.

“No! Shoo! Kreacher,” Mrs. Black beckoned in a sickly sweet voice. “We’ll have a bit of a mess on Sirius’s floor in a moment, I’m afraid. There’s been an intrusion and I do feel the need to get a bit violent with this one.”

“Yes, Mistress Black,” Kreacher said. Sirius growled at him, the fur on his back prickling.

“You stay where you are,” Walburga hissed at Sirius, who noted, with a degree of amusement, that if he had thought it wasn’t possible for her to look at him with any more distaste, he’d been wrong.

Seeing a dog in his place seemed to have introduced a new sort of hatred to Mrs. Black’s demeanor.

What are you going to do to me? Kill me?

Sirius thought, with a fresh wave of horror. Oh, bloody hell, bloody hell, bloody hell.

She pulled her wand from the pocket of her robe, pointing it into his face. He snarled at her, his jaws snapping, and she recoiled.

Good,

he barked at her, making her take a step back.

You should be scared of me.

He pushed past her and ran, clumsily tripping over his new paws, down the stairs.

If I never come back, he thought, with only a twinge of regret. I can be a street dog. It’ll be better than anywhere else I could go.

He slipped out the door, knocking it open with one paw, and trotted down the steps. He gave one last, conflicted look at Grimmauld Place and kept walking, slowly, the pads of his paws feeling heavier and heavier with every step.

Sirius sighed when he reached the park nearest their house and settled down under a tree, feeling a panic rising in his chest. I want to be human. Merlin, I just want to be human.

Leaves rustled in the trees around him, and he curled his paws against his chest, whimpering, looking up at the nearly full moon.

“Peter! Peter — Peter, Peter!” James sprinted towards the other boy at the train station and threw his arms around him.

Peter hugged him tightly back. “Did it happen to you too?” he whispered.

“What?”

“The animagus transformation. Did it work?”

James nodded, gesturing to his head — the antlers had grown too large for the hat, so he’d resorted to wearing the invisibility cloak around his antlers, which occasionally caused large patches of his head to become entirely invisible. “What about you, Pete? Still got a tail?”

“Unfortunately. And claws on my toes as well.”

“Poor bloke,” James patted him on the back. “Alright, shall we?” They walked onto the train together, James looking wildly around for any sign of Sirius. But there was nothing — not when the train pulled away, not when they filed into the Great Hall for dinner. Sirius was gone.

“Regulus!” James stood up at the Gryffindor table and yelled across the room. “REGULUS!”

Regulus politely excused himself from the Slytherin table and meandered over, looking, like his brother, effortlessly handsome. “Keep your voice down, why don’t you?” he asked. “I expect you
want to ask about Sirius.”
“Right you are,” James said. “Where is he, then?”
“He’s gone,” Regulus lowered his gaze.
“The hell do you mean, he’s gone?”
“The second day of holidays he was gone. There was a dog in his bed…”
“No,” James whispered.
“What?”
“What happened to the dog, Regulus?”
“It ran away.”
“Have you seen it since?”
Regulus looked down.
“Have you seen it?”
“It came back. Just once.”
“When?”
“A few days ago. My mum…”
James thought he was going to throw up. “What happened?”
“Look, Potter, can I tell you something?” Regulus leaned towards him. “You have to swear to
Salazar — sorry, Godric — that you won’t tell anyone.”
“I swear,” James said solemnly.
“I think — you’re going to think I’m mad, but…I’m nearly sure — Potter, I think Sirius was the
dog.”
“Really?” James asked, feigning surprise. “And er, what happened to Sirius, the — the dog?”
“I don’t know,” Regulus said, looking distressed. “I heard screaming and I ran upstairs. I’m worried
that —“
“I know.” James sighed, running a hand through his hair, his fingers carefully avoiding the antlers.
“Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”
“If he’s dead…then he died thinking I hate him,” Regulus said, on the verge of tears. “I don’t hate
him. I just got scared.”
“We have to tell Remus,” Peter said at last. “We have to tell him everything.”
“Where’s Remus?” Peter asked, climbing back up to their dormitory after the feast. Remus's trunk lay abandoned on the bed, his shabby robes neatly folded, his shoes laid out precisely next to each other under the bed, but he was nowhere to be found.

“It’s the full moon tonight.” James reminded him. “It’s the first full moon since we’ve stopped being friends with him. He’ll wake up in the hospital wing tomorrow morning alone -- we can’t leave him like that, it wouldn’t be right, would it?”

“You’re right. We have to, don’t we?” Peter asked, his brow furrowing. A horrible thought seemed to occur to him. “Do you think Evans, Macdonald and McKinnon know about his furry little problem?”

“Course not, don’t be daft.” James sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Merlin, I miss Sirius."

“He’ll be back, won’t he?” Peter asked worriedly.

James’s gaze lingered on the other boy’s face for quite some time. “Yeah. He will be.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. We’ll start looking for him after we talk to Remus.”

“Talking to him right after the full moon, just to give him bad news.” Peter said guiltily. "It seems like a horrid thing to do."

“It does.” James agreed. “This is Sirius, though. Even after what happened, Remus would do anything for him. We all would.”

Sirius Black limped through the door of the castle nearly a week later, still wearing a large hat to cover his dog ears -- the only canine part of him that hadn’t yet disappeared. His face was bruised nearly beyond recognition, and a long cut marred his face. As he started for the stairs up to the Gryffidor tower, a figure swept in front of him.

"Damn," he hissed. Filch grabbed his shoulder and pushed him towards the stairs.

"You're in trouble now, Black," he cackled. The lanterns on the walls flickered on the stone floors, and Sirius breathed a sigh of relief. *I'm home.* "Look who I found wandering the corridors, Professor."

Filch slammed open the door to McGonagall's office without bothering to knock first. "Technically, I wasn’t wandering. I knew precisely where I was going," Sirius said indignantly around his hugely swollen and purple lip.

“You’re dismissed, Mr. Filch,” McGonagall said warily. "Have a seat, Mr. Black." Sirius sat, staring pointedly at the floor. "I’d advise you to take that dreadful thing off of your head.” McGonagall said after waiting a few moments for Sirius to speak.

“This?” Sirius pointed to his hat. “I don’t think so.”

“Suit yourself.” McGonagall folded her hands on top of her desk. “Would you care to explain your absence for the past few days?”

“I wouldn’t, actually, shocking as you may find it.” Sirius said indigently around his hugely swollen and purple lip.

“You’re dismissed, Mr. Filch,” McGonagall said warily. "Have a seat, Mr. Black." Sirius sat, staring pointedly at the floor. "I’d advise you to take that dreadful thing off of your head.” McGonagall said after waiting a few moments for Sirius to speak.

“This?” Sirius pointed to his hat. “I don’t think so.”

“Suit yourself.” McGonagall folded her hands on top of her desk. “Would you care to explain your absence for the past few days?”

“I wouldn’t, actually, shocking as you may find it.” Sirius said.

“Will you speak to Potter, at least?”

“James? Where is he? What about Peter and Remus? Tell me they’re alright --""And why on earth wouldn’t they be, Mr. Black?” McGonagall inquired.

"I -- I don't know, I just thought -- Remus, is Remus alright?" Sirius asked frantically.

“Mr. Lupin is indisposed.”

“What do you mean indisposed? Professor, what day is it?"

“If you mean to ask me whether the full moon was last night, indeed it was.”

“No,” Sirius whispered. “And James and Peter, did they go to the hospital wing to see him?”

“I daresay I have no idea. I must insist, however, that you give me a small piece of information to put my mind at ease. Did you go home to your family for easter holidays?"

“I did,”

“And all that you have discussed with me…has been forgotten?”
“No.”
“Mr. Black, I must implore you to tell me why on earth you went back to that house,” McGonagall said, struggling to remain calm.
“I had to,” Sirius said. “I had no choice.”
“And why was that?”
“Remus hates us.”
“I can assure you that Mr. Lupin certainly does not hate you.”
“How do you know?”
“Because Mr. Lupin told me so specifically when I inquired after the friendship that seems to have been lost between the two of you.”
“He’s not speaking to any of us.”
“As far as I know, your secondary residence is with Mr. Potter. Your relationship with Mr. Lupin has nothing to do with your holiday location.”
“It is. But nothing was the same once Moony — Remus, I mean — left.”
“So you put yourself in immediate danger to compensate for it?”
“That’s sort of my thing, professor.”
“Mm. Well, your ‘thing,’ as you put it, is exceptionally irrational and dangerous.”
“I’m aware of that.”
“Mr. Black, I recommend you return to your dormitory immediately.”
Sirius sighed. “Alright.”

He pushed open the door to their dormitory, bracing himself for disaster. “Hello, boys.”
“Sirius,” James leapt to his feet and threw his arms around the other boy. “Thank Merlin you’re alive,” he said into Sirius's shoulder.
“Of course I’m alive, you great idiot.” Sirius said, leaning over to hug Peter. He and Remus exchanged a look, Remus’s eyes full of tears.
“They told you.” Sirius said, wanting nothing more than to grab Remus and hug him tightly, and never let him go.
“Of course they did,” Remus shook his head. “I missed you so much, Sirius.”
“Come sit down,” James gestured to Sirius’s bed. “Tell us what happened.”
“I’ve already been interrogated by McGoogle —”
“Sirius, we thought you were dead,” Peter said, with a weak tremor in his voice.
“I’m sorry,” Sirius felt as if Peter had hit him. “I woke up as a dog one morning and I just had to leave. I had to.”
“Why didn’t you come back when you turned into a human again?” Remus asked, his knees curled to his chest as he sat on the bed, looking smaller and more fragile than usual.
“When I started turning human again I went back to my family’s house,” Sirius said heavily. “And my mother tried to kill me.”
“Did she know it was you?” James asked.
“She might’ve done, I don’t know. All three unforgivable curses --” Sirius's voice broke, his hands beginning to shake in fear. “Er, she missed most of the time, obviously.”
“You could’ve died,” James said, tackling Sirius in a tight embrace once again.
“You’re all so bloody sentimental,” Sirius laughed, choking back tears. “I wouldn’t have died, I always make it out of these things alive. I was more worried about you berks than I was about myself.”
James chuckled. “Blimey, you’re a terrible liar.”
“Ah, don’t say that, you might make me cry.”

“What I don’t understand is why you lot didn’t just tell me,” Remus said on the way to Transfiguration the next morning.
“Because we wanted to surprise you,” Peter offered.
“That’s a horrible reason. Now I’ve got to lie to the girls when they ask —”
“You’re still speaking to Evans, Macdonald, and McKinnon?” James asked.
“Of course I am, we’re mates, aren’t we?”
“They were just your replacement mates!” Sirius said indignantly.
Remus laughed. “That’s not true.”
“But you can’t be friends with girls, Remus, girls are the enemy!” James said in a horrified gasp.
“You’re ridiculous,” Remus sighed.
McGonagall’s lips twitched up when she saw the Marauders back in their normal seats, and she exchanged a proud glance with Sirius.
“What was that?” James hissed, twisting in his seat.
“Nothing. She’s glad to see we’re all speaking again, I think.” Sirius whispered back.
“As interesting as what you’re talking about may be, I regretfully must ask you to pay attention.” McGonagall said sharply.
“Sorry, Professor,” Remus said, trying and failing to hide his smile.
“Wake up, boys, come on, let’s go!” James yelled into the dark one night, stumbling into his shoes. Sirius shot up, his hair a wild mess about his face.
“What? Potter, what are you doing?” he hissed.
“We’re long overdue for another late night trip around the castle, don’t you think?” James asked, squinting at him.
Sirius grinned. “I do.”
He stood, brushing his hair with his fingers, and walked to the middle of the room, casting an amplifying charm before yelling, “Moony! Pete!”
“Oh, Merlin!” Peter scrambled out of bed, shaking. “What is it? What happened?” Upon seeing the grins on James and Sirius’s faces, he sighed. “What now?”
Apparently our Moony can sleep through anything,” James said, grabbing a still sleeping Remus by the ankle and pulling him bodily from his bed.
“Oi, watch it —” Remus protested, wincing as he stood up. “I dare assume you’ve come up with some lovely night excursion to cause my permanent exhaustion.”
And you assume correctly yet again!” James said. "I do, in fact, have a plan."
“Not another one of your bloody plans,” Sirius rolled his eyes. “There’s something I like to call winging it, you should try it once in a while.”
“But it’s always better to have a plan,” James argued. “Pete, Moons, tell me you’re on my side.”
“Er…” Peter stammered.
“Never mind. Let’s go.” They crept down the stairs and out of the common room.
“Okay, James, much as I loathe to disagree with Sirius, what exactly are we doing?” Remus asked diplomatically.
“Your betrayal stings, Moony,” Sirius said with a hand clutched to his chest. “But if you must know, we’re going to find more of those blasted secret passages again.”
“Not again,” Peter groaned. “Just once, would you lot let me have a full night of sleep? Just once?” Remus laughed. “I don’t think so, Peter.”
“Well,” Peter sighed. “One can dream.”
“It was just dumb luck that we found the last one,” James said. “So my idea is that we start bumping into things —“
“What if there aren’t any others?” Remus asked.
“You’re joking, Moons, have you seen the size of this castle?” Sirius asked.
“Why do we need to find these, anyway?” Peter grumbled under his breath.
“Because it’s a challenge!” James boomed, making the portraits along the wall shriek and cover their ears.
“Bloody hell, will you be quiet?” Sirius hissed.
“I won’t do any such —“ James began.
“Someone’s coming,” Remus whispered.
“What? Really? Damn —” James threw the cloak over them, and they all held their breath, barely fitting under the cloak. Mrs. Norris walked by, her claws clicking softly on the corridor floor, her glowing, lamp like eyes sweeping the walls for any sign of students out of bed.
“I know they’re here, Mrs. Norris,” Filch said, limping along behind her. Peter gasped in fear, grabbing onto Sirius’s arm. “It’s that Potter and Black again, I’d bet anything.”
“We ought to have a way to know when Filch and that evil creature are coming,” Peter said,
recoiling as Mrs. Norris wove around Filch’s feet.
“Mrs. Norris?” Sirius asked incredulously as Filch and Mrs. Norris walked away.
“Sh! Yes. I don’t like cats,” Peter looked down.
“Would you say you’re a dog person, then?” Remus asked with a smirk.
“No, Moony, that’s Sirius,” James chuckled. “Pete, I think you might be on to something, there.”
“What?”
“We ought to have a way to know when Filch is coming? What you just said?”
“Oh, that.” Peter sighed. “I mean, it’d be convenient, wouldn’t it?”
“Of course it would. If we could figure out how to do it,” Remus said, leaning against the wall.
“Which we can,” Sirius said with a grin.
“How, exactly?”
“We’ll put a tracking spell on him.”
“I don’t think you can put tracking spells on teachers,” Remus said rationally.
“Well, Filch isn’t exactly a teacher, is he?” James asked. “More of a vile, smelly old bag who limps around getting into other people’s business, wouldn’t you say?”
“Perhaps not in such crude terms,” Sirius suggested. “I would call him a devious Squib with a penchant for cruelty.”
“Is he, though?” Remus asked.
“What? A Squib? Don’t know, but you don’t become a ‘caretaker’ for being good at magic, do you?”
“Suppose not.” James said. “Shall we?” He offered Sirius his arm.

“Potter?” Professor Flitwick looked up from his register to see a conspicuously empty seat. “Absent.” He scribbled an ‘x’ through James’s name.
“Black?” He piped. “Mm. Absent. Should I bother to ask about Lupin and Pettigrew?”
“No,” Lily whispered to Severus. “They’re busy filling the halls with toads or something of the like.” Severus laughed. “You know, Lil, I have an idea,”
“What is it?” She leaned towards him, her dark red hair falling across her face.
He fought the urge to reach out and smooth it back behind her ear. “What if we got them back for all the things they’ve been doing?”
“How do you mean?” Lily asked, scribbling down notes as Flitwick squealed on about some charm or another.
“Black seems to be fond of that Astronomy tower, yes?” Lily nodded, unconvinced. “Well, I mean, he does go there for class, obviously. I’ve seen him there…one other time,” she lied. “What do you want to do?”
“What if we made it so he and those other prats couldn’t go there anymore, put a hex on it,” Severus said, a glint in his dark eyes.
“Do you know a hex to keep specific people out?” Lily asked, folding her arms.
Severus rubbed his nose impatiently. “No, I’m sure we could find it in a book, though.”
“Miss Evans, I’m sure whatever you’re discussing with Mr. Snape can wait until the end of the lesson.” Flitwick squeaked.
“Sorry, Professor,” Lily ducked her head and scribbled something on the inside cover of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three. Severus watched her write until the end of the lesson, when he stood to leave, holding an empty piece of parchment where his Charms notes should’ve been.
Lily stood and wordlessly passed the book to Severus, grinning at him with a smile so beautiful, so full of a happiness he’d never feel, that it hurt to look at.
He smiled back, running his finger over the drying ink.
Meet me in the restricted section at midnight tonight.
Underneath these words, she’d drawn The Marauders, in exceptional detail, sitting outside the Astronomy Tower with identical angry expressions. Above each head was a label, written in block letters and finished off with several exclamation points. James’s read ARROGANT BULLY, Sirius’s SELF-RIGHTEOUS PRAT, and Peter’s COWERING KISS-UP. Remus’s was slightly
Lily snuck into the restricted section with a lantern in her hand and a mischievous grin on her face, crouching down beside a stack of books and gesturing for Severus to follow her. At the same time, the Marauders were sneaking down to the library themselves, in search of a remedy for Peter’s not yet disappeared tail. While Sirius’s dog ears were nearly completely gone, and James’s antlers as well, something with Peter’s transformation seemed to have gone awry.

“Alright, alright,” James chuckled under the cloak, as Remus hissed for the millionth time for him to hurry. Lily dropped her lantern in shock, the glass shattering on the floor, and ducked behind a book case, pulling Severus by the hand after her.

“What was that?” Peter asked worriedly.

“Nothing, come on, do you know anyone else stupid enough to sneak into the library at midnight?” “Us,” Lily whispered to Severus.

“Lily, I found it, the spell to keep them out — look, here,” Severus showed her a page from one of the books. “It’s banned because it can cause permanent damage to the building and is almost impossible to reverse — ”

“Sounds dangerous,” Lily remarked.

“Doesn’t it?”

“We’re still doing it.” Lily stood up cautiously. “C’mon, before they see us.”

Chapter End Notes

sorry it took me such a long time to write this! I’ve been very busy with school and such and could never find the time. I have mock GCSEs in two weeks so I may be writing a bit more slowly than usual, i’m so sorry
“Hey, look, James, it’s your girlfriend and her greasy pet,” Sirius said enthusiastically on their way to the Astronomy Tower for Astronomy one morning.

James’s face lit up instantly upon seeing Lily and Severus waiting outside the Astronomy Tower, identical smirks on their faces. “Excellent.”

“Won’t be so excellent for you in a minute,” Lily threatened.

“It speaks!” Sirius gasped, his face breaking into a smile. “Well, well, Evans. What were you doing in the library last night? I almost wouldn’t have seen you, you know, but I saw your lantern on the ground.”

“How do you know it was mine?” Lily challenged.

“Smelled like annoying teacher’s pets.” This was a lie. It smelled, like Lily herself, very mildly of strawberries.

“I am not —”

“Name one teacher who doesn’t talk about you like you’re the reincarnation of Merlin.” Remus deadpanned.

“Well, Binns doesn’t like me.” Lily said rationally.

“Binns can’t tell you from Professor Dumbledore.” Peter piped up, his round face going red, and Lily laughed.

“I’ll see you gits on the other side,” she said, and as she and Severus passed through the door, unable to hide their smiles, the Marauders started after her.

“What the hell?” Sirius began to demand walking face-first into the magical barrier. Lily and Severus stood on the other side of the door, hiding grins behind their Astronomy textbooks as they walked to their seats.

“Let me try, it’s just a door —” James said, slamming into the barrier as well. He slammed his back against the wall, sinking to the floor and mussing his hair in frustration.

“There’s some sort of blocking spell on it,” Remus said, kneeling down painfully to examine the door.

“What do you mean there’s a blocking spell? Why would someone try to stop us from getting to class?” Peter worried, frantically pawing at the barrier.

“Did you see Evans and Snivellus’s faces?” Sirius asked, his dark eyes narrowed. He peered into the classroom, winking at a pretty Ravenclaw girl who was staring intently at him. She blushed and giggled. “It was definitely them, but why?”

“As if they need a reason,” Remus scoffed. "We've been awful to them, we'd deserve anything they wanted to do to us."

“No one does anything without a reason. Besides, I thought you and Evans were mates?”

"The key word being 'were' in this case. I take this as an act of open distaste for us -- all members of the Marauders included." Remus said.

"You've been reading too much, Moony." Sirius said affectionately. "Using all those big words and the like."

Remus looked at him, his eyes dark with a hidden pain. He shook it off, with a sigh that felt as if it shifted his very bones. "Can't sleep."

"Didn't seem that way when you were snoring last night," James said, drawing his wand and shooting useless spells at the barrier.

Remus rolled his eyes. "I assume Lily and Severus did this because we as a group torment them on a daily basis — not that it isn’t deserved, in Severus’s case. Still, I didn’t think they were capable of —"

“Moony, my dear, you're beginning to sound like a book,” James said, patting Remus on the back.

“A book who happens to be right.” Remus arched an eyebrow.

“Wait, if they did this, does that mean…” Peter began, sinking against the wall in defeat.
“What?”
“Well, they’ve declared war now. That means we can prank them back, doesn’t it?”
“Obviously,” Sirius chuckled. He clapped his hands together suddenly, making Peter jump. “Alright! Let’s go plot our revenge!”
“We have class,” Remus reminded him, with an apologetic glance through the Astronomy Tower door.
“Since when do we care about class? C’mon boys, we have work to do.”

“Well, then, what are we doing?” Remus asked resignedly, as the Marauders sat in the empty third floor corridor, throwing marbles down the staircases. One passed through Nearly Headless Nick, and he glared at them and sniffed with great indignation as he drifted away.
“What if we destroyed the Slytherin table in the Great Hall?” Sirius suggested, chucking a marble across the stairwell where it hit the railing and bounced back, nearly colliding with his face. He glanced at it and pushed it away.
“Brilliant!” James declared. “But how?”
“Well, it’s dangerous —“
“Excellent —“
“and really stupid —“
“Even better —“
“And if it goes wrong it’ll be a bit of a disaster, really —“
“Exactly what I like to hear, Siri, spit it out,” James said enthusiastically, hazel eyes dancing. “I’d love to see the looks on their faces.”
“Alright, alright, hear me out — we set the Slytherin table on fire.”
“Dreadful idea,” Remus said into the momentary silence. “You could burn the castle down. If Filch were cleaning the Great Hall, he could die —“
“That’d be wonderful, wouldn’t it?” James asked.
“No!”
“Well, Moons, Pete, I don’t know about you two, but it’s a risk I’d be willing to take. Besides, not only will we have our revenge on Snivelly and the soulless demon that is Lily Evans, we can tick off all the Slytherins! Shall we?”
Remus rolled his eyes. “Alright, then.”
The Marauders crept down to the Great Hall, wands and eyes alight.
“I’ll go first,” Sirius said. “They won’t expel me if they catch me, I’ll cry about how I was thrown from my home over break, et cetera, et cetera and McGiggles will take pity on me.”
“I wouldn’t count on that,” James warned.
“Nah, neither would I,” Sirius sighed. “Our last weekly tea ended in me throwing one of her teacups, I doubt she’s feeling warm and fuzzy towards me.” None of them mentioned the reason behind Sirius’s frequent meetings with McGonagall, or pointed out the pain that flashed in his eyes when he discussed the events which had taken place over the Easter holidays. “Okay, on three, I’ll go in. James, follow me after exactly one minute, then Peter after you. Remus, you go last,”
“Why?”
“Because every professor thinks you’re a well behaved little beast.” Sirius elbowed Remus in the ribs.
“Other than the fact that I barely got into Hogwarts due to my furry little problem and could easily be expelled for appearing as dangerous,” Remus muttered, digging his fingernails into his arm.
“Ah, Moons, don’t say things like that, they’d never expel you.” James said confidently.
“Your optimism is both incredible and naive.” Remus said.
Sirius raced into the Great Hall, pulling his wand from the deep pocket of his robes.
“Incendio,” he said, a devilish grin spreading across his face as he watched the Slytherin table catch fire. He stood watching it for a moment, the flames flickering in his eyes, and James couldn’t help but think that Sirius seemed broken in that moment, broken and something entirely different from what he really was.
As Sirius dashed through the hall and outside, waiting for the other Marauders, he laughed, the coldest sound that any of them had ever heard him make. James dashed forward with an expression of manic glee, setting another portion of the table alight. He joined Sirius in the hall, and the two of them watched it burn — although it barely seemed to splinter beneath the force of the fire, it felt as if they were burning each and every Slytherin who had wronged them, and it was horribly right. Peter cowered in the corner, too scared to act. “This is wrong, Remus,” he whispered. “We’ll be expelled if we get caught.” Remus sighed. “I know. But you saw their faces, we don’t have a choice.” “You don’t think they’d stop being friends with us for refusing to do something like this, right?” Remus sighed heavily. “I don’t know.” “You know how much they care about us,” Peter tried to assure Remus, sounding more like he was assuring himself. “They care about each other more.” Remus said decisively. Little as he wanted to believe it, there was a deep and terrible assurance in his mind that Sirius and James would never choose him and Peter over each other. “You ought to go set the table on fire.” “I suppose so,” Peter stepped forward gingerly and a weak spurt of flame burst from the end of his wand. It sparked along the end of the Slytherin table and went out, and Peter scurried outside, leaving Remus alone.
Dumbledore stood before the great hall, his beard sweeping over his robes as he spread his arms out wide. "I regret to announce that the Slytherin table was set ablaze last night. Thankfully all the damage was easily repaired." He sighed heavily. "I don't dare to expect that the perpetrators will come forward, but I must impress upon you that this will be taken as a crime against Slytherin and all it stands for."

"Well someone did the rest of us a favor, then." James declared loftily, lounging in his seat without a care.

Severus glared across the room at the Marauders. "We have to get them back for this."

"We don't even know who did this," Mulciber said, shooting a suspicious, leering glance at the Gryffindor table.

"Who would it be other than that lot? They hate all of us. Lily and I pranked them and this was their revenge. We've got to hurt them enough to get them to stop."

Mulciber grinned. "I'm listening."

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"Just think of it, Moons — exams start in a week, and we haven’t studied for one second." James said as Remus curled on a chair, Charms notes in his lap.

"What you do in your spare time is absolutely none of my business," Remus said nonchalantly.

"Well, whatever you do, don’t think about me and Sirius failing. I won’t mention Peter since he’s so hard at work over there, but," at this he leaned towards Remus with an air of conspiratorial mischief. "We all know he’ll fail anyway."

Remus rolled his eyes. "You can fail if you want, it’s not my business."

"It’s not?" James asked.

"Why would you assume I care?"

"Because it’ll ruin your reputation as a pain in the arse and a know it all."

Remus laughed. "Is this your way of asking for my help?"

"Potters never ask for help."

"Neither do Blacks," Sirius said, his face falling momentarily.

"Leave me to study in peace then, will you?" Remus demanded, familiar twinges of pain running up his spine.

"You okay, Moony?" Peter asked.

"I’ve been worse," Remus said softly.

As James and Sirius sat together on their armchair, talking earnestly to each other with no space for anyone else, Peter felt a nearly imperceptible shift in the dynamic between the Marauders — something different, something changed. He would always be on the outside, but all at once, he felt for the first time that Remus was there with him.

Remus stood and walked towards the table where Lily, Marlene, and Mary were doing their homework.

"Talking to us again, are you?" Marlene asked coolly.

Remus sat down next to them and sighed. "Perhaps."

"Remus, because I still trust you, tell me the truth," Lily leaned towards him, her green eyes so bright and full of trust that Remus almost wanted to cry.

"Okay," he said.

"Did James and Sirius set the Slytherin table on fire?"

"Keep your voice down," Remus muttered. "We all did it."

"What?" Mary demanded. "Why?"

"I’m sorry, Lily," Remus said. "I know how much Severus means to you."

"Don’t," Lily shook her head in disgust. "You’re no better than them, you’re just like them. We should’ve known. Come on, Mary, Marlene. We’re leaving."
“No, Lily — I’m sorry —” Remus protested. As she walked away, red hair swinging down her back, Remus muttered under his breath, "it wasn’t my idea, I’m sorry."

“What was that?” James asked.


Peter stood up and started up the stairs after him.

“Remus — Moony, tell me what’s happening,” Peter said, sitting next to Remus on his bed and comfortably touching his arm. He never made a show of things, Peter, Remus mused. Not like James and Sirius. He was kind in a different way, in a simpler way.

“I’m sorry,” Remus said. “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Peter said, in his soft, high voice. “Really, don’t be. It’s okay.”

“You don’t even know what I’m sorry for yet,” Remus said, almost smiling.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m sorry I made you set the table on fire when you didn’t want to.” Remus said. “We could’ve gotten expelled.”

Peter’s round face broke into a smile. “We didn’t get caught, right?”

“No,” Remus shook his head. “It’s just, you know, almost the full moon. It’s always worse when the weather’s changing,” he said under his breath. “I’d kind of like to be alone right now. If you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Peter said, and left Remus lying in his bed, head pounding and bones shifting to accommodate the monster that would undoubtedly rear its head soon enough.

The Marauders raced up the steps to their next class, Remus supported by Peter and trailing far behind Sirius and James.

“McGonagall will have our heads for this —" Sirius panted, leaning against the railing.

“True,” James huffed. “’C’mon, don’t stop —“

Sirius ruffled his long, black hair, and it brushed across his forehead. “My hair is getting all sweaty, I’ll look like Snivellus if I’m not careful —“

“You could never look as disgusting as him,” Peter said earnestly.

Sirius grinned. “Means a lot, Pete. Shall we?” As he started up the stairs again he slipped, falling down several stairs before landing, painfully. James reached after him and slipped as well, and the steps seemed to slide from underneath Peter and Remus, sending all of them tumbling down the stairs.

“The bloody staircase!” James exclaimed, lying across the marble steps with an expression of great distaste. “The whole world of revenge and they go with the bloody staircase. A bloke is walking to class and look at that! The bloody staircase has turned to ice! What a bloody hazard, what a —“

“You think Severus and Lily did this?” Peter asked.


“What are we going to do?” James pressed a hand against his bruised head.

“Well, it’s not obvious, then, is it?” Sirius asked grimly. “We’re going to bloody kill them.”

Remus struggled to his feet, feeling the cold sting of the staircase pressing against his skin.

“Attacking us on our way to class,” he groaned. “Cowards. Everyone alright?”

“Aside from the wicked bruise on my left arse cheek, I think I’ll survive,” Sirius said.

“Always good to hear,” James said, pulling both Sirius and Peter off the ground. "C’mon, we'll miss Transfiguration if we don't hurry."

“Now McGonagall’s really going to kill us,” Peter frowned.

“Ah, don’t say ridiculous things like that.” James scoffed.

“I think you may have hit your head when you fell,” Remus said. “As you seem to have forgotten that McGonagall once banned Mulciber from an entire week of lessons when he was five minutes late to Transfiguration.”
“She just doesn’t like him.” James said decisively.

“Alright, alright,” Remus said.

“Hey, Remus, what day is it?” Sirius asked.

“What do you mean? It’s…Tuesday?”

“No,” Sirius smirked. “In terms of your furry little problem.”

“Oh,” Remus went slightly pink. “Er. The full moon is tomorrow, if that’s what you want to know. Why do you ask?”

“You’re looking a bit paler than usual.”

“Am I?” Remus laughed self-consciously. “Well, you know, I don’t spend much time gallivanting around the grounds in the sun like you and James here, do I?”

“I wouldn’t call it gallivanting,” Sirius said. “General Marauding, I think.”

“Er, speaking of Marauding,” Peter said, looking especially sweaty and anxious — or at least, more so than usual.

“Yes, Pete?” James asked.

Peter quivered under the demanding gazes of the other Marauders. “Well, I had a bit of an idea.”

“Oi, hear that, Moons? He’s got an idea.” Sirius stage whispered. Remus rolled his eyes.

“Potter! Pete over here has an idea!”

“Yes, I did hear that, thanks,” James said. “Alright, Peter, let’s get to the point, shall we?”

“Never mind,” Peter mumbled. “S’not important.”

Remus could barely see through the blinding pain in his head. “Peter, we’re only joking, go ahead and tell us.”

Peter gave him a grateful smile. “I’ve been thinking about something for a while, and I can’t do it without your help.”

“Is it passing History of Magic? Because I can’t help you there, mate,” James said.

“No. I was thinking we should make a map.”

“Fascinating.” Sirius said dryly.

“No, listen to me —” Peter said insistently. “Like, a map of all the secret passages —”

“I’m listening,” James said, his hazel eyes snapping into focus.

“You and your secret passages,” Remus said affectionately.

“Go on, Peter,” Sirius said.

“It could show all the ways out of the castle, and could have tracking spells on the professors so we could go ‘gallivanting’ as Remus said,” he pronounced the word completely wrong, but Remus smiled anyway, “without being caught.”

“Peter, that’s actually —“

Peter braced himself for the worst of Sirius’s criticism.

“A really brilliant idea,” Sirius finished. “Alright, we start tonight.”

“Er, not to, um,” Remus said, shifting from foot to foot uncomfortably. “Not to pressure you, as I’m sure you’re doing all you can, but are you — er, still working on the, er — you know, animagus thing?”

James laughed. “You’re adorable, Moony. Yes, of course we are, no worries. The next step should be learning to transform at will, but since our last transformations faded nothing’s happened. Well. sometimes I get an odd craving for plants —“

“Disgusting,” Sirius said offhandedly.

“Alright, I see your judgement, Professor Raw Meat.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Sirius insisted.

“Could’ve fooled me, Fluffball. I’ve seen you in the kitchens.”

“Fluffball?”

“Well, I haven’t seen it yet, but I assume your dog form is, you know, furry?” James guessed.

“We’re not calling me Fluffball,” Sirius said.

“We most certainly are,” Remus said, breaking into a laugh that hurt his chest. “Shall we get to class, Fluffy?”

“NO.” Sirius said. “I mean, yes, class. NO FLUFFY.”
“I expect you’ve got an excuse for old McGiggles, Fluffy?” James asked cheekily. Sirius hit him in the arm, a lopsided grin on his face.
“Yes, I have. Oi, what are we to do about the slippery staircase?”
“I think our Snivelly needs a bit of a lesson, don’t you?” James asked, turning to look at the other Marauders as he limped up the stairs, rubbing the bruise on his face. “Perhaps a Howler from the lovely Evans would do?”
“How are we going to —“ Remus began.
“Patience, Moony. Patience.”
“You think we should make Polyjuice Potion?” Remus whispered to James while McGonagall lectured about the importance of promptness to lessons.

“Silence, Mr. Potter. Unless you want a detention, of course?”

“What? Professor, it was Remus who was talking —” James protested.

“You lying skills are steadily deteriorating, Mr. Potter.” McGonagall said curtly.

Remus just grinned at James, who glared murderously.

“Yeah. Instead of sending him a Howler, all we have to do is look like Lily and tell him we hate him, right?” Sirius whispered as McGonagall began talking about spells once again.

“Which one of us is going to drink the potion?” Peter asked.

“You looked a little too excited when you said that, mate.” Sirius said. “I think James should do it, as he’s in love with her. Might as well look like her, too.”

“I am not!” James said. “Besides, wouldn’t Snivellus hate it if Evans were to kiss me right in front of him?”

Remus nearly choked. “I think I speak for all of us when I say I’m not kissing you, as Lily or otherwise.”

“I’d do it,” Sirius said offhandedly. “Weird fantasy, though, mate, I have to say.”

James blinked, taken aback. “Pardon?”

“I’d do it. Pretend to be Evans and kiss you.” Sirius said. “Why? We’re mates and it’d make Snivellus cry greasy tears, I don’t see why I shouldn’t. Remus just won’t do it because he’s never been kissed.”


“It’s true, isn’t it?” Sirius asked, flicking his hair out of his eyes.

“I mean — er — none of your — business, that, is it?”

“Moons, is there anything we don’t know about you, really?”

“Yes,” Remus said defensively. “Yes! I resent your assumption that you know anything about me —”

James grinned. “Ooh, looks like our Moony’s got a secret.”

“Whatever your current issue with Mr. Lupin is,” McGonagall said, glaring at them. “I’m sure you can all resolve it in detention next week?”

“What?” Sirius protested. “Professor!”

“And a second detention for Mr. Black,” McGonagall noted.

Sirius swore under his breath.

“Mr. Potter, as I highly value your often loud and obnoxious opinions, I’ll let you decide if Mr. Black should receive yet another detention for assuming professors don’t have ears.”

Sirius sat, glaring, in silent outrage.

James grinned ear to ear. “Professor, if I may, I suggest you give our lovely friend Mr. Black thirty detentions.”

McGonagall’s lips twitched up in a semblance of a smile. “Mm. Well, I suppose just the two will suffice for now.”

“Thank Merlin,” Sirius muttered under his breath, and kicked James in the leg.

“Should I bother to ask what the hell Polyjuice Potion is made of?” Sirius asked as James set a large pile of books on the table in the common room. Each of them were labelled with something Potion related -- Greatest Potions of the 18th Century, Greatest Potions of the 17th Century, Potions for the Potions Teacher --

“Keep your voice down, Fluffs,”

“That’s not catching on.” Sirius laughed derisively. “Please?” he added.
James, Remus, and Peter gave him identical cheeky grins. “Sorry, mate,” Remus said, patting Sirius on the back.

Sirius groaned and flopped back on the bed. “Bloody stupid Snivelly and bloody stupid Evans… bloody stupid takes-months-to-make Polyjuice Potion…”

“Perhaps you could’ve said that more intelligently, but I agree with the sentiment,” Remus said, beginning to open the book on top of the pile. “James, did you take the entire library?”

“Only one shelf,” James said sheepishly. “I enjoy watching Madam Pince wonder where her books are disappearing to.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Sirius commented.

“Oi, Fluffy, better watch it.”

“Please. Please.” Sirius ran his hands through his hair. “Anything else.”

“Alright, fine,” Remus said with a grin. “How do you like Whiskers?”

“That’s a cat’s name!” Sirius protested. “My animagus is a beautiful — and yes, fluffy, dog, in case you’d forgotten.”

“How could I.” Remus gave Sirius a dead-eyed look and turned back to James’ Potions books, absently turning the pages without reading. “You’re just trying to rub it in Peter’s face that he has to be a rat, anyway.”

“Wonder why you’re a rat, Pete, it doesn’t really suit you.” James said offhandedly.

“I dunno, maybe because I’m scared of everything,” Peter went quite red and wrapped his arms around a pillow from the sofa. He rocked back and forth in his chair, trying to hide his tearful expression.

“Of course you’re not, you’re a Gryffindor, aren’t you? You don’t think the Sorting Hat made a mistake —” Sirius demanded.

“Maybe.” Peter’s face fell. “I should’ve been in Hufflepuff.”

“Don’t say that,” Remus said. “You’re just as brave as any other Gryffindor. Braver. In a different way. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with being a Hufflepuff.”

Peter sighed. “That’s what someone who belongs in Gryffindor would say.”

“And you should say it too,” Remus said. “You belong here. Doesn’t he?” He looked meaningfully at James and Sirius. “Doesn’t he?”

Both James and Sirius nodded fervently. “Of course,”

Peter smiled gratefully. “You think so?”

Remus widened his eyes at them over Peter’s head. “Absolutely.”

Peter gave a watery grin. “Thanks.”

“Well, the Polyjuice idea is dead,” James sprawled in the grass underneath a tree outside the castle, his tie wrapped around his head, making his black hair stick up straight. He lazily tapped his fingers on Sirius’s outstretched arm to the tune of a Muggle rock song, careful to avoid any of Sirius’s now fading scars.

“Oh? Why?” Sirius glanced over at him with practiced disinterest.

“It needs Boomslang Skin,” he groaned. “We could find it, obviously, but we wouldn’t have time.”

“Easy. Potions cupboard.” Remus said.

“My dear Moony,” James said. “You’re quite devious today. Unfortunately, the Potions cupboard is fresh out of Boomslang Skin and we won’t have time to make the potion before the end of the blasted year.”

Sirius sat up, eyebrows arched. “It isn’t like you to give up so easily, James, is everything all right?”

James nodded, a bit too fast. “I’m fine, I s’pose. I just…well when you lot were studying,” he gestured to Peter and Remus. “And you were having tea with McWhiskers,” he said to Sirius. “I asked Evans out again. As I’ve been doing all year, and she said — she said —” James groaned and messed up his hair. “She said she hated me so much that if I were to die she wouldn’t shed a single tear for me. Can you believe that? She’d hardly care —” he shook his head. “Well, anyway. I dunno, I’ve been thinking about it quite a bit.”
“Can we blame her for it, really?” Remus asked.

James gave him a pointed look. “Yes. Anyway, I don’t know, I thought it wise to…call off the prank.”

“Merlin,” Sirius said, looking a bit faint. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“He’s in love,” Peter teased.

“Am not!”

“You’re turning down a chance for revenge on Snivellus for her!” Sirius exclaimed. “You’re in love with Evans.” He smacked a hand against his forehead. “You’re bloody in love with her, do you have any idea what an inconvenience that is?”

“I know,” James sighed. “I wish I hated her — I do hate her, she’s so rude to us —”

“But you also love her,” Peter said.

“I know!” James flopped onto his stomach, tearing up fistfuls of grass and throwing them in the air. He made them float in neat circles above the Marauders’ heads, and whenever he turned his attention from the swirling grass, they would rearrange into hearts. “Stupid Evans and her stupid beautiful face and her stupid beautiful hair.”

“Ah yes. Hear this, boys, Witch Weekly’s newest article: describe everything about the person you like as ‘stupid beautiful,’” Sirius mocked.

“I wouldn’t say it to her face,” James muttered.

“Of course I do, it’s ruined loads of plans.” Sirius rolled his eyes. “I suppose you can’t help it, then?”

“Unfortunately. Bloody hell, I hate her for being so attractive.”

“Can we just go through with the prank anyway?” Peter asked hopefully.

“Doubt it,” Remus told him. “But if you lot want to do something to get back at Severus, we might want to get to work on that map Peter was talking about.”

James sat up, eyes lighting up. “Alright! I’ll go get all the parchment I can find! Remus, you get the ink, Sirius, you get the quills, and Peter— our brilliant Peter, you can just sit here and relax, as it was your idea.”

Peter beamed.

“My dear Miss Evans,” Slughorn said in surprise, glancing down at Lily Evans, who waited patiently for an answer to her question -- a most horrible question which Slughorn did not care to answer. “Whatever would you be looking at such a dreadful thing for?”

Lily looked him steadily in the eye. “I’m sorry, professor, but I simply must demand an answer — would the Draught of Living Death be reversible if applied in extremely small doses?”

“Whatever for?” he repeated.

“Why, professor, it’s only a question.” Lily said with a good-natured smile.

“Alright, alright, as long as you aren’t planning anything unsavory.”

“I assure you I would never,” she said.

He chuckled. “Ah, yes, I wouldn’t dream of accusing my brightest student of anything so dreadful. Well if you’re only curious, there is an antidote known as the Wiggenweld Potion, but both are extremely difficult to brew and must be executed perfectly, with extreme caution. In fact, I shan’t teach it to you until you reach N.E.W.T. level anyhow. Why on earth would you want to know such a thing?”

“Answering a question for a friend, sir,” Lily said, almost truthfully. “Well, I’ll tell him what you’ve told me. Thank you very much, sir.” she handed him a large box of candied pineapple, and waited until his round face broke into a cheerful smile.

“Oh! My favorite. Have a lovely afternoon, Miss Evans.”

“Of course, sir,” she closed the door behind her and broke into a sprint. “Sev!” she shouted down the empty corridor. “Severus!”

Severus dashed out from behind a pillar and grabbed her hands, searching her face for a sign of the
answer to his question. “Well?”
“There’s an antidote,” she said, grinning ear to ear. “You can figure out how to brew the potion, right?”
Severus smiled proudly. “Absolutely. C’mon, careful on the staircase, I don’t think our spell ever quite wore off.”
Lily laughed. “Potter had a bruise on his forehead for a week. He kept telling people he’d gotten in a fight with something in the Forbidden Forest, I think. Mary almost believed him.”
“Really?” Severus asked, with a sly grin. “Perhaps it was a werewolf.”
Lily just laughed and shook her head at him. “You always come up with the strangest things.”
“Do I?” Severus asked. “I dunno. There are plenty of rumors about those werewolves, you know.”
“I’m sure there aren’t any in the Forbidden Forest, Sev. Dumbledore would’ve said something.”
“You have so much faith in people,” Severus said.
“And you don’t,” Lily arched an eyebrow. “Because you’re so bitter.”
“As bad firewhiskey,” Severus said, smiling slightly at her. She grinned, with freckled cheeks and bright eyes.
“Are we really going to go through with this?”
“Hopefully.”
Lily grinned. “Alright then. Here’s to seeing James Potter cry.”

It was a month before Severus brewed the perfect Draught of Living Death, bottled it, and handed it discreetly to Lily during Potions one bright and warm afternoon. The Marauders were wrestling over a note James had written in his Potions textbook and didn’t glance over for a second.
James fell against Lily’s cauldron on her desk, the sleeve of his robes brushing into her expertly brewed potion.
Lily pulled a face. “Potter, kindly get your arm out of my potion before Slughorn comes back.”
“Is he gone?” James asked. “I hardly noticed. Well, I guess that gives us an opportunity to,” he turned around and rested his elbows on her desk. “Get to know each other better.”
“I’ll set your bloody arm on fire.” Lily hissed.
“Fine, fine. See you around, Evans,” James stood and walked away from her, immediately grabbing onto Remus’s arm and whining into his ear, “her hair smells like strawberries. Strawberries! I could die.”
Remus laughed. Lily was glaring at James across the room, her green eyes glinting with fury.
“Can we change the plan?” she whispered to Severus. “And give the Draught of Living Death to Potter instead of Black?”
“We’d miss Potter crying his eyes out in front of the whole Great Hall.” Their plan was complicated and, in Lily’s opinion, almost too horrible to go through with. While slipping Sirius a bit of the Draught of Living Death and leaving him somewhere for James to find while everyone else was eating dinner was dangerous, and terribly risky, Severus was confident in his skills, and certain that once James eventually was forced to eat by their gluttonous friend Peter, and spent all of dinner verbally lamenting this tragedy, Severus and Lily could give Sirius the antidote and leave the distraught James looking a fool.
“Alright, alright. But if Potter doesn’t cry his bloody eyes out, I’m blaming you. Besides, what if it doesn’t work?”
“Lily, we’ve known each other for years. Do I ever fail at Potions?”
“No,” Lily grumbled. “But it only takes once.”
Severus smiled at her. “It’ll be fine. Trust me.”
“I do.”
"Good luck." Severus whispered as he walked Lily back to Gryffindor Tower, his arm linked in hers. "I don’t need luck. I just need Remus to be distracted." Lily rolled her eyes. "If he sees the potion, the whole plan’s ruined."

"Why Remus?" Severus asked, with a mildly confused grin at her.

"We were friends. He knows me." Lily said. "And if he catches me trying to slip a potion to Black, it’ll be over before it starts." She was almost hoping Remus would catch her -- doubts were beginning to spiral through her mind. Perhaps this is a bad idea...this could kill Sirius, maybe we shouldn’t... Despite her doubts, she held her tongue. Severus would never understand.

"Alright — I trust you, Lily," Lily laughed nervously. "I really hope this works and we don’t, y’know, accidentally kill anyone."

"If we do, I’m telling everyone you made me do it." Severus joked, his head held high for once in his life, his shoulders relaxed and posture confident in a stance that was quite uncharacteristic for him. "As if they’d believe you.” she rolled her eyes, fingers tapping on the seal of the potion. "I’ll be back in a minute. Have the antidote ready, alright?"

Severus glanced over his shoulder at her as he slunk away into the shadows, where she stood, the light shining on her hair and casting a bright halo around her head.

"Potter," she said coolly as she walked into the common room, linking arms with Mary and Marlene. Both of her friends were giggling hysterically, and she elbowed them to keep them quiet.

"Alright, Evans?" James asked, leaning his chin on his hand.

Lily blanched and raced up the stairs to her dorm, the potion still clutched tightly in her hand. "Wonder what that’s about," James said nonchalantly.

Remus glanced up the stairs where Lily had been only moments before. "She’s planning something," he said, eyes widening as he looked over at James and Sirius. "We can’t go to the Great Hall tonight."

Sirius looked up. "Why?"

"Lily’s planning something. It involves a potion, I saw it in her hand."

="And...that relates to the Great Hall...in what way?" James asked.

"She’ll put it in someone’s food." Remus said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"What do you think it is?" Peter asked. "Why would she do that?"

"My guess?" Remus rubbed his eyes in frustration. "Severus."

"Oh, bloody hell." Sirius said. "We’ll ignore whatever it is they’re doing, it’s not like they’re going to kill us."

"I was thinking more in the vein of extreme public humiliation." Remus said. "Although, knowing Severus’s extremely skewed moral compass and Lily’s bad decision making, death is a likely result."

Sirius shrugged. "I say we go for it. James deserves whatever it is they’re doing as he cancelled the prank," he glared at James, dark eyes full of joking anger, "out of love."

James opened his mouth to protest. "That’s ridiculous —"

"Save it, we’ve had this conversation before." Sirius snapped. "Remus, you’re being paranoid, Evans has no personal vendetta against anyone but our Jamie here, and we’ll protect him. Ah," he accepted a cup of tea from Frank as the older boy walked through the portrait hole carrying a large tray of teacups. "Haven’t seen you in a while, Frank. How’ve you been?"

"Busy with N.E.W.T.s and such," Frank shrugged. "Anyone else for tea? Lily was making some in the kitchens."

"Don’t drink it!" Peter stood, shaking, to snatch the teacup from Remus’s hand and throw it, in a fit of dramatics, onto the ground. It shattered, tea sinking through the rug.

"You two are conspiracy theorists," Sirius remarked, and took a sip of his tea before either of them could protest. "You’ve had some, right, Frank?"
“Yes. It’s just tea, you two, don’t worry. Oi, Remus, how’s the rabbit?”
“The — the what?” Remus blinked.
“We told him you’ve got a rabbit.” James whispered.
“Right! Oh, it’s fine,” Remus smiled tightly, with an annoyed glance at James. “Much better behaved now.”
“Excellent. Do I remember correctly that its name is Moony?” Frank asked.
“You do,” Remus said, shooting a look at James and Sirius.
Sirius took another sip of his tea. “Mm,” he said. “This does look a bit off. James, is your tea smoking green as well?”
“What? Of course not —” James looked into Sirius’s teacup to see his tea perfectly normal, if a bit cold. “Bloody hell, you nearly gave me a heart attack,” he chuckled.
Sirius winked.
“Alright, well, Lily asked me to bring this up to the girl’s dormitory, so I should —“ Frank turned to the staircase to the girl’s dormitory and had barely put one foot on it before the staircase turned before his eyes into a slide and sent him tumbling, head over tea tray, back into the common room.
“Oh,” Frank said weakly, struggling to sit up. He glanced around him at the spilled tea, which had formed a puddle that looked oddly like blood when paired with the red carpet in the common room.
“Didn’t know that was going to happen.”
“In seven years you never tried to get into the girl’s dormitory?” Sirius asked. "Mate, you have some issues."
“I’m a respectable bloke, I’ll have you know —“ Frank said indignantly, a bit of tea running from his hair down into his face.
“Yeah, aren’t we all,” James remarked. “Hey —“ he looked over at Frank, who was now lying quite still on the floor, almost as if dead. “Oh, Merlin."
Lily stood at the top of the staircase, her eyes wide. “Bloody hell,” she said, her hands in a death grip on the railing.
“What did you put in the tea, Lily?” Peter demanded, trembling like a frightened animal, but standing his ground nonetheless.
“I didn’t — well, alright, I did, but I — I’m sorry, I didn’t realize — it was meant for Sirius, Frank must’ve given you the wrong bloody teacup —“ she buried her face in her hands. “This was such a terrible idea, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”
“Why is she crying?” James whispered to Sirius. "He isn't dead."
“Dunno, girls cry.” Sirius shrugged.
“You lot are insufferable,” Remus said, kneeling next to the motionless Frank and cleaning broken teacup shards off his face.
“Snivelly made the potion, yeah, Evans?” James asked.
Lily nodded and wiped at her eyes.
“Then, though I loathe to admit it, it was likely made properly. So they can reverse it with some Wigenweld Potion, no problem,” James said casually.
“No problem?” Peter squeaked. “No problem?"
“Yeah, works like a charm. Someone slipped the Draught of Living Death to my dad once,” James said. “He made a full recovery, we have a whole cupboard full of antidotes in case one of his experiments goes wrong. Evans, you’ve got the antidote?"
Lily looked at him and blinked a few times. “Er, yeah, yeah. I do -- Severus does. You’re… surprisingly relaxed.”
James laughed for what seemed to be an unnecessary length of time. “You’re hilarious, Evans. Quickly with the antidote, though, I’m not entirely sure how long our Frank will survive if Snivellus made even the slightest of mistakes with this potion. Awful idea, that,”
“I know,” Lily sighed and dashed out of the common room, jumping through the portrait hole.
“Severus!” she shouted, tears streaming down her face. “Severus, it didn’t —“
Severus stopped her with a hand on her shoulder, looking her steadily in the eyes. “What’s wrong, Lily?” he asked in his soft, quiet voice. It held a tone of menace, now that Lily listened to it
differently. A streak of some indescribable coldness.
“Sev — we made a mistake, we shouldn’t have done this,” she said, her lip quivering. “Frank —”
“Who?”
“A prefect, he’s quite nice,” Lily explained quickly, her voice shaking. She couldn't get the image of
poor Frank lying on the ground, shattered teacups all around him. “But he drank the Draught of
Living Death, and we need the antidote, and — and,” she bit her lip. “We shouldn’t have done this, I
can’t believe we did this —”
“It’s going to be alright,” Severus assured her, pressing the antidote into her hand. “Lily, don’t
worry. Everything’s alright.”
“This is our fault,” she said, her hands shaking. “This is our fault, Sev, I can’t believe we did this —
“Lily, listen to me. If we get caught, I’ll take the blame for it. It wasn’t your fault. It was my idea.”
Lily squeezed her eyes shut tightly. “We can’t do this anymore, Sev. We can’t.”
“Do what?”
“This. Anything to do with those prats. Other people get hurt when they’re around. I know,” she held
up a hand to keep him from arguing. ”I don’t like them any more than you do, but we can’t put
people in danger like this anymore, Sev — we can’t!”
“Lily,” Severus said, his eyes pleading with her.
She shook her head and took off running again, hair streaming out behind her. “I’m sorry,” she
called, without looking back at him.
Severus stared after her, helpless.

“I can’t believe how calm you were back there,” Peter said to James around a mouthful of chicken at
dinner. He had one hand on Remus's arm, as the other boy was wringing his hands and pushing his
food around his plate without eating it.
James snorted. “Please, I was just showing off for Evans. I thought Longbottom was dead.”
“Really?” Remus asked.
“A bit, honestly.” James rolled his eyes. “Evans cries like a girl, though.”
“Well, in case you hadn’t noticed, Evans is a girl.” Sirius said, searching his friend’s face for some
sign of any feeling. He looked at the other boy, this boy who was so different from him and yet so
similar, who would do anything for the people he cared about and nothing for the people he didn’t,
and he thought that something in James’s eyes had changed. Something important.
“James, you look exhausted,” Peter commented.
James sighed and ran a hand through his hair. It flopped back over his forehead haphazardly. “Nah,
I’m good,” he gave a little smile. “Have you seen Evans and Snivellus?”
“No,” Sirius said. “I think Evans is feeling a bit guilty —” he stopped, suddenly, his eyes going
round and wide. “James, James!” he grabbed onto James’ arm. “If you really want her to like you, I
know where you can find her. I've just remembered --"
“What?”
“The Astronomy Tower, she goes there when she’s —"”
“Upset,” Remus finished for Sirius, remembering Marlene telling him that in their brief stint as
friends. “How did you know?”
“Er...” Sirius tugged at his sleeves, pulling them down over his wrists. “No reason. If you were
willing to talk to her, it could put an end to this. Just like you wanted.”
James looked up at Dumbledore, who was talking in quiet and concerned tones with McGonagall. “I
think it already is over,” he said. “I’ll go.” And maybe she’ll like me then, and maybe she’ll see how I
feel about her...or if all else fails I can hex Snivellus in the face. James shrugged.
“Good luck,” Peter smiled at James. James shook his head.
“Don’t need luck,” he muttered, his words slurring together in exhaustion. “Need Evans.”

“Evans?” James climbed the stairs to the Astronomy Tower, his hands shaking at his sides. “Evans,
are you up here?”
She stood, tears stained down her face. “Potter,” she sniffed, folding her arms across her chest. “This is usually Black’s chosen place to have a good cry.”

“Sirius doesn’t cry,” James lied.

“Everyone cries. Including you, looks like.”

“Me?” James snorted. “I’m just here to see you.”

“This isn’t really the time to be asking me out, Potter.” she snapped. “Someone nearly died today.”

“Frank’s going to be fine.”

“I know.” Lily took a cautious step toward him.

“What did you think was going to happen? You would do that to Sirius and I would sit back and watch, I wouldn’t — Evans,” he shook his head. “You don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

“Get out, Potter.”

“You think it’s bad enough that you almost killed Frank? It could’ve been Sirius, it could’ve been Remus or Peter, and if it had been any one of them I swear —” James grabbed her by the shoulders, suddenly aware it was the first time he’d ever touched her so directly. Her eyes were very green up close, and full of tears and an anger that ran deeper than James had known. “I don’t care that you hate me, Evans, I’m not too fon of you and your greasy boyfriend either. I would have —” he wanted to cry, and he was shaking her and she was standing there stiffly with a fury that grew in her eyes like a fire, and it all felt like it was over. “I’d’ve killed you,” he hissed.

“Your breath smells like a liar’s,” Lily said coldly. “You’re weak, Potter, nothing worse than a stubbed toe has ever happened to you.”

“Or you,” James arched an eyebrow.

Lily looked him in the face and inhaled sharply, pushing his hands from her shoulders. “I hate you,” she said with such vehemence it surprised even her. “You’re a prat and you don’t care for anyone but your stupid mates.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Oh, am I? When was the last time you were nice to anyone —”

“I’m nice to plenty of people.”

“You were so calm when Frank had just taken the Draught of Living Death one would think you didn’t care.”

“Of course I do.” James said. “Just because I don’t show it doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

“If it had been me —”

“What if it had been you? I still would’ve made sure you got the antidote, I’m not a monster —”

“You’re only saying that because you think you love me!” Lily shouted, pushing a chair onto the ground where it fell, satisfying, with a loud thumping noise. “What if it had been Severus?” She demanded. ”Don't you dare tell me you would've done a thing to help him.”

James’s face took on a flat and heartless countenance which reminded Lily oddly of Sirius when he was upset, when he would hide every emotion in his face and take on the Black family persona. Uncaring. “I would’ve let him sleep forever.” James insisted, not knowing, even in his own mind, if it were true.

Lily turned away from him and sprinted down the stairs.

“Go to hell, Evans!” James roared after her.

“You wish!”
“Lily,” Slughorn looked at her with a disappointment that made Lily want to cry. He glanced at McGonagall, who looked furious enough to fly into a rage and push both Lily and Severus out the window. Lily almost wished she would. “Lily, why would you do something like this?” Slughorn asked, his small, watery eyes pleading for her to tell him she hadn’t slipped the Draught of Living Death to Frank Longbottom and it had all been a misunderstanding.

“It was my idea,” Severus said. “I wanted revenge on Potter —“

“What does Mr. Potter have to do with this?” McGonagall asked, her voice so cold it could have turned the Black Lake to ice.

“Nothing. He wasn’t involved,” Lily said quickly. Severus gave her an odd look.

“Potter and Black were plotting something — so I thought if we pranked them before they pranked us —“

“You call this a prank?” Slughorn spluttered. “I hate to take points from my own house —“

“And I from mine,” McGonagall said, with another steely glare at Lily and Severus. “But I believe we must. Fifty points from each of you.”

“Fifty?” Severus demanded, outraged.

“Yes. And you’re lucky it wasn’t more.”

Slughorn seemed to have been rendered immobile by guilt at having told Lily the antidote to the Draught of Living Death, as McGonagall went on to demand of Lily and Severus where they had learned the Wiggenweld Potion and how they had prepared it without Slughorn’s help.

“Professor, we read about it —“

“In the Restricted Section?” McGonagall asked, one eyebrow arched. “Which, as the name implies, is off limits unless given express permission?”

“Yes, but —“ Lily said weakly. She sighed. “I’m sorry, Professor. It was a terrible idea.” She bit her lip, fighting not to cry.

“I forced her to do it,” Severus said loudly. Lily wouldn’t look at him. “I wanted revenge on Potter and Black, and I went a bit too far. Lily had nothing to do with it.”

“A bit too far is an understatement,” Slughorn said, his large mustache quivering. “I can’t speak for Professor McGonagall, but I recommend detentions for both of you.”

McGonagall nodded curtly. “You will receive detentions twice a week for the next month in order to think about the consequences of your actions. And Miss Evans, I recommend you use your judgement in the future.”

“Will do, Professor.”

“Dead? What d’you mean, dead?” James demanded. McGonagall’s niece, who went solely by M as apparently her full name was too horrendous to say out loud, sighed.

“I mean what I said. I don’t like this any more than you do, but my aunt told me I had to tell the whole Quidditch team before the feast tonight so it doesn’t come as a surprise when Dumbledore talks about him.”

“Professor McGiggles,” Sirius commented.

“This is no laughing matter, Black,” M snapped, looking like a younger, albeit much more angry, version of the professor.

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said sincerely. “We’re sorry, aren’t we, boys?”

Both Peter and Remus nodded, but James ignored them.

“He can’t be dead! What are we going to do about Quidditch? What even happened?” James demanded.

“Who died?” Peter whispered in Remus’s ear.

“James’ Quidditch captain,” Remus replied. “James, it’ll be alright,” he said, putting a hand on James’ shoulder.
M sighed. “I’ve told the whole team and all you lot care about is Quidditch,” she sighed, seeming as if she wanted to cry, or possibly hex James into the ground. “He was an actual person, you know. A good one.”

“I know,” James said, looking at the ground. Alix, their Quidditch captain — best they’d ever had, apparently — was dead. How could he be dead? He wasn’t even of age, and Hogwarts was so safe… “What happened to him? He wasn’t sick —“

“You remember the last practice all the third years missed for your exams?” M asked, her usually sharp eyes looking dull and grieving.

“Obviously,”

“He took a bludger to the head and he would’ve been fine, but no one managed to catch him when he fell off his broom, and well…”

“He died in front of you?” James asked in horror. It hadn’t sunk in, it wasn’t possible, Alix had been fine and he couldn’t just be gone...

“No, but we took him to the hospital wing, and he -- we thought he’d get better, and Madam Pomfrey said she could help him… but apparently something went wrong last night and he just… died.” She sniffed, but wouldn’t cry in front of James, or anyone else.

“Oh, no, M —“ James threw his arms around her, looking small and young for the first time since she’d known him.

“It’s alright, don’t make a fuss,” she said, holding her head high with shining tear-filled eyes. “We’ll get along just fine.”

“Dead,” James repeated. “Alix is dead — I’ve never known anyone who’s died before,” he looked at Sirius. “Not in my life.”

Sirius sighed. “I know, mate. C’mon, we should go.”

“I don’t want to make her tell everyone else alone — M, who haven’t you told?”

“Just MacDonald.”

“I’ll tell her,” James said dutifully.

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it might be the last time I saw him.”
“Don’t worry about it,” Sirius said, uncharacteristically gentle. “James, don’t worry about it — it isn’t your fault.”
“But maybe if I’d been there —“
“You were taking a Potions test, what would you have done?” Peter asked, somewhat bitterly. He was furious at himself for being angry when this wasn’t about him or why his friends would never treat him the way he treated them, it wasn’t about James or Peter or anyone, it was about a boy who had died in a Quidditch practice accident by chance and chance alone.
“Missed it. If I’d known what was going to happen —“ James swallowed past the lump in his throat as the Marauders started up the staircase for the common room. “I would’ve tried to do something. It’s a Quidditch team full of people good at Quidditch and significantly less good at casting spells. I could’ve tried to stop him from hitting the ground, at least — maybe he would’ve lived —“
“Do you really think —“
“I don’t know!” James yelled. “But I would’ve done anything to keep him alive, I swear, I would’ve —“
“James, this is not your fault,” Sirius insisted.
“I didn’t even know he was in the hospital wing —“ James sunk down on the stairs, putting his head in his hands. “It’s not just that. Alix is — was — one of the only people I have any respect for, you know, aside from my parents and McGonagall and maybe Dumbledore, and I just…I,” James shook his head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so upset.”
Remus and Sirius exchanged a look, light eyes meeting dark, both of them realizing that this was the most upset they’d ever seen James about something that didn’t involve any of the Marauders, and it was this that made everything worse.
“Don’t apologize,” Peter said. “James, it’s going to be alright.”
“I know,” James shook his head, his eyes shining with tears. He pressed his lips together to keep from crying. “I can’t — I have to go,” he stood, looking less and less like himself with every passing second, and he drifted away, up the staircase, more ghost than person.
“I’ll get him,” Sirius said, and Remus and Peter went their separate ways — Remus to go find Mary MacDonald and tell her what had happened to Alix, and Peter to their room to cry for his dad, for Alix, but mostly for James, who they had all hoped would never have to feel what he now felt.

The end of their third year turned James Potter from a laughing, pranking, brilliant young wizard to a shadow of a boy, who woke earlier even than the new captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, to fly in circles around the pitch, each time swearing more and more vehemently that he would be the best Quidditch player the world had ever seen. For Alix, he had to. He owed it to the team.
Sirius, Remus, and Peter hadn't seen James in a week by breakfast on the last day of the school year, and without him, they barely spoke to each other.
“I miss James,” Peter sighed.
“Me too,” Remus replied. In James’s absence, all three of them seemed to have shrunk, slumped over, their eyes hollowed and demeanors hushed.
Sirius shook his head. “I don’t miss the prat.” This of course was a lie, and hardly believable at that. “He’s become obsessed with Quidditch, we’re his best mates and he speaks to MacDonald more than he speaks to us.”
“I miss the way he used to be,” Peter sighed, looking sadly at James' normal seat at the Gryffindor table.
“Someone he respected died — I understand, I really do,” Remus said. “He just needs time.”
“He’s had time,” Sirius grumbled. “When Peter’s father died, did he gripe and groan about it for all this time? Of course not! He bloody moved on with his life.”
Peter sighed. “It was much more difficult for my mum than it was for me, and besides, it's different for James.” This, at least, was something they could all agree on.
“I just wish James would get over it,” Sirius complained. “We’re his mates, we’re here for him,”
“I think we have to give him a bit longer to get over it,”
Both Peter and Sirius groaned. “See, this is the part where I would look at James and tell him he has poor choice in friends,” Sirius said, stabbing pats of butter as he spread them on his toast. “But he isn’t here,” his face fell. "He should be here.”

Mere seconds later, James’ owl swept over the Great Hall and hovered for a moment, hesitating as its eyes searched for James. It dropped the Daily Prophet and two letters from James’ parents in front of Sirius, pecking at his hands.

Sirius picked them up and tapped the Daily Prophet against the owl's beak. “I suppose I should be getting this to James, then,” he picked up his toast and took a bite out of it. “But on an unrelated note, if I were to try to avoid a distraught Quidditch player and leave the letters from his parents on his bed and steal his paper, where would I not go?”

“Well, if you don’t step foot outside the castle, you should be alright,” Remus said dryly. “Last I checked, he was flying in circles around the Astronomy Tower again.”

Sirius groaned. “Oh, bloody hell. He’ll make himself sick doing that.”

Remus raised his eyebrows. “You’re sounding a bit worried.”

“Me? No. James Potter is as good as dead to me.”

“Doubt it,” Peter shrugged.

“Ah, me too,” Sirius said. “I’ll talk to him. Maybe we’ll have our fearless leader back by the time we get on the train.”

“One can hope,” Remus commented.
“Potter, get your stupid arse out of the sky, would you?” Sirius yelled. James flew around one of the spires of the castle, hair blowing about his unreadable face, and swept down towards Sirius. “What do you want?” James muttered. He leaned against his broomstick and waited, dark circles under his eyes. “I don’t know…er, well, Peter misses you,” Sirius said, suddenly unsure of what to say. James chuckled. “He does, does he?” “We haven’t spoken in a week.” Sirius said loudly, unable to stand the silence which now existed between them. “Well, that’s just not true. Just the other day I asked you to pass the Treacle Tart.” James said, with an attempt at his usual smirk. “Jamie,” Sirius said. “It’s the end of the year. We’re all tired of not speaking to you — even McGonagall looks annoyed that she doesn’t have to tell you off anymore. Please, James,” James sighed. “Well, mate, all you had to do was ask.” “Liar,” Sirius said. “You know, if you want to have breakfast with us, I’m sure Peter’s stored enough crumbs on his shirt for another meal by now.” James grinned and shook his head. “Alright, alright, I see your point. Look — it was really hard for me when Alix…” he rubbed the back of his head and sighed. “Anyway. I swear I — I couldn’t talk to you, I just — I wasn’t ready, I’m sorry, Siri, I’m sorry.” Sirius sighed. “James, it’s alright.”

Fleamont and Euphemia Potter stood on Platform 9 and 3/4, hands clasped, waiting for their son as the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station — and despite all their fears, there he was, stepping off the train with a smile, talking animatedly with the other Marauders with a carefree smile on his face. “Oh, look, it’s my parents,” James said with a grin. “Haven’t seen them in ages, I’ll be back in a moment, hang on —” he ran towards his parents and hugged both of them tightly, kissing his mother on the cheek. “Mum, Dad, it’s so good to see you!” “Jamie,” Mrs. Potter said affectionately, glancing up at her husband. James looked up and recoiled from his parents, eyes wide. “I saw that look, Mum, what’s wrong?” “Oh, hell, here it comes,” Sirius muttered. “What?” Peter asked. “Well, knowing Euphemia, she’s worried about something our Jamie either has or hasn’t done, and there’s about to be a Potter family dispute,” Sirius said knowledgeably. “I have witnessed my share of them. James yells, Fleamont yells, Euphemia yells, their house elf cries, the cat screeches — it’s quite loud.” “And what do you do during these family disputes, Sirius?” Remus asked with a wry smirk. “Well, I just sit back and watch. It’s better than Quidditch.” Sirius replied. “Oh, look, Fleamont’s decided he’s got to say it. This should be interesting.” “James, we haven’t heard from you in a month,” Mr. Potter was saying, looking quite distressed. “Ah, that,” James said. “Well, perhaps that’s a conversation for off the platform. Sirius, have you decided if you’re staying with us?” “My parents are here,” Sirius said, shifting his eyes in the direction of his family, who seemed to be draining the light from the sun itself with their disdain for the families around them. “And my lovely mother is giving me the eye of evil, so I believe I should go home with them.” “Alright, well, stop by any time you like,” Mrs. Potter said, ruffling Sirius’s hair. “I’ll keep your room ready.” “Thanks,” Sirius grinned, his eyes lighting up with genuine affection for the Potters. “Sirius!” Mr. Black hissed, beckoning his son towards him. Sirius gave a long-suffering sigh and a last glance at the Marauders before holding his head high and stalking over to his parents. The
change in him was noticeable, the difference between their Sirius and Sirius Black. “You can’t be seen fraternizing with blood traitors.” Sirius’s father hissed.

“Well, then you can’t be seen fraternizing with me, can you? If that’s all, I think I’ll be going.” Sirius said coldly. “Oh, hello, Regulus.”

Regulus nodded curtly at his brother.

“Sirius, I have missed you,” Mrs. Black said.

“I’m sure you haven’t,” Sirius said, but allowed himself to be hugged rather stiffly by his mother.

“We haven’t heard a word from you since the dog incident.” Mr. Black said, clamping a cold hand onto Sirius's back. Sirius froze, his face becoming stiff, but he kept his tone neutral.

“Ah yes, the infamous dog. Well, I don’t care to explain, as I don’t know exactly how there came to be a dog in my bed.”

“And where were you when this was happening, might I ask?” Regulus arched an eyebrow.

Sirius glared at him. “I was with James.”

“Well, we should be off, then, shouldn’t we?” Sirius asked, his voice rising.

It was perfectly wonderful, Mother,” Regulus said.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Don’t bother to ask me, Mother, it was fantastic, there was an attempt on my life by the worst bloke on this earth and his ridiculous girlfriend which ended up putting a friend of mine in the hospital wing. Then James’ Quidditch captain died and he wouldn’t speak to any of us for a few weeks. I had such a lovely end of third year that I think I’d just rather stay at school and continue it for the rest of my life, really.” Better than spending summer holidays with this lot, he thought, but held his tongue.

“Now, Sirius —“ Mr. Black said.

“For Merlin’s sake —“

“Don’t take that tone with me!” Mr. Black hissed. “We’re leaving. Come on.”

Sirius looked back at Remus, who was standing next to his parents, each of whom had a hand on his shoulder. Sirius smiled slightly, aware that Remus was looking at him with a sort of pity that made his stomach twist.

The two of them watched each other for a moment, and Sirius found himself wanting to leave his parents and run towards Remus, to shake the sympathy from his eyes, to do anything, something... But he didn’t — he turned away, still aware that Remus was watching him, and followed his parents out of the station.

________________________________________________________________

“James,

I know we don’t usually write to each other during the summer, but I had to tell you that everything is wonderful here. My parents are being lovely and so is Regulus. I certainly haven’t broken the International Statute of Secrecy or received a threat that I may be expelled if I do it again.

Everything is fine, and I absolutely don’t need to see you or the others immediately or ever again for that matter. I don’t miss any of you at all, in fact I don’t want to remain friends with any of you when we return to Hogwarts. I don’t need you.” Mrs. Potter read from Sirius’s neatly sealed letter which had arrived early in the morning.

“Mum,” James whined, stepping around their house elf as she scurried to set the table. “Sirius would never say that.”

“And yet here we are,” Mrs. Potter said.

“Oh, give me that,” James snapped, and snatched the letter from his mother’s hand. ” Merlin,”

“Let me guess,” Mrs. Potter said. “I didn’t actually make up the contents of his letter.”

“I don’t think Sirius wrote this,” James said, studying it closely. “Something must be wrong.”

“Monty, our son is functioning at an extremely high level this morning.” Mrs. Potter called.

“Excellent,” Mr. Potter responded. “So, James, what’s caused your brain to cease function this
“You’re so cruel when you’re worried,” James muttered. “It’s Sirius.”

“Yes, I imagine it is a very serious —“

“No, Sirius Black, as in my best mate and your part-time son.” James sighed. “He’s written me this letter — it doesn’t sound like him, something must have happened.”

“If you want to go see him, you can.” Mrs. Potter said. "Don't worry, Jamie, I'm sure he's alright.”

“I wonder what they’ve done to him this time,” James said miserably. “He always goes back to them, even when he’s safer here.”

“Sometimes when you love someone, you keep going back to them even if you know it’s a bad idea,” Mrs. Potter said. “Even if there’s a better way.”

“Sirius doesn’t love them. They treat him like he’s nothing, Mum, you should see —“ James’ hazel eyes went wide as he realized he couldn’t tell his parents what Sirius's family would do to him, much less what Sirius would do to himself. “Er, never mind.”

“He probably does love them,” Mrs. Potter said. “Even if he doesn’t know he does. He’s grown up with them, and although he’s rejected their horrible lives, he’s not just going to stop missing them. Even if he only misses the idea of a family.”

“I wish he’d come stay with us,” James said. “What should I write back? ‘Sirius, I know your parents have made you write this awful letter and as fascinated as I am by how you managed to break the International Statute of Secrecy, I think you’d best tell me in the comfort of my home and not yours.’?”

“What are you talking about, Jamie?” Mrs. Potter asked.

“Oh,” James tugged at the ends of his hair. “My Quidditch coach died of an injury about a month before the end of term.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Mr. Potter asked.

“Er, that’s not important, is it?” James asked.

“That’s such a horrible thing to say, Jamie. Weren’t you upset?” Mrs. Potter asked.

“I was,” James said. “But not anymore.”

“Not anymore?” Mr. Potter inquired.

“I was miserable, but I feel better now, I do.” James said. “And Sirius is the reason for that, and I owe it to him to save him from those dreadful people.”

“We’ll all go to their house together this afternoon to see them, James.” Mr. Potter said.

“It won’t work. I have to go alone and get Sirius out of there, otherwise they’ll never let him leave.”

“I don’t like the idea of you in that house by yourself,” Mrs. Potter said.

“I won’t be by myself. I’ll be with Sirius.”

Sirius was lying on his bedroom floor, head spinning, throat burning with firewhiskey when James found him.

“What are…?” he asked, hearing footsteps echo through his head as James walked over and knelt next to him, leaning his broomstick against the wall. Sirius took a deep breath — he’d known it was James, before he looked up or opened his eyes, from the light footsteps and the tapping fingers against the handle of his wand in his robes. “James,” he sighed, not getting up.

“What did you think I was going to do? That letter was ridiculous.” James said. “Obviously you didn’t write it.”

“Obviously,” Sirius chuckled dryly. “How did you get here?”

“Flew,”

“Through the window?” Sirius asked.
“What else?” James rested his feet on Sirius's bed. “Talk to me, Siri, what happened?”

“Nothing happened. My parents are downstairs, James, you have to go.”

“You really think I’m going to leave you here?” James asked.

“Had to ask, didn’t I?” Sirius said.

“You keep coming back here, and every time, you get hurt. Sirius, you know you have to stop, don’t you?”

“Later,” Sirius said, reaching for an empty bottle of firewhiskey. “Right now I’d like to get more drunk and jump off the roof, if you don’t mind.”

“Siri,” James said. “Please, just come home.”

“I am home.” Sirius said.

“Sirius, this place isn’t safe for you. Please, please, I’m begging you here, mate. You have to leave with me, right now.”

“I can’t,” Sirius said. “Jamie, I’m sorry.”

“Why do you always do this?” James asked, kicking Sirius’s desk chair onto the ground in frustration. It landed with a clatter, upside down, all four legs sticking up in the air like a petrified animal. “Merlin, it’s like you want them to hurt you! You talk about how you hate them and you keep going back.”

“Well, maybe I do want them to,” Sirius muttered.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Sirius?” James demanded.

Sirius shrugged.

“I don’t care,” Sirius said, his voice shaking. “Worry for me all you like, but I can’t come back with you.”

James grabbed Sirius’s wrist — he could feel, for the first time in almost a year, the fresh wounds oozing blood down his arm. Sirius flinched and pulled away, the manic light in his eyes flickering and going out. “I’m sorry.”

“What did they do this time?” James asked, moving the bottles of fire whiskey away from Sirius. He put his hands on Sirius’s shoulders, helping him to sit against the bed. Sirius sighed. “This is how it always goes, you know. You come save me from whatever it is my parents did, and I go back to them, and you never stop. I don’t deserve your help.” He leaned against James, swallowing past the lump in his throat. “You’re a good family, you and Moony and Pete. Better than them.”

“I know,” James said, taking Sirius’s hand gently, rubbing circles on his palm. “It’s going to be alright, I swear.”

“I can’t do this without you,” Sirius said, at last meeting James’ eyes. “Come back with me, Siri, my mum and dad will take care of you.”

“I know they will,” Sirius said. “But I can’t leave Regulus here…he’s…too soft to believe what they’re really like, but with me gone they’ll go for him, and I won’t…” Sirius closed his eyes. “I won’t let him turn out like me, I don’t want him to feel like this.”

“He let them do this to you?”

“What did they do to me? Nothing, I did this…I did…” Sirius stretched his bleeding arm in front of him, weakly trying to show the evidence to James. James looked away, burning with rage at Sirius’s parents.

“Why?” James asked, almost reaching for the wand in his pocket before remembering where he was.

“This is who I am, James, I’m a bloody maniac with maniac parents.”

James shook his head. “This isn’t who you are. Please come with me,” Sirius nodded and allowed James to help him to his feet. James helped him onto his broom, shakily lifting off the ground and flying through the large, open window into the red sky, darkest near the horizon. James found himself thinking, without reason or logic, of Lily Evans. They flew high above the rows of houses, away from Muggle eyes, and James thought that Lily would have known what to do better than he would. Maybe she could have stopped Sirius from going back to Grimmauld Place and putting himself in danger for what James
prayed would be the last time.
Two young wizards on a broomstick landed with a thump in the Potters’ garden, one with tears in his eyes and fire whiskey on his breath, the other struggling to keep his friend standing.

James helped Sirius to the couch and looked desperately up at his mother. “I don’t know what happened,” he said wildly. “I don’t know what they did to him, I know it was awful, it’s always awful…” he buried his face in his hands. *Alix is dead, and I could’ve done something, if I’d just been there…Sirius is hurt and I can’t do anything about it…I can’t get him away from his parents…*

“James, this isn’t your fault,” Mr. Potter said, enveloping his son in a hug.

“Yes it is!” James said, straining against his father’s arms. “It is my fault, I could’ve stopped this from happening again.”

“What were you going to do?” Sirius asked blearily from the couch. He lay in stiff, miserable agony, but his face remained entirely calm. “You against my parents? You’d be killed, James.”

“Nice to see how little faith you have in me,” James said.

“Jamie, I have all the faith in the whole bloody world, but you couldn’t’ve…”

James kicked his parents’ best table, the toe of his shoe creating a long scratch across the wood.

“Mum, Dad, tell him he could have just stayed with us.”

Sirius waited for them to respond, one eyebrow arched.

“Of course you could, Sirius —“ Mr. Potter said earnestly.

“Right, then, you see?” James insisted. “You make bloody terrible decisions, mate.”

“James, don’t say things like that —“ Mrs. Potter said in Sirius’s defense.

“Euphemia, I hate to tell you he’s right.” Sirius said, and his voice took on a soft, apologetic tone which he hardly used with anyone else. “I’m sorry to worry you.”

Euphemia reached over and pulled a blanket around Sirius’s shoulders. “We’re just glad you’re safe.”

Sirius nodded, with a vague wondering why he didn’t feel as if he was, with the Potters around him.

“Alright, Mum, I think Sirius needs to sleep,” James said, taking Sirius’s hand and pulling him up the stairs.

“Sirius, you just let us know if you need anything,” Mr. Potter said, seething, like his son, with rage at the Blacks and their horrific mistreatment of their son.

Sirius nodded briefly and walked up the stairs, making a show of hiding his pain by slinging his arm around James’s shoulder.

“You look like a ghost, Sirius, what did they do to you?” James asked as Sirius lay down on his bed. This room, Sirius thought blearily, was more home than his own house had ever been. This boy in front of him was more of a brother than Regulus was. “Nothing I didn’t deserve,” he said, watching James’s stricken face. “I made a bloody stupid comment and my parents reacted as well as you might expect.”

“What about ‘I certainly didn’t break the International Statute of Secrecy’?” James asked.

“Right,” Sirius said, managing a twisted expression which looked almost like a smile. “I sort of…well, I forgot where I was and I tried to disarm my mother. Needless to say, the owl from the Ministry of Magic did nothing to improve affairs in our house.”

“They didn’t expel you?” James asked.

“Course not, s’only my first offense.” Sirius said. “Eh, it’s alright. Only made my parents angry at me for being irresponsible.”

“You look like you’ve been dragged headfirst down a staircase.”

Sirius sighed. “Something like that.”

“Oi, Muggle-born wizards are people, you can’t say things like that!” Sirius said, outraged, as the effective ways of murdering wizards without pure blood made their way into polite dinner conversation.

“I’ll say what I like in my own household!” Mr. Black boomed, slamming his hand down against the
table. Kreacher cowered and slunk away, muttering obscenities at Sirius.

“You’re wrong!” Sirius stood and yelled, burning with the rage in his chest that seemed to never be quelled, but only rose and rose with every passing second, into his throat, filling his eyes with red. “Every day is like this with you, Sirius, what sort of things are you taught at that school?” Mrs. Black said.

“Should’ve sent him to Durmstrang,” Mr. Black remarked.

“I should send an owl to your headmaster asking him what sort of Muggle-loving business he thinks he’s running—“

“Don’t you dare!” Sirius hissed. “That’s the only bloody place in the world where I’m not scared, all the time —“ he wanted to cry, but swallowed past the lump in his throat and ignored the stinging in his eyes.

“Why would you be scared here, then?” Regulus asked.

Sirius jutted his chin outwards and looked straight ahead, glaring daggers through the wall. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sirius, would you eat your dinner and hold your tongue?”

“At the same time?” Sirius asked.

His mother sent him a frigid look.

Sirius coughed under his breath as his parents resumed their conversation, calmly discussing the deaths of Muggle-borns at the hands of the rising Voldemort and his followers. “Alright, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I can’t take this anymore!” Sirius shouted. “You’re talking about murdering people like you agree with it and I can’t listen to you!”

“Well, they’re not really people,” Mr. Black said. “Sirius, they’re hardly even capable of conscious thought. You can’t be feeling bad for them.”

“Sometimes I think you don’t even hear yourselves. You’re both so bloody awful!”

“Don’t you dare speak to us like that!” Mrs. Black stood, drawing her wand from her robes with fury smoldering in her gaze. Sirius steadied his hand around the handle of his wand and waited, defensive, heart and mind racing.

“Mum, stop —“ Regulus said, almost defending his brother. She shot a silencing charm in his direction, sparks flying from her wand.

“Regulus, this doesn’t concern you,” Mr. Black said, joining his wife with wand pointed at Sirius. The two stood together, perfect in their balanced, practiced cruelty.

“Nah,” Sirius looked at James and shrugged. “Just an unforgivable curse.”

“They could’ve killed you,” James said, and tackled Sirius in a hug. “Merlin, you could have died.”

“I don’t doubt one day they will,” Sirius said. “James, dear, you’re crushing my ribs.” As James apologized, Sirius’s bruised and battered face lit up. “Oi, James.”

“What?”

“Dear. Deer.”

“For the love of Godric —“ Sirius just grinned. “My deer, at last I shall have my revenge for the short-lived but painful reign of Fluffy.”

“Alright, say what you will, but don’t let Peter hear or he’ll be wanting a nickname as well.” James rolled his eyes.

“Of course, deer.”

“Now you’re just being cruel.”

Both laughed for a moment before James looked over at the other boy, who seemed to breathe now with a great effort as if existing was taking a great toll on him. “You should go to sleep,” James said. “You can tell me more about what happened later.”

“I s’pose you’re right,” Sirius lay back on his bed. “You won’t tell Remus and Peter about this?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” James said. “But they’ll figure it out, you know.”

“Ah, I don’t mind so much,” Sirius said in a tone which failed to convince James of anything of the sort. “But I’ll get that look from Remus, you know the one I’m talking about, don’t you? Where his eyes get big and he starts to look a bit sad, but only in a sympathetic way, and you know how
disappointed he is in you?”
“I thought that was just his normal face.” James said absently.
Sirius snorted.

A strong-jawed, dark haired man strutted to the Potter’s doorstep, a look of permanent disgust on his face. “Good morning,” he said as the kindly-looking Mr. Potter opened the door.
“And to you, Mr. Black,” Mr. Potter said. “To what do we owe this pleasure?”
“I hate to intrude upon your,” he sniffed and looked around, “household. However, based upon the circumstances, I felt it necessary to make a personal visit.”
“Er, yes, well, not to be rude, but why exactly are you here?” Mr. Potter asked, trying to keep his tone civil. This, in his opinion, was one of the worst people he’d ever met. Anyone who could hurt a child as wonderful as Sirius deserved nothing but a well-placed curse directly in the face.
“I’m here for my son,” Mr. Black arched an eyebrow. “I presume it is your own child who has abducted him from our home?”
“Abducted!” Mr. Potter repeated, outraged.
“Indeed,” Mr. Black said coldly. “I won’t deign to enter your lovely dwelling,” he dragged out each word with a pointed look at the Potter’s house. “But I expect my property returned to me, or I daresay it may put your family in some degree of danger.”
“You think your son is your property? Are you threatening us?” Mr. Potter asked, closing his hand around his wand in his robes.
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mr. Black said. “May I see my son.”
“As it would seem you very nearly killed him, I believe he’s still resting,” Mr. Potter said.
“Killed him? It was a small family spat,” Mr. Black said indignantly.
“My son doesn’t come out of small family spats covered in bruises!”
“I resent your accusation, sir,” Mr. Black said coldly. “Please return Sirius to me immediately.”
“One moment,” Mr. Potter said curtly, and shut the door in Mr. Black’s face. “Sirius!” Sirius limped down the stairs — the bruises on his face had been mostly healed by Mrs. Potter, but his eyes were puffed up and purpled. “What is it?” he asked, a bit of the light back in his eyes.
“Your father is here,” Mr. Potter said.
Sirius froze upon the staircase, his face draining of blood. “What?” and then, more quickly, frantic, “No! No, you can’t let him take me back there! Please — you can’t, I can’t —”
“What’s wrong, Siri?” James asked, his lopsided grin quickly fading.
“My father,” Sirius said hoarsely, and he lunged for James, grabbing him by the shoulders, shaking him. “You can’t let him take me back there, you can’t, please, James —”
James had never seen the other boy so desperate. “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it.”
“No,” Sirius said, his eyes flicking between the door and the window. “No, he’ll have you killed! They’re evil, James, evil, I won’t have you put in danger —”
“It’s alright, we won’t let him —”
The door flew open with an earsplitting crack, sealing back into place behind Mr. Black. “Come home, Sirius,” he said, his voice calm.
Sirius shook his head vehemently. “Never.”
“Sirius, get out of this house this instant!”
“Pardon me, Mr. Black, would you mind leaving this innocent boy alone?” Mrs. Potter asked, drawing her wand and holding it against his throat. He stepped away, looking disgusted.
“He is my child.” Mr. Black said between clenched teeth.
“And I’ll defend him to my last breath!” Mrs. Potter hissed, kind face crinkled in fury.
“I’ll go,” Sirius said. “I’ll go, I can’t put you in danger. I’m sorry.”
And without another word, Mr. Black took Sirius's arm and they Apparated away, leaving the Potters gathered together, watching the space where they had been as though sheer force of will could bring them back.
“We have to help him, we have to do something,” James said tearfully. “They’ll kill him for this.”
“What are we going to do?” Mrs. Potter asked into the empty space, her voice a cracking plea.
The Map

As the morning sun rose over the Pettigrew household, Peter held a letter from one James Potter tightly in his hands. “Mum!” he exclaimed, looking up at her. "I've got to Floo to James' house." Mrs. Pettigrew blinked at her son in surprise. “Petey, are you sure about this?” she pointed her wand at the table, clearing the scraps of paper the nervous Peter had shredded.
“Absolutely,” Peter said assuredly. “James said it’s an emergency.” “Alright, be home soon, won’t you?” Mrs. Pettigrew asked, patting her son’s head affectionately. He smiled up at her. “Alright.”

Meanwhile, in the Lupin family home, Remus was curled on a large, worn chair, fresh, deep scratches across his face, several mugs of tea on the table next to him. He opened his mail with pained fingers, reading each letter with the same stiff expression on his face. As he read his letter from James, he leapt to his feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in his bones.
“Where are you going?” Mr. Lupin demanded, eyeing his son over the top of his glasses.
“Flooing to James’s house,” Remus said.
“The full moon was yesterday, Remus, you can’t — “ Remus limped towards the fireplace, wincing. “I’m alright, Dad.” “Remus John Lupin, I forbid you to — “ But Remus had already gone in a flash of green fire.

Remus and Peter stumbled through the Potters’ fireplace within minutes, both covered in soot and coughing. They embraced tightly and ran towards James, who forced a smile.
“Merlin, what’s happened?” Remus asked, eyes going wide. “You said it was an emergency.” “It is,” James said, taking Remus and Peter by their arms and dragging them over to the couch. “You may want to sit down.” “I’m getting that sense, yes,” Remus said faintly, his head spinning even from the short Floo journey. “It’s Sirius,” James said. “He got in a fight with his parents, so I went to go save him and — it —” he sighed, burying his face in his hands. “His father came here yesterday to take him back. And he left, and I didn’t do anything,” his voice wavered. “Anything, Moony, we’ve got to — “ “Have you spoken to Dumbledore?” Remus interrupted, rubbing his temples. “D-Dumbledore?” James repeated, dumbfounded. “Well, he’s a brilliant wizard, if anyone would have the power to get Sirius out of that place — “ “Blimey,” James said hoarsely. He jumped to his feet. “You’re a GENIUS, Moony!” Remus squinted in pain. “Mind your volume, James, will you?” “Sorry,” James said. “Pete, get your fat arse over here and help me find some parchment in this mess. Oi, MUM! WHERE DO YOU KEEP THE PARCHMENT?” he shouted up the stairs. Both Remus and Mrs. Potter winced. “James!” they exclaimed in unison. “It’s in the cupboard, dear,” Mrs. Potter called. “And I can HEAR you at a NORMAL VOLUME, YOU KNOW!” James jumped. “Merlin’s arse! Alright, alright, case in point.” Peter handed him parchment from the cupboard. “I wish Sirius were here,” Peter groaned. “His handwriting looks like the tears of angels.” James laughed aloud, a bit of the panicked edge going out of his voice. “Remus can forge excellently, can’t you, Moons?” Remus smiled. "I shan’t bother to ask how you know that.” He accepted a quill and neatly wrote out a letter to Dumbledore in an exact copy of Sirius’s lovely, cultured scrawl. “You think this will help get Sirius out of his parents’ house?” Peter asked worriedly, wringing his hands together, his palms slick with sweat. “It’s our best chance, isn’t it?” James said, tugging at his hair. “We’ve got to do something.”
“We are,”
“They could kill him, you know, they’d do it — obliviate it from everyone who ever met him. We could forget we knew him, Merlin —” James clutched suddenly at Remus’s arm, his eyes wild.
“What if something terrible happens?”
Remus felt a cold fist of dread clench around his heart. “Don’t — don’t think about it, James, please. Here, the letter’s done,” he folded it, failing to hide his trembling hands.
“We shouldn’t worry, right?” James said. “There’s nothing we can do but ask for help.”

And it was only a day before a neatly sealed letter arrived from the office of Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore himself. The Marauders had gathered on the couch as James’ owl deposited the letter, pecking at his fingers in annoyance.
“Bloody hell, you ridiculous creature,” James said affectionately, feeding his owl a few treats. “Pete, read us the letter, will you?”
Peter cleared his throat. “Er, alright. He says…he’ll go talk to the Blacks and get Sirius permission to come stay with you for the rest of summer holidays, but…after that there isn’t much he can do.”
“Not much he can do? He’s probably the most powerful wizard alive, and there’s nothing he can do?” James demanded.
Peter flinched. “Wait, wait, he said if Sirius wants to file a complaint about his parents with the ministry —”
“He won’t,” Remus said rationally. “He won’t want to hurt them. It’s Sirius, he’d never let anything happen to them, whether they deserve it or not.”
James stood and paced past the window, fists clenched. “D’you really think Dumbledore can get him away from them?”
“I think Dumbledore can do anything,” Peter said.
“That’s the problem with you, Pete, you believe too much in people.”
Remus gently touched Peter’s arm as the other boy looked down in shame. “James, it’s not only Peter who does that.”
“I expect you’re talking about me, then?” James spat.
“No need to be angry at me, it’s not as if it isn’t true,” Remus said. “It’s not inherently terrible, though, really.”
James looked at Remus with a raw, flashing anger in his hazel eyes. “I thought Sirius and I could do anything. But even with both of us…we couldn’t stop his father from…” James slammed his hand into the wall. “Couldn’t do it, could I?” he asked, with a funny little laugh that spoke of danger and a brimming fury he was no longer able to contain.
“He’ll be alright. James, this isn’t your fault,” Peter said softly.
“Wrong again, Pete. This is my fault,” he sighed. “It's all my fault. I put him in danger because I’m a bloody selfish git, and I just wanted to…”
The doorbell rang, a high, tolling sound which echoed through the house. “Jamie, is that the door?”
Mr. Potter called.
“No, dad, it’s the bloody window. Of course it’s the door,” James muttered, wiping tears from his eyes as he prepared to face whatever stood outside.
And it was Dumbledore, with Sirius Black holding onto his arm. James could barely speak, but gestured frantically for Remus and Peter.
“Is he alright?” Remus asked Dumbledore.
“He can speak for himself,” Sirius said. “Yes, Moony, I’m perfectly fine.”
“Thank Merlin,” Remus breathed, and in a rare emotional display, threw his arms around Sirius. “Thank you, Professor,” James said respectfully, looking up at Dumbledore. Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled.
“My pleasure,” he said. “Now, Sirius, I expect you won’t be returning to your parents for some time…”
“No,” Sirius shook his head. “Professor, I can’t go back to them after this.”
“It’s for the best that you don’t, at least for now, I think.” Dumbledore said. “I’ll take my leave of
“Have a nice day, Professor,” Remus said, as Dumbledore disappeared with a loud crack.

“Right then,” James said, as the Potter family clock struck midnight, clanging loudly enough to wake the dead. “It’s midnight, Siri, and it’s time for you to start talking.”

“I’ve been talking,” Sirius said mildly.

“You know what I mean. Not that I’m in the mood to shed tears for you, but I want to know what happened with your parents.” “Must we do this?” Sirius asked.

“Actually, Sirius, if you don’t want to tell us —” Remus said forgivingly.

“Thank you, Moony, I —” Sirius began.

“You ought to, though, is what I was going to say,” Remus said. “We’re your best mates.”

“I don’t see what makes it so important,” Sirius said.

“We want to help you,” Peter said honestly.

“That’s sweet, Rat,”

“Rat?”

“Well, I mean, is there anything better to call someone whose Animagus is literally vermin?” Sirius asked with an arched eyebrow.

“It isn’t my fault!” Peter protested. “And yes, there’s…”

“Whiskers, Twitchy, Rat Tail, Sewer-dwelling Beast, Vile Vermin, for example,” James said.

“I’m partial to Twitchy,” Remus commented. “We’ll call you that when we label your name on the Map.”

“Speaking of the Map,” James said. “I’ve started a small sketch of what it may look like,” he pulled a large sheet of parchment from under his bed and showed it to them, covered in swirls of ink and labelled with each room in Hogwarts.

“If that’s small, what’s the actual map going to look like?” Sirius said. “As that piece of parchment is the size of Peter.”

“In James’ defense, I’m exceptionally short,” Peter mumbled.

James shrugged. “Here, we’ll draw plans for the map while Sirius tells us what happened.” He didn’t say what all of them were thinking, that this wasn’t to satisfy their own curiosity, it was to be absolutely certain that Sirius was going to be alright.

“Bloody hell, you lot are persistent,” Sirius muttered. “If you insist, then.” He rolled onto his stomach, measuring a piece of parchment. “My parents were casually discussing murder, as one does in the Black family home, and I essentially told them to bugger off, which was a bloody stupid idea.” Sirius sighed, brushing his hair out of his face. “Right, so if we measure the dimensions of the castle and create a scale —”

“Measure the whole bloody castle? That’ll take a year!” James protested.

“Ahem,” Peter cleared his throat.

“What is it?”

“Well, I mean, if any of you had bothered to read our History of Magic textbook…” Peter said shyly.

“Merlin’s arse, Peter, you can read?” Sirius said in mock surprise.

“Yes,” Peter said, glancing down in embarrassment. “All I’m saying is…”

“The size of the school is written in it?” Remus guessed.

Peter nodded.

“Pete, you’re a genius!” James said, and Peter beamed with pride, his smile wide enough to hurt his cheeks. “Are we going to pretend that you read books for no reason, or…”

“My mum told me my spelling is atrocious and threw the nearest book at me to get me to read more. It was interesting, though, I learned loads,” Peter said enthusiastically. “I have it in my pocket.” He handed James the book, which was covered in something sticky which looked like toffee. “And… you know… a few sweets, as well,” he added sheepishly.

“Excellent!” James declared. “Sirius, continue.”

“We’re still on that subject?” Sirius groaned. “Look, Reg tried to defend me and my dearest mother shut him up with a Silencing Charm so she could deal with me.”
“Your mother puts Silencing Charms on you?” Remus demanded.
“She did it all the time when we were younger, to stop us crying,” Sirius shrugged. “Hardly the worst thing she’s done. Anyway, she…” Sirius looked down and began to label the Transfiguration room on the map. “My father…” he shook his head. “I can’t, I’m sorry.”
James touched his arm. “It’s alright.”
“It is?” Sirius’s eyes widened. “Really?”
“They hurt you. That’s all we need to know,” Remus said softly. “And we’ll keep you from going back for as long as we can, I swear.”
Sirius shook his head. “No, I know I should tell you, I just…” he bit his lip, hands tapping out patterns on the ground as if playing piano.
“Don’t move!” Mr. Black bellowed. “Don’t move, you stupid, ignorant child!”
Sirius fought his father’s hands on his shoulders, lunging for the staircase.
“I warned you, Sirius!” Mr. Black sent a curse at him which carved a bleeding slice across his back. It stung, soaking through his robes instantly.
Sirius roared in pain and staggered away. “Stay away from me!”
Mrs. Black stalked after her son, wand drawn, face impassive. “Sirius, darling, calm down.”
Sirius held onto the banister, shaking, blood trailing down his spine. “I’d do it, I —” he drew his wand from his robes, full of a reckless desire to hurt her, to stop her from doing anything like this again.
“You’re not allowed to use magic outside of school.”
“I don’t care!” Sirius yelled. “I don’t care, I have to get away from you, I don’t care how I do it!”
“Get away from us?” Mrs. Black feigned a hurt expression. “Why, Sirius, how cruel of you. I’m your mother.”
“And I’d rather die than live another second with your blood in my veins,” Sirius sobbed. He turned and ran up the stairs, sending one last, wild-eyed look down at his parents.
“Don’t make me do this,” Mrs. Black threatened. “I don’t want to, Sirius, but you’ve forced my hand — CRUCIO!”
Sirius fell to the ground, writhing and screaming, while Regulus sat in forced silence, crying for his brother.
“Sirius,” James said quietly, seeing the other boy’s blank, pain filled gaze.
Sirius looked at him as if he’d never seen him before. “James?” he closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, I need a moment.” He stood and stumbled from the room, head spinning, tears streaming down his face.
“This was the worst time yet, wasn’t it?” Peter asked. “With Sirius’s parents.”
James nodded. “Yes, I think so.”
A panic filled Remus’s eyes. “James, can I talk to you for a moment?”
Peter looked hurt. “Oh, don’t mind me. Your other friend who you apparently don’t trust,” he said, in a quite rare display of bitterness.
“I’m so sorry, Peter, just one second,” Remus pulled James into the hall. “Remember what happened about a year ago?” he asked, glancing at the closed door.
“Loads of things,” James said.
Remus raised his eyebrows.
“I’m sorry. You mean when Sirius and I had that fight about…”
Remus nodded. “You don’t think that because of this, he’d…”
James shook his head vehemently. “This is Sirius we’re talking about. He’ll be alright.”
“James, I don’t know…” Remus sighed. “We can’t tell Peter. He’ll worry, he’ll tell Sirius we’re worried, and it’ll make everything worse.”
“Moons, listen to me, if there’s anything we can do to help Sirius, we’ll do it.”
“I love him, you know?” Remus asked, and his face went red. “Er…in the way that…we all do, I mean, of course.”
James nodded. “Of course. But I don’t stutter when I say I love Sirius, do I?”
The Potters and Sirius stood on the platform at King’s Cross, waiting for Remus and Peter's families to pass through the space between platforms nine and ten. "Have a lovely year, Jimmy,” Mrs. Potter said.

Sirius grinned and whispered, "Jimmy," with an evil glint in his eyes.

"You've heard me call him that hundreds of times," Mrs. Potter said.

"Still hilarious." Sirius commented.

"Good luck with Quidditch tryouts, Sirius," Mr. Potter said.

"Thanks, Fleamont," Sirius said, brushing his hand over the broomstick the Potters had bought him.

"I swear I'll pay you back for this." James laughed. "Nonsense. You don't owe us anything. Besides, between you and I, Slytherin hasn’t got a chance at the Cup this year."

“Remus, Peter, will you be trying out for the team as well?” Mr. Potter inquired as they emerged onto platform nine and three quarters.

Remus snorted. “Absolutely not.”

“I have the coordination of a blind, deaf hippogriff,” Peter added.

They all chuckled.

“Bye Mum, bye, Dad!” James said as he raced the Marauders onto the train. They grabbed each other's arms and stumbled into their usual compartment, laughing.

“Fourth year,” Remus sighed, slumping in his seat. "Merlin, third year felt like it lasted forever." He propped his feet up on the opposite bench next to Sirius. Sirius poked at Remus's worn shoes.

"No new shoes, then?"

"Nah," Remus wiggled his toes through the holes. "Wasn't worth it."

“Of course,” Sirius arched an eyebrow. “Oi, look at that, Evans and —” he squinted. “James, deer, don’t look.”

“What?” James turned around, peering through the carriage. “What is it?”

“The words ‘don’t look’ are lost on him,” Remus commented.

James gripped Peter’s arm. “Merlin, it's Evans and — and —“

“Benjamin Fenwick,” Sirius said darkly. “Ravenclaw. He’s in our year.”

“Never seen him before,” James muttered, glaring at Lily as she leaned up to kiss the so-called Benjamin Fenwick. Her dark red hair spilled from a messy ponytail, soft curls brushing over her face. "Look at him, he's even taller than Moony. I can hardly blame her for being charmed -- oh wait," James slammed his head against Sirius's shoulder. "I can."

“Their parents live near each other,” Remus said. "They must've met over summer holidays."

“How do you know?”

“During my brief time as Lily’s mate, I actually paid attention,” Remus said wryly. "She told me she and Snape wanted to spend the summer together, but her parents don’t care much for him —“

“Who can blame them?” Sirius grumbled.

“Anyway,” Remus said pointedly. “Her parents wanted to introduce her to a bloke with manners, who also happens to be a student at Hogwarts. Seems they’ve gotten close.”

“It does,” James said through clenched teeth, as Lily and Benjamin walked down the corridor of the train, arms around each other’s waists. “Well,” he leaned back in his seat. “It shouldn’t last.”

“Why not?” Peter inquired.

“Well, it's simple,” James said, drawing his wand. “I’ll kill him.”

“No you won’t,” Remus lowered James’ arm. “Then you’ll be expelled, and both your parents shall die of shame.”

“Just one hex,” James insisted. “C’mon, Moons, just one!”

“No,” Remus insisted.

“Thanks, Mum,” James rolled his eyes, adjusting his new glasses on his nose. The frames engulfed
his face, already cracked slightly from a pillow fight with Sirius the night before.
“James, did you get glasses?” Peter asked, peering into the other boy’s face.
“I did,” James said, polishing them on Peter's jumper. “Alright, Sirius, that’ll be five galleons.”
“What?” Remus asked.
“I bet Sirius it would take you at least twenty minutes to notice,” James said proudly.
“I noticed as soon as I saw you,” Remus said. "Although I didn't want to tell you that they make you look absolutely --"
"Ridiculous,” Sirius interrupted, winking at Remus.
“Ridiculous?” James asked.
“No, they suit you,” Peter said honestly. “Really.”
“Thanks, Pete,” James said, his face a bit red. “I don’t need them that badly, anyways. My eyesight is perfectly alright.”
“James, I’ve seen you walk into trees on multiple occasions,” Remus grinned.
“Oh, shut up,” James said. “I’m practicing for when I have antlers.”
Remus shifted in his seat, glancing from side to side, avoiding the question he wanted more than anything to ask.
“You’re less than subtle, Moons,” James said affectionately. “No, nothing else has happened, and apparently we can’t do anything until another transformation starts. But I’m developing a strange taste for leaves, which may be the deer talking.”
“Technically, it’s a stag,” Remus said, adjusting the sleeves of his overlarge robes.
“I’ll bet it is,” Sirius winked at James.

“Right,” M.G. McGonagall stalked across the Quidditch pitch, tossing her broomstick from one hand to the other. “Last year's final match was a disaster.”
“You’re telling me,” James groaned. “We lost three hundred to twenty.”
“Excellent point, Potter,” M said. “That’s why I’ve got to be harsh this year. Every morning, I want you all awake before anyone else, out here practicing.”
“Ugh,” James groaned.
“Potter, there’s no guarantee you’ll make the team again this year.”
James rolled his eyes. “Blimey, M, you might as well stop lying.”
“Right, then, everyone in the air. If you’re trying out for Keeper, over here.”
“Siri,” James nudged him in the ribs, rising on his broom. He seemed, if possible, even more confident in the air than on the ground. “That’d be you.”
Sirius straddled his broom and swept over to M, hair flying back off his face.
“Black,” she said, with an expression of pleasant surprise. “I was wondering when you’d be trying out. Keeper, then?”
“Ah, well, I’m only here because James’ parents bought me a broomstick.”
“James’ parents?”
Sirius blanched, wondering if McGonagall ever even hinted to her niece what he said during their meetings, if M had any idea what he was like underneath this polished but rowdy facade.
“Yeah, I live with them.”
Her stern face registered a slight bit of concern. “Oh? You know, your brother Regulus — “
“I know of him, yes,” Sirius rolled his eyes.
“I was going to say he's trying out for the Slytherin team this year. In the hoop, Black,” M said, with a hint of a smile.
“Sirius never let the Quaffle in. Not once. Peter and James cheered enthusiastically as Remus shook his head and sighed, handing each of them a galleon. Sirius flew towards them, flicking his hair off his face in vague annoyance. “What’s this, then?”
“Well,” Peter began eagerly. Remus shot him a glare.
“Nothing.”
“Ooh, Moons. James, it would appear our Remus is feeling a bit guilty, don’t you think?”
James chuckled. “Indeed, I do. He should tell you, shouldn’t he?”
“Why do I bother?” Remus asked dryly. “Alright, if you insist, I bet Peter and James you’d miss at least one.”
“The lack of faith,” Sirius gasped, pressing a hand to his chest. “Astounding!”
“Is it, though?” Remus asked, with a cheeky grin. “I was only being realistic.”
“I believed in you,” Peter added.
“Course you did, Pete,” Sirius smirked, leaning over his broom to ruffle Peter’s hair. “And James?”
“Obviously, I bet you’d amaze M and she’d be begging you to join the team.”
“Not quite,” M called from the ground. “But James, you’re in, and Sirius as well.”
“Congratulations,” Remus said warmly, his eyes, like liquid gold, glowing in the light. Sirius shook the thought that Remus’s eyes were the most beautiful color he’d ever seen out of his head, and landed in the stands, a triumphant grin upon his face. “Both of you.”
James and Sirius embraced, like the brothers they were, with identical wide smiles on their faces.

The next morning, early, when the clouds ringed the spires of Hogwarts castle like a cloak, Sirius and James were out on the field practicing, nearly half asleep.
Remus and Peter watched from Gryffindor Tower, Peter practically snoring on Remus’s shoulder.
“Peter,” Remus said, gently shaking the other boy’s shoulder. “C’mon, we should go to class.”
“Too early,” Peter groaned.
“It’s History of Magic, you can just sleep on your desk. I’ll take your notes for you.”
“Usually it’s the other way round,” Peter commented.
“Well, this is my way of thanking you, then,” Remus pulled Peter from the cushions by the window, handing him his wand from it’s precarious position on the mantle above the fireplace.
“You don’t have to,” Peter said, suddenly quite awake, his watery eyes alert and for once, not darting from side to side in perpetual nervousness. “Really. I love you, Moons. During the full moon, when we make sure you get all your work done, it’s not something you have to ever thank us for, or apologize for. Anything any of us can do to help is nothing compared to what you’ve done for us. Course, I don’t love you the way that Sirius does —” he covered his mouth. “Merlin! Bloody hell, bloody hell, I’m sorry, no, just I didn’t say that…really, I didn’t! Oh, Merlin, Sirius will kill me,” he groaned and put his head in his hands.
“Sirius what?” Remus asked, dumbfounded.
“Nothing!” Peter had gone as red as the sofa. "We love you, Moony, all of us."
Despite himself, Remus’s eyes filled with tears. “Peter, that’s so…” he smiled slightly, and, regaining control of himself, he raised an eyebrow. “You’re trying to distract me from what you said about Sirius, aren’t you?”
“Well, yes,” Peter said. “But it’s true what I said.”
“You’ve got a bit of devious streak, Peter,” Remus said, shaking his head.
“You think?” Peter asked brightly.
“Absolutely. Now, what’s this about Sirius?”
“Nothing. Nothing!” Peter insisted. “C’mon, we’ll be late to class.”
“Tell me on the way,” Remus picked up his books, ignoring the twinges of pain in his bruised arms.
“What happened?”
“It was…” Peter looked away. “Sirius fell asleep on the sofa in the common room, and I suppose he had a dream about you or something, because he kept saying your name in his sleep —“
“He what?” Remus spluttered.
“He was talking about you, something about your eyes being beautiful…”
Remus buried his face in his hands. “You’re joking.”
“I’m not, I swear,” Peter said insistently. “I wouldn’t, not about this.”
“You must’ve misunderstood, Sirius doesn’t love me, he can’t…” Remus shook his head. “He can’t.”
“Obviously, he can,” Peter said. “Why won’t you believe me?”
“Peter, this isn’t —“
“What?” Peter almost laughed, his round face full of concern. “What isn’t it, Moony? What’s wrong?”
Remus was shaking from head to toe, eyes full of tears. He moved towards the bathroom, ready to run. “I’ve got to go, Peter.”
“Don’t tell Sirius I told you,” Peter begged. “He’ll flay me alive. He’ll hex me into next year!”
“I won’t tell him,” Remus swore, and turned away, trembling.
The Pumpkin Patch

The sunlight filtered, golden, through the window in the Marauders’ dormitory, glowing on Sirius’s sleeping face. He woke up to see the others missing entirely, the room empty. “Oi, you lot,” he yelled into the silence, running a hand through his long hair, which had curled haphazardly around his face as he slept. “Bit early to be maraudering, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” James marched into the room, whistling. “What are you plotting now?” Sirius asked as he stumbled out of bed.

“Nothing,” James said. “On an entirely unrelated note, it is your birthday, isn’t it?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Yes. If I find my breakfast replaced with rotten vegetables as some sort of prank, I shan’t be amused in the slightest. We’ve got a Quidditch game this morning, you know.”

“Oh, I do,” James said.

“Where have Moony and Ratface gone?”

“Y’know, that nickname is really NOT working.”

“What about Whiskers? Claws? Mr. Rat?”

“We’ll see,” James said sarcastically. “C’mon.”

“Where are we going?” Sirius asked. “What have you done?”

“Nothing,” Remus emerged from the common room, grinning, but he wouldn’t meet Sirius’s eyes. “Right, Peter?”

Peter nodded. “Of course. Well, Sirius, let’s go.”

“Go where?” Sirius asked. “What have you done?”

“Between last night and this morning, we’ve turned the castle into a shrine for Sirius Black,” James said. “Happy birthday, mate.”

Sirius laughed. “This is fantastic,”

“Did we surprise you?” Peter asked.

“Absolutely,” Sirius said, linking his arms with Remus’s and James’s. “I’m surprised you could keep a secret, Ratty.”

“Can we please give the poor bloke a better nickname?” James begged.

“Agreed,” Remus said.

“Fine,” Sirius said, winking at one of the photographs of him as it danced within the frame. “I didn’t even know you lot had a camera, how’d you take all these pictures?”

“You’ve Moons to thank for that one,” James said. “He put a silencing charm on a camera Frank gave us before he left school, and took photographs when you weren’t looking.”

“All of them?” Sirius asked.
“Well, we’ve been planning it since Easter Holidays,” Peter said.
“All of them?” Sirius repeated. He dropped the Marauder’s arms to stare into Remus’s quickly reddening face. “Really?”
“Well, I mean —” Remus’s cheeks went the color of Madam Puddifoot’s. “In a word, yes.”
Sirius hid his touched expression with a smirk. “Excellent. Can’t believe I didn’t notice, I really ought to work on my observational skills.”
“You ought to,” Remus echoed. The Marauders continued walking down the hall, covered with photographs of Sirius. Sirius grinned, enjoying the looks from the Slytherins standing at the bottom of the staircase.
“Oh, Moons, by the way,” James said, exchanging a mischievous look with Sirius. "It's Sirius's birthday, and while we love to surprise him, we also love to watch our dear friends suffer horrifically. So we've --"
“What have you done now?” Remus asked, with a dramatic sigh.
“Well, our normal Quidditch commentator is out —“
“Merlin’s beard,” Remus groaned. “C’mon, the full moon is tonight, there’s no need to be cruel.”
“Old Minnie McGee asked if anyone in our transfiguration class wanted to stand in as commentator, and we volunteered —“
“Me,” Remus guessed.
“That’s right,” Sirius and James said cheerfully.
“You realize I don’t know anything about Quidditch, right?” Remus said.
“We’ll explain it to you on the way.”
“Why couldn’t Peter do it?”
“Because I’ll start crying and make an utter idiot of myself,” Peter said.
“Couldn’t’ve put it better myself, Pete. Shall we?”

“Welcome to the first Quidditch match of the season,” Remus said, a scarf wrapped tightly around his neck. Madam Pomfrey stood close behind him, a hand on his arm in case he collapsed. “between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. Er, the Quaffle is in the air, and James — sorry, Potter —“ he sighed, pain blurring his vision. His knuckles were white against the railing, but he kept narrating the Quidditch match, his voice shaking. He saw Mary MacDonald and Marlene McKinnon whisper something and point at him, and he raised his voice. “Potter scores ten points for Gryffindor, nicely executed, and Fenwick narrowly avoids a Bludger to the head —“ Remus paused to look at Lily, standing in the stands with a Gryffindor banner over her head but the Ravenclaw colors smeared across her cheeks. He smirked and thought of what James or Sirius would’ve said. “Which could’ve happened to anyone with half a brain, I’m certain.”
“Lupin,” McGonagall hissed.
Remus smiled at her apologetically. “Anyways, Black saves another. Poor Ravenclaw isn't doing well today. And,” he glared at Sirius. "He's asked me to mention that it's his birthday, and he is," Remus cleared his throat and sighed. "The actual best person at Hogwarts.” Sirius winked across the pitch.
“And M.G. McGonagall catches the snitch — Gryffindor wins!” Remus cheered, momentarily releasing his death grip on the railing. He nearly toppled over, his face going whiter than a Hogwarts ghost.
Sirius and James ran up into the stands, racing and laughing, both with bright eyes and flushed faces.
“Moons, that was great! You remembered everything we taught you!” James said, grabbing Remus’s wrists.
“You were both fantastic,” Remus said honestly. "Despite forcing me to say ridiculous thing in front of all of Hogwarts."
“Yeah,” Sirius dragged the word out, letting it fall into the air between them. “I’m going to have to quit the team.”
“Fetch, don’t you bloody dare,” James hissed.
“You're running out of names, Deer. It isn't anything personal --"
“The hell it isn’t. You’re doing it to torture me.”
“You love Quidditch, Sirius, what’s the problem?” Remus asked with a raised eyebrow. Peter came puffing up the stairs, face red and sweaty.
“Well done,” he panted.
James and Sirius reached over in unison to ruffle his hair. “Thanks, Peter.”
“Anyway, Moonlight, I think I’ve got to quit because I could feel Snivellus plotting something all the way across the pitch, and someone’s got to be there to watch him and keep his greasy arse glued to the bloody stands so he won’t attempt anyone’s murder again.”
“I could do it,” Peter offered.
Sirius chuckled. “Peter, you’re about as threatening as a Pygmy Puff.”
“What was Severus doing to bring about your desire to kill James?” Remus asked.
James groaned, clutching at his heart. “Sirius, you cause me such agony.”
“If it means that much to you, I won’t quit,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. “But it’ll be your problem when you wake up one morning bald, or he poisons your food, or some such disastrous prank.”
“It grows back,” James said dismally, plucking at one of the unruly spikes on his head. “It always grows back.”
Sirius chuckled. “And we could have Moony keeping an eye on him, if our Remus weren’t so opposed to violence.”
*I’m a bloody werewolf, you don’t know anything about violence until you’ve seen what I really am,* Remus thought, but nodded.
“Besides, he misses matches because of his furry little problem,” Peter added.
“Fair,” Sirius nodded. “Mark my words, Snivelly's plotting something.”
“He’s probably upset because of Lily and Benjamin,” Remus said.
“It’s Benjy, actually,” Benjy Fenwick interrupted them. James turned around to face him, glaring at the other boy. “Lily’s told me so much about you lot, I had to meet you.”
“Good things, I presume?” Sirius asked, flicking his long hair off his shoulder.
Benjy laughed, but didn’t answer. “I was wondering if you could help me with something?”
“Oh, you mean Snivellus,” Sirius said.
“It is,” Sirius said with a smile. “Alright, if it’ll get you out of our hair, wait until he does something to mildly annoy Evans — and it won’t be long until he does, believe you me. Then don’t stop bringing it up. Ever. She’ll stop talking to him for a while, because she won’t have time to forgive him. Allowing you to plan your next move. It’s like wizard’s chess with that one, I’m telling you.”
“What is my next move, then?” Benjy asked. James noticed that his eyes were sparkling blue, and thought that no matter what kind of beauty Lily saw in them, they didn’t hold a candle to her endless, shining green.
“You’re a smart bloke, Fenwick, figure it out,” James said.
“Alright, well, I probably shouldn’t be taking advice from you, anyways. Lily finds you irritating.”
“Does she?” Sirius asked. “It’s all part of the Marauder charm, you know, irritating the hell out of
people with terrible taste in mates.”

“Do you have a problem with Mary and Marlene?” Benjy asked.

“Who?” James asked. “Oh, they’re alright. I was talking about Sev.”

“What does she like about him?” Benjy asked. “He’s a bit of a git, if you ask me.”

“Which no one did,” James muttered. “But he is, in fact.”

“She won’t be convinced to stop speaking to him,” Remus said, holding tightly to the railing. His teeth were clenched in pain, and a vein stood out in his temple, jumping, a cold sweat beading on his forehead. “Mary and Marlene have been trying for years. He could kill someone and she’d forgive him. I suppose some people you just forgive,” he looked at Sirius, at the other boy’s dark eyes shining, the triumphant smile still resting on his face. “No matter what they do, you forgive them every time. When you love someone, you can see past every flaw they have. That’s just how it works.”

“You think she loves him?” Benjy asks.

“Not the way she probably loves you, but in a way, I assume she does,” Remus said rationally.

“Now, er, if you’ll excuse me,” he smiled tightly and walked down from the stands, pausing on the stairs as a wave of pain wrenched through his bones.

“We’ll be back,” Peter said apologetically to Benjy, who turned around, searching the stands for Lily’s blaze of red hair.

The Marauders found Remus in the forest, lying amongst the leaves. The sun shone weakly through the clouds, sunlight splattered across the forest floor like tea leaves in a cup.

“You alright, Moons?” Peter asked, lying down next to Remus without question.

Remus looked over at him, eyes glazed with pain. “I’ve been better. It’s because it’s getting to be winter, and it’s always worse when it’s cold. I’ll be alright.”

“Will you?” James worried. He and Sirius joined them on the ground. He waved his wand and caused a flurry of leaves to take the shape of the Gryffindor lion. “Can you walk back up to the castle?”

Remus nodded. “Of course, I can —” he took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’m fine, I’m perfectly alright, I can do this.” He stood, squeezing his eye tightly shut. “I can do this.”

“Merlin, no you can’t,” James said. “C’mon, we’re going to Hagrid’s.”

“What, the groundskeeper?” Sirius scoffed.

“Don’t speak in that tone, Sirius,” Remus said. “People will hear your pureblood supremacist upbringing all the way across the castle.”

Sirius froze, shocked, and his face broke into an unwilling smile. “Nice one, Moons,” he said, shaking his head. He felt as if Remus had stabbed him. “Alright, let’s get you to Hagrid’s.”

“You think Dumbledore told him about my —“

“Everyone bloody knows, Moons,” James said affectionately. He draped Remus’s arms around his shoulders and helped carry him to Hagrid’s hut.

“No they —“

“Everyone who needs to know does,” Peter corrected James, with a warm hand on Remus’s freezing shoulder. “Don’t panic, Moony.”

“Not panicking,” Remus said tiredly, and the Marauders stepped into Hagrid’s hut without knocking.

“’Ello, there,” Hagrid said in surprise, looking up from prying a Bowtruckle off the wall of his hut.

“What’re ya doing out a class? Quidditch game ended ‘bout an hour ago.”

“Are you aware of our friend’s problem?” Sirius asked diplomatically, at once the picture of politeness.

“Oh,” Hagrid’s beetle-black eyes went wide with surprise. “Oh, yer the werewolf, then?”

Remus nodded. “That’d be me, yes.”

“Professor Dumbledore warned me yeh might be down here. I’m s’posed to send yeh to the hospital wing,” Hagrid said, looking quite menacing for a moment. The Marauders looked up at him pleadingly, not wanting to explain. “Alright, c’mere, sit down, the lot of yeh, and I’ll put the kettle on. Can’t be encouraging students out of classes, o’course, but cause of your situation I reckon Dumbledore won’t mind.”
Remus practically collapsed at the kitchen table, and the others glanced over at him worriedly.

“Yeh need anything? Think I’ve got some biscuits if yer hungry.”

“No, thanks,” Remus said, glancing about the room. It was warm, cozy, the fire casting dancing shadows on the wall. It felt safe, he thought. Sirius and James had begun discussing the logistics of raising a dragon with Hagrid, whose face had lit up underneath his beard.

“Always a dream o’ mine, havin’ a dragon,” Hagrid said. "Such interesting beasts."

“I’ll tell you what,” James said, taking a sip of tea. “When I become Minister of Magic, as my mother hopes I will be, I’ll make having a domestic dragon legal.”

“That’s right kind of you,” Hagrid said. “Say, yer James Potter, aren’t yeh?”

James grinned. “So you’ve heard of me.”

“Oh, I’ve heard ‘a you, alright.”

“You’ve been speaking to Snivellus, haven’t you?” Sirius asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Severus Snape was here with Lily Evans yesterday, if that’s what ya mean.”

“You speak to them often?” Peter asked.

“Eh, sometimes they come round here askin’ questions ‘bout the forest, or Hogwarts history,” Hagrid said. “Real nice, both of ‘em.”

“I’m sure Snivellus’s greasy face and vile manners inspire affection from all who know him,” Sirius said dryly.

“Not that I’m technically s’posed to get involved with anythin’, but yer not too fond o’ him, are yeh?”

“We’ve got a bit of a history,” Remus said.

“Understand that by this, he means that Snivelly is a git and we all despise him,” Sirius added. Hagrid chortled. “Can’t believe I’ve never spoken to the lot of yeh before. Always getting detentions, but they don’t put me in charge o’ that.”

“Don’t they?” James asked.

“Sometimes, but with you lot it’s best to keep yeh inside the castle, cleaning floors.”

“Don’t remind me,” Peter groaned, rubbing the back of his neck. “I could barely stand for weeks.”

“Yeh should really get back to yer classes,”

“I’m excused from lessons the day of the full moon,” Remus said. “I only have to go if I feel up to it.”

“He always goes. He could be dying and he’d never miss class if he had the option,” James said.

“We’ll stay with him here. It’s too far for him to walk back up to the castle.”

“Alright, gimme a second, I got to check on the pumpkins. Growin’ real well this year,” he looked out the window with pride. “I’ll be back.”

As he stooped to leave the hut, the Marauders all exchanged a look.

“Blimey, I’ve never seen anyone so tall. Peter, he could eat you!” James said.

Peter quivered in fear. “You don’t think he would, do you?”

“No, course not.” James laughed. “Can’t believe we’ve never been here before.”

“I have,” Sirius said grimly.

“What?”

“Must’ve been sleepwalking, but I woke up in the bloody pumpkin patch last year.”

James roared with laughter. “How the hell did you manage that, then?”

“Still don’t know. It remains one of life’s great mysteries,” Sirius said. "Hagrid walked with me back to the castle."

"Why haven’t you ever told us about this?" James asked.


“No point,” Remus said. “I’ve got an hour until the moon comes up.”

“I wish this animagus thing would work so you didn’t have to be alone,” Peter said.

Remus smiled. “You’re very kind, Peter.”

“You know, we’re onto the last stage. Learning how to transform at will.” James said.

“Really?” Remus asked, touched.
“Yeah, of course. We work on it whenever M will give us a spare moment from Quidditch practice. Which, mind you, is almost never,” Sirius said, and sipped his tea, setting the cup down like it was a glass of fire whiskey.

Remus smiled, but the urge to tell the others how much he loved them (and especially Sirius) died in his throat.

As the sun began to set, purple light filtering through the window as Hagrid tended to the pumpkin patch outside, Remus’s memory began to blur, his mind started to sink into the violent hunger of the wolf.

Hagrid carried him to the Whomping Willow without question, humming an old drinking song as the moon began to rise. The other Marauders trailed after him, solemn, as if carrying Remus to his grave.

“Every time, you know, I worry he won’t come back,” James confessed. It felt the moment to say such a thing. “Remember the worst time, when he was gone for days and days, before we even knew about his furry little problem? And he came back and swore he’d fallen off the roof of his house?”

Sirius laughed. “Course I do, his face went all pink, he looked like the begonias in your mum’s garden.”

“Ah, come off it, Sirius, she’s your mum too.”

Sirius smiled. “I suppose she is.” They stood away from the Whomping Willow as it flicked it’s branches around, waiting to attack them. He felt, for a second, the overwhelming urge to tell both James and Peter what they already knew. “I love him, y’know?” he said, all in a rush, staring hard at the bark of the Whomping Willow.

“We know, Sirius,” Peter said.

“No, you don’t. You --”

“Sirius, I’ve got to tell you something,” Peter said, quivering, holding onto James’ robes in anticipation of Sirius’s reaction.

“You told Remus.” Sirius guessed.

“What, no, of course I didn’t — well, okay, I did,” Peter sighed. “You’re not going to hex my nose to stick to the Whomping Willow?”

“Certainly not,” Sirius said. “Although that’s brilliant, Pete, I’ll remember that one. Worry not, I’d not have told you if I didn’t want him to know.”

“So you told me on purpose?” Peter asked, dumbfounded.

“I wasn’t planning to, no, but I didn’t explain it away as well as I might have if I wanted my secrets to remain secret.”

“It’ll change everything, won’t it?” James asked. “You and Moons.”

Sirius shook his head as Remus’s tortured, desperate howl rose from the Shrieking Shack. “Don’t think it’ll change a thing, actually.”

“How can I forget,” Peter teased.

“Are you sure you love him, really?” Peter asked.

Sirius nodded. “You know how James feels about Evans?”

James chuckled, failing to pass this off as a joke and not an acknowledgement of the heart-rending pain he felt in seeing Lily with Benjy.

“How can I forget,” Peter teased.

“That’s how I feel about Moony,” Sirius said. “Anyway, I’ve no way of knowing if he feels the same. And being Moony, he won’t tell me if he does.”
Remus spent the following night lying awake in the hospital wing, scratches marring his arms and face. He stared up at the ceiling, fighting back tears, as Madam Pomfrey bustled out of the hospital wing.

What are you crying about, you bloody idiot? he demanded of himself. What, Peter said Sirius loves you? Don’t be daft. Sirius doesn’t love anyone — and if he’s in love with someone, it’s bound to be James. Remus clenched his fists, glaring at the truth which hung over his head, unwilling to admit, even to himself, that no one would ever love a werewolf.

“Sirius Black is in love with me,” Remus whispered to the empty room. Somewhere outside, an owl hooted.

Remus sighed and covered his face with his hands. He can’t be in love with me, it doesn’t even make sense…I don’t even think I like blokes — I don’t even think Sirius likes blokes…Peter must have misunderstood — he sighed. But if it’s not true, why can’t Sirius and I even look at each other anymore?

He stood up, cold bare feet hitting the stone floor. “I’ve got to talk to him,” he justified to the empty, judging room. “I’ve got to, really,” he limped out of the hospital wing, biting his lip in pain.

“Lumos,” he muttered, ignoring the shrieks of the portraits on the wall.

“What’re you doing out of bed at this time of night, boy?” a portrait of an elderly witch demanded.

“Bugger off,” Remus mumbled, barely caring about whether he was being rude or not.

“Oh, we’ve got ourselves a rude one,” she gasped. “Well if you’re going to be ill-mannered, you may as well turn the light out!”

Remus kept walking, shooting an annoyed look in the direction of the howling portraits, and prayed he wouldn’t run into Filch, or, Merlin forbid, Dumbledore. Bloody hell, where’s the bloody common room — “ he had never walked the corridors of Hogwarts alone, at night, after a full moon, and barely knew which floor he was on, much less how to get to the common room.

He trudged on, pain stinging through his body, until he reached the Fat Lady and woke her with a loud knock on the wall that felt as if it shattered all the bones in his hand.

“Yes?” the Fat Lady asked, glaring at him.

“Mandragora,” he said wearily.

“You look a fright,” she cackled. “Lucky Peeves hasn’t seen you.”

“I’ll count that as a blessing, then,” Remus said, stumbling through the portrait hole. He landed face first on the soft rug, pain shooting through his head. His vision flashed bright red and then went black.

Hours later, the Marauders stumbled down the stairs from their dormitory into the common room, bleary-eyed and sleepless as they were every full moon. They saw Remus lying crumpled, small on the floor of the common room, and were awakened a sharp, shooting sense of fear for him, their best mate.

“Moons? Moony?” James’ voice sounded as if it was echoing from the bottom of the Black Lake.

Remus opened his eyes, head spinning. “J-James?”

“What happened?” Peter’s soft, tentative pacing was hell on Remus’s ears. “Remus, are you alright?”

Remus struggled to sit up, every muscle aching. “Yes, of course, I’m perfectly —” pain sparked behind his eyes. “I’m just a bit —“

“Nonsense, Moonbeam,” Sirius said, wrapping a blanket around Remus’s shoulders. “C’mon, I’m taking your stupid arse to the hospital wing even if I’ve got to carry you the whole way.”

“I’m fine, Sirius,” Remus said feebly, breathing in Sirius’s scent, peppermint and cold metal. He stood up quickly, a voice in his head screaming at him to focus.

“Remus John Lupin, what the bloody hell were you thinking?” James demanded. “Not only is it less than a day after the,” he dropped his voice, “full moon,” at this, he began to shout again. “But it’s quite cold, and you’ll catch a bloody chill! And you’ve broken out of the hospital wing and Madam
Pomfrey is going to flay you alive and throw you into the Forbidden Forest, and —“ James stopped, reaching for Remus’s arms. “And you could’ve died, and then who would be our Moony?”
“I’m certain you could find some other werewolf to roll his eyes and help you make bad decisions,” Remus muttered.
“We definitely couldn’t,” Peter said.
Remus forced a smile, the muscles in his face tight and painful.
“Moons, you’re whiter than Nearly Headless Nick, we’re going to the hospital wing.” Sirius said.
“Not necessary,” Remus attempted to argue.
“Moons,” he repeated. Remus’s eyes softened.
“Alright, fine.”

“Remus,” Sirius said, as the hospital wing door slammed behind James and Peter, who were sneaking down to the kitchens to get Remus some food.
“What?” Remus looked up, surprised at being called by his actual name.
“Sorry, Moons,” Sirius sat down next to him. “I’ve got to ask.”
“Ask what?”
“Why were you trying to get to the common room the night after the full moon? You could barely walk.”
Remus sighed. “We can’t talk about this now.”
“Why not?” Sirius demanded.
“Because I’m tired, and you’re looking at me as if…”
“As if what?” Sirius persisted.
“You’re looking at me the way James looks at Lily. You’re looking at me the way you look at James, for Merlin’s sake,” Remus ran his hands through his hair, dust-colored curls flopping back over his forehead.
“James and I are brothers.”
“And I’m not part of that,” Remus snapped. “Don’t think I don’t bloody know.”
“Remus,” Sirius said, looking heartbroken.
“Sirius, you’re my best mate, but…you understand.”
“You’re not interested,” Sirius said.
“No, it’s not — I can’t — I,” Remus laughed, panicked. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this.”
“Moons, it’s alright,” Sirius said, feeling as if Remus had reached into his chest and ripped out his heart. “I get it,” he stood and clapped Remus overly hard on the back. “Feel better, mate.”
“You want me to go after him?” Madam Pomfrey asked, bustling down the rows of beds.
“You didn’t hear that, did you?” Remus asked worriedly.
“Not one word,” Madam Pomfrey vowed. “So? What’s happened?”
“No, don’t follow him. I’ve already said too much.”
“Anything I can help with?”
“Regretfully not,” Remus said. “I’ll apologize to him later.”
“And you won’t sneak out of the hospital wing?” Madam Pomfrey scolded.
“Not this time,” Remus said. He glanced up to see a familiar girl walking into the hospital wing, a purple bruise blossoming on her forehead. “Lily?”
“Remus,” she nodded, green eyes glimmering.
“You alright?” he asked.
“I’ve been better, actually,” she admitted, touching her head. “I fell down the stairs on my way to Ravenclaw Tower to see Benjy.”
Remus grinned. “Poetic justice for the stairs prank last year.”
Lily grinned.
“But seriously, are you alright?”
“Sirius-ly,” Lily chuckled.
“He only makes that joke seven times a day,” Remus replied, and sighed, remembering Sirius’s face as he’d left. “Really, though —“
“I’m alright, Remus. I’m only here to be certain I didn’t get a concussion,” Lily insisted. “What are you doing in here? You look like you’ve been attacked by the Whomping Willow.”
Remus chuckled. “Oh, I was. I was racing James to Divination and I tripped in front of it.”
“How many times have you done that? Weren’t you in the hospital wing a few weeks ago?” Lily asked.
“That time, Peter accidentally pushed me out a window,” Remus lied.
“You’re quite clumsy, aren’t you?”
Remus laughed. “A bit, yes. Although you’re the one who’s fallen down the stairs.”
“Fair,” Lily nodded. There was a moment of the two looking at each other, both smiling, and Lily said, “I’ve missed you, Remus. Mary and Marlene have, too.”
“The Marauder lifestyle is a full time affair,” Remus apologized.
Lily sat on the hospital bed next to him and held up a packet of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans. "Can I?"
Remus nodded.
She took a bite of a suspicious looking green one and handed the box to Remus. "Alright, mate, let's hear the truth."
“What?”
“I’m not an idiot, Lupin,” she said. “I know you didn’t run into the Willow.”
What Remus likely should have said was, “you’re wrong.” Instead, he sighed, shoulders slumping.
“How?” he asked.
“First of all, Peter’s already told me you ran into a wall,” Lily said. “So one of you is certainly lying. And Peter’s is somehow more likely. Remus, if anything happened you would tell me, wouldn’t you?”
“Of course,” Remus said, looking away from her.
Lily’s sharp green eyes softened, and she reached out to put her light, comforting hand over his. “Is there anything I can do to help you?” she asked, with such sincerity that he felt the truth threatening to escape his lips.
He shook his head and swallowed past the lump in his throat. “Don’t worry. I’m alright.”
Lily looked at him with her head slightly tilted. “You’re terrible at lying. Alright, if you won’t tell me, let me guess.”
Remus shrugged.
“It has something to do with one of the Marauder-things, doesn’t it?”
“Marauders,” Remus corrected. “And yes, of course.”
“Why do you call yourselves that?” Lily asked. “I’ve got to know.”
“It was the middle of the night. We were coming up with names for our group, and one thing led to another. It was between that and The Idiots.”
“Would’ve been more accurate,” Lily teased. “I’m guessing this has something to do with Potter or Black, as Peter isn’t crying in the girls bathroom.”
Remus chuckled. “Peter doesn’t cry. He stands in places where we’ll notice him and sniffles dramatically.”
“Sniffles dramatically? What a phrase.”
“I know. And yes, you’ve guessed correctly.”
“It’s not Potter,” Lily said suspiciously, standing and sniffing the air like a bloodhound. “He leaves a smell of cinnamon, dirt, and Quidditch everywhere he goes. He hasn’t been here for at least half an hour.”
“You know what James smells like?” Remus asked incredulously.
“After that time he tripped into my potion, my robes smelled like him for a week,” Lily pulled a face.
“Must be Black, then. He’s said something that upset you, it’s clear from your face. What was it?”
“Lily…” Remus said. “You know I can’t —“
“Oh, why not? Listen, Remus, I don’t know much about what you lot do, or what your big purpose
is, but I bloody well know that I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve seen one Marauder upset because of the others.”

“We’re best mates. It’s how it works. Are you trying to tell me you never fight with Severus?”

“Sev and I have worked it out,” Lily said defensively. Her face fell. “If I tell you something, you’ll swear you won’t tell a soul?”

“I swear.”

“What would you do if you thought someone you cared about was getting mixed up with…He Who Must Not Be Named?” she didn’t understand who He Who Must Not Be Named really was, or what was happening, or why people were saying things about Dark Marks and killing Muggles, Muggles like her parents, like her sister…

Remus gave an odd sort of laugh. “I don’t think anyone I care for would be involved with that lot. But I wouldn’t risk putting myself in a situation where I may have to participate in the dreadful sort of thing You-Know-Who does to innocent people.”

Lily nodded solemnly. “Of course.”

“But if I suspected something, I might speak to this aforementioned person, to get a clearer idea of what it is they think they’re playing at,” Remus said. “It’s not Benjy, is it?”

“No, course not.”

“No Mary or Marlene?”

“Never.”

“Mm. Only one left, you see,” Remus raised an eyebrow. “So what’s Snape done now?”

Lily sniffed. “None of your business. What’s Sirius said to you?”

Remus looked away.

“Checkmate,” Lily said, the corner of her mouth raising in a smirk.

Dumbledore tapped his fork against his glass, silencing the Great Hall after a single, piercing look at James and Sirius, who had burst into improvised song about gravy.

“It has come to our attention that the grounds of Hogwarts are facing an oncoming possible disaster.”

“Sounds like my mum,” Marlene whispered to Lily. “She says we’re facing a crisis because someone cut down a tree near our house.”

Lily chuckled. “I love your mum.”

“Unfortunately, the weather conditions have worsened throughout the day, and we anticipate a storm which will cause all Quidditch practice to be cancelled.”

“Damn it,” James hissed, slamming his hand against the table.

“There’s no need to worry, although Mr. Filch has asked me to warn you that any Quidditch being played may lead to injury or even death.”

“BOO,” James complained, joined loudly by Mary.

“That will be all,” Dumbledore boomed.

“Bloody hell, bloody bloody hell,” James said. He beat his head repeatedly against Sirius’s shoulder.

“Sirius, tell me this isn’t happening.”

“Wish I could, mate,” Sirius said, unconcerned. He was deliberately avoiding Remus’s gaze.

“Alright, then,” James stood and stretched, abandoning his food on the table. “Time to go have a nice cry for a few hours.”

“Pull yourself together, Jamie, it’s only Quidditch,” Sirius said. “And I’ve got an idea.”

“Oh, Merlin, what is it now?” Remus blurted, and remembered, with a pang of regret, that he and Sirius weren’t meant to be speaking to each other.

Sirius blinked in surprise before answering. “I was thinking we hex the common room to blow bubbles from the windows, if you’ve got any idea how to do that, Moons?”

“Sounds brilliant,” Remus deadpanned. “And no, I don’t, but James’s expression is telling me that he does.”

“Yes, James?” Sirius asked, with a grin.

“You know my dad likes to experiment with magic, especially potions. Well, shall we say, there may have been an incident involving bubbles,” James scowled. “My entire house smelled of soap for a
“Think you can recreate the potion?” Remus asked, only mildly interested.

“Or my name isn’t James Fleamont Potter,” James said cheerfully.

“You ought to wish it wasn’t,” Remus rolled his eyes.

“Sirius is named for his father as well, you know. Sirius Orion Black,” James protested, tapping his wand against the edge of the table. He was always fidgeting, moving, a hurricane of a boy who’d always rather be in the air than on the ground.

“Well, we don’t make fun of Sirius for his name because his father’s horrible. Your father, however, is perfectly lovely and thus makes excellent joke material,” Remus explained.

“I suppose I’m supposed to find this fair?” James asked.

“You don’t have to find it fair, mate. It’s not going to stop us,” Sirius gave one of his wicked grins.

“Please follow your Head Boy and Girl to your respective dormitories,” McGonagall said curtly, her voice not especially loud but silencing every person in the hall all the same. “And Mr. Filch has,” she glared at the caretaker, “asked me to remind you to please keep the windows in all your rooms shut to avoid the rain.”

“Open the windows?” Sirius suggested.

James grinned fiendishly. “Obviously.”

“If I catch my death of cold, I shall place the blame on you,” Remus said resignedly, following the prefects up the staircase.

“Nonsense, it’s only a bit of rain,” Sirius said.

“So what you’re trying to say is that if a single raindrop got into your majestic hair you wouldn’t scream like a first year?” James asked.

“Not exactly,” Sirius amended.

Thunder cracked through the common room as Gryffindors climbed through the portrait hole, rattling the windowpane. Peter made a slight squeaking noise, grabbing onto James’s arm. James rolled his eyes.

“You’re not scared of thunder, are you, Peter?”

“N-n-no,” Peter said unconvincingly. “C-c-course n-not.”

“C’mon, it’s been four years since we’ve met, and I’ve never seen you shaking like that,” James said.

“Here, sit.”

He plopped down on his and Sirius’s armchair and patted his knee. Peter sat reluctantly.

“Oof — Peter, you weigh more than a Hungarian Horntail —” James said. Peter went red.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Oi, Ratface, it was only a joke,” James chuckled. “What is it that you’re scared of?”

“I don’t like storms,” Peter said shyly. Thunder rattled a cup of cold tea which had been sitting on the table for hours. “They didn’t always bother me, but…”

“What?” Remus asked.

“Well, after my dad died, I started getting nervous about loud noises — because I heard…” he trailed off. “Never mind, I’m sure you don’t care.”

“Don’t be stupid, of course we do,” Sirius said. “Now, what’s the problem?”

“I heard my dad fall when he died and I ignored the sound and if I’d just gotten up —” Peter bit his lip, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. “My mum wouldn’t have found him —“

James rubbed Peter’s back comfortingly. “That’s awful.”

“S’alright,” Peter lied. “It’s only a storm.”

The Marauders sat on the couch in front of the fire, pretending, for his sake, not to notice the tears in Peter’s eyes.

As darkness descended over the common room, candles flickering, most of Gryffindor house sitting by the fire and throwing pieces of crumpled parchment into the flames.

“Damn bloody stupid rain,” James said, glancing out the window. Raindrops rolled through the cracks in the window frame and down the stone walls, pooling on the carpet.

“Jimmy, my dear, you’ve got to use better vocabulary than that,” Sirius said, throwing a draft of
Peter’s transfiguration essay into the fire. “Ridiculous, unnecessary, and horrifying rain which I detest with the entirety of my being,” James suggested.

“Better,” Sirius agreed. “Moony, you’re asleep on your feet.”

Remus nodded tiredly, stifling a yawn behind a bruised, freckled hand. “Sorry. Didn’t get much sleep, thanks to you lot.”

“Oh, what’re you getting at?” James protested.

“What’s I’m getting at is that you were working on The Map all night and I probably failed my Defense test.”

“Not only the map,” James said. “We also learned how to alter the Hogwarts paintings — and mate, we’re going to have fun with that.”

“Not on my watch, you’re not,” a prefect said from across the room.

“Oh, don’t worry,” James said cheerfully.

“We wouldn’t do it on your watch,” Sirius added.

“What’s this map you’re talking about?” Mary MacDonald asked, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders and settling into the overstuffed cushions of the sofa.

“Sh,” Sirius said, eyes glittering with roguish charm. “It’s a secret.”

“Ooh, Black, you send shivers down my spine,” she teased, rolling her round blue eyes. “Can’t be too much of a secret, otherwise you wouldn’t be talking about it in the common room.”

“Oi,” Sirius said indignantly. “Everything that happens in the common room stays in the common room.”

“Course it does,” Lily said, flicking a strand of red hair out of her face. The raindrops on the windows cast silvery patterns on her skin.

“Evans, hey — Evans, look at me,” Lily looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Do you recall a certain time in which you showed me a certain letter from a family member of yours who —“

Lily glared, jaw clenched.

“Now repeat after me, Lils. What happens in the common room —“

“Stays in the bloody common room,” Lily said, drawing her wand. “Accio quill.” Sirius’s quill flew from his hand to hers. “Oh, and it’s Lily, not Lils, by the way, Siri.”

Sirius scoffed and turned away from her. “Can you believe this —“

“Yes,” Remus interrupted. The two looked at each other for a moment, lightning crackling outside the window, then, just as suddenly, looked away.
Remus was just finishing off his Transfiguration essay with a flourish of his quill, narrowly avoiding knocking his inkwell onto the carpet, when Peter caught his arm with a warm, insistent hand. "Moons," Peter hissed, pulling Remus to his feet. Remus left the parchment drying on the table and followed reluctantly as Peter led him up the steps to their dormitory.

“What’s this all about, then?” Remus asked, the two of them facing each other in their dormitory, Remus's back against the end of Sirius’s bed.

“What’s happened between you and Sirius?” Peter asked in a mumble. "I'm sorry I dragged you up here, I didn’t know how else to get you to tell me the truth. James recommended Veritaserum.” “Sirius hasn’t spoken to me properly since…” Remus sighed. “Pete, I'm sorry, I can't --” “Why can’t you?” Peter asked earnestly. “Moony, tell me what’s wrong.” “Peter, it's not your job to fix this.” “It’s because of me that this happened. I’m so sorry, really —“ “Listen to me. It’s not your fault,” Remus said, taking Peter’s hand. “Sirius and I will figure this out. Really, we will.” “Maybe I can get him to talk to you,” Peter said enthusiastically. “He’ll listen to me, especially if I get James involved —“ “Peter. I appreciate you trying, but there’s really nothing you can do.” “I’m not a child, Remus,” Peter said, looking, with his flushed cheeks and watery eyes, very much like one.

Remus turned away from him and started down the stairs, looking at Sirius, who was laughing and levitating pieces of paper above his head. “I’ll talk to him.” “What are you two doing in there?” James demanded from the staircase, glasses crooked on the end of his nose.


“Alright, you’ve understood the point,” James said. “Well?” “We’re not actually rehearsing our wedding vows,” Peter explained. “No,” Sirius said, dragging out the word. “What were you talking about, then?” “Nothing,” Remus muttered. “Moony, your ears have gone all pink. What’re you lying about?” James asked. He sent a paper airplane flying through the air, and it landed at Remus’s feet. “Nothing,” Remus insisted. James’ eyes went wide with realization behind his glasses. “Is it about —“ he cocked his head towards Sirius.

Remus nodded. “This is ridiculous. You two go upstairs and talk about this, you’re driving me and poor Peter mad,” James grabbed Sirius and Remus by the collars of their robes. “Come back when you’re done fighting.” “We’re not fighting,” Remus said. “There’s nothing to fight about.” “Correct, Moons, there will be nothing to fight about once you actually address your problems. Merlin, you really don’t know how to fix these things, do you?” “Well, based upon past experience, you seem to think the solution is hexing people,” Remus said. “Oh, believe me, it is.” James pushed the two of them up the stairs. “You lot adore me, don’t you?”
“If you insist,” Sirius said.
“Do this for me, then,” James said, and turned away from them as if to close all possibility of further discussion.
“We’re talking about this, aren’t we?” Remus asked, following Sirius up the stairs.
“Seems so,” Sirius agreed. He paused, considering, and the knot of anger which had risen in his chest grew. “Unless you’re too frightened of your own bloody feelings — “
“Me?” Remus spluttered. “You won’t even look me in the eye! I heard how you felt about me from Peter -- you didn’t tell me to my face, you couldn’t even -- ”
“I didn’t want you to find out! Why would I want to see this look on your face, Remus? You look miserable. If you don’t feel the same way, just bloody say so.”
“I’m — “
“What?” Sirius laughed manically. He was terrifying when he was upset, wild, ready for a fight.
“You’re what, scared?”
Remus looked at him, scarred fists clenched. “Is that what you want to hear, Sirius?” he asked, voice softening. “That I’m scared of feeling anything for anyone?”
“Of course not,” Sirius said, taking Remus’s hand. Remus pulled away, looking out the window at the rain. “I just want to know why, Moons. What are you so afraid of?”
Remus felt the violence of the werewolf writhing within him, wanting to shout, and scream at Sirius until he could finally understand. “I can’t say.”
“What can’t you say?” Sirius demanded. “Bloody explain it to me, Moony, because I don’t understand.”
Remus stood up, face cold and impassive. “I am going to say this, and you are never to repeat a word of it, ask me about a single detail, respond in any way to anything I say, or tell anyone,” he focused on a tiny patch of wall beyond Sirius’s head.
Sirius nodded. “Of course.”
“I was attacked when I was four;”
“I know.”
“You don’t, Siri, not really,” Remus said, and closed his eyes. “I never spoke to anyone outside my family until Dumbledore came to tell me I could come to Hogwarts when I was eleven.”
“Moons —” Sirius said.
“My parents told me I had to be alone because I was dangerous — they love me, but I was too dangerous to be anything but a liability.”
“I understand, Remus, I do — “
“Please, Sirius,” Remus said. “I can’t be with you because I’m scared, I’m terrified that I’ll hurt you,” a tear rolled down his face, and he wiped it away, his shoulders shaking. “Monsters don’t fall in love.”
“You’re not — “
“Don’t try to tell me what I’m not. It’s dangerous and I can’t put you in any more danger than I already have.”
“Alright, mate, listen.”
“You agreed — “
“No, Moons, listen. I understand you don’t feel the same way, there’s no reason to pretend it’s because of your furry little problem.”
“It is.”
“No, it’s bloody not! You don’t feel that way about me, and you wouldn’t just tell me.”
“Sirius, please.”
“No. I know you’re lying.”
“About what?”
“I think you love me back and you’ve convinced yourself that it will never happen — so you try to rationalize it by believing you don’t deserve to be loved, but you do.”
Remus looked away. “I don’t love you, Sirius. I can’t love you.”
“Why not?” Sirius demanded.
“Sirius, the only way I can think to describe it is that you’re so much more alive than I am,” Remus said, leaning his head against the cold, frosted glass of the window.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Sirius said, but it did, and the words sunk through his chest like a stone through water.

“You understand, I know you do. I’m not a person like you are. Once a month, I’m a monster, and I lose everything human about me. There’s nothing human about --”

"Remus!” Sirius snapped, grabbing his arm. "Why won't you listen to me, why won't you understand that --"

He and Remus just looked at each other for one singular, electric moment, and in an instant their lips had crashed together like the thunder outside. Remus’s lips were chapped and cold but he tasted like sunshine, and Sirius wanted to live in that beautiful, violent kiss for the rest of his life. Remus pushed Sirius away, and Sirius sighed, and raised his hand to his lips, looking at Remus with a slight smile.

“It’s not ever going to work between us, is it?” he asked after a moment of silence.

“Likely not,” Remus said. “I love you, Sirius. If not the way you want me to.”

“Love you too, Moons,” Sirius said, and the storm which had long been brewing between them calmed.

“We’re still the Marauders,” Remus said, staring at the ground. He summoned their draft of their map from under James’ bed. “See? Once we give you a better nickname than Fluffy, our names will be right there.”

“I know,” Sirius said, a lazy smile spreading across his face. “C’mon, let’s go dangle Peter by his toes out the window.”

“You’re a bit cruel to the poor blokie, you know.”

“He’s the one who told you I loved you. I shall have my revenge.”

The common room was full of Gryffindors that night, all lying on the floor in nests of blankets and pillows, gathered around the blazing fire in the fireplace. Rain poured over the windows and seemed to shake the stone turrets of the castle.

Remus lay with his head on Sirius’s shoulder, and Sirius slept comfortably, leaning on James’s chest. Peter curled over James’s legs, his arms wrapped around one of Remus’s arms, all of them sleeping peacefully.

Lily, Marlene, and Mary, however, sat, talking, limbs draped over each other, Muggle music playing on Lily’s record player.

“Lil, I want the truth. Why do you hate Potter?” Marlene asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You hate the bloke. Why?” Marlene repeated, knocking her bare foot against Lily's head.

“He treats Severus terribly. He’s an arrogant bully, and so are his stupid mates.”

“What about Remus and Peter?” Mary asked.

“Remus is alright. Peter follows Potter around, and doesn’t have any bloody opinions of his own,” Lily said, her normally kind tone full of venom. “Why do you ask?”

“He might be a git, but he looks at you the same way my parents look at each other,” Mary said. “Potter doesn’t love me. He’s only making fun of me by pretending to be interested. It’s a stupid Marauder joke,” Lily said, crumpling up her scarf and throwing it at the wall.

“You seem upset,” Mary said.

Lily smiled slightly. “I’m not upset. I’m annoyed, because it’s not bloody funny anymore.”

“Lil, I don’t think it’s a joke,” Marlene said. “I’m telling you, I’m not blind. I see when a bloke likes you.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” Lily said. “You want me to believe that the same prat who hexed a first year yesterday for singing too loudly actually likes me?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Mary asked. “The way he looks at you.”

“What about the way Benjy looks at me?”

Mary and Marlene both groaned. “Benjy.”
“What’s wrong with him?”
“Nothing,” Marlene said, pulling a face. “He’s just respectable and handsome and has good marks and is good at Quidditch and treats you nicely. What a prat.”
Lily rolled her eyes. “Benjy’s wonderful.”
“Too wonderful,” Mary said. “He’s like someone’s idea of a bloke and not an actual bloke. Not that I don’t hate Potter, which I absolutely do — on your behalf of course — but he’s more real.”
“Well, if you like him, you can have him,” Lily glanced over at the slumbering James, his glasses endearingly crooked on his nose. “I’m not interested.”

“Oi, Antlers,” Sirius hissed not moments later, nudging James awake.
“Bloody hell, what time is it — never fallen asleep in the common room before —“ James said groggily.
“Shut up, will you?” Sirius whispered. “Evans. Sleeping.”
Lily was sprawled across the sofa, hair thrown away from her pale face, snoring softly.
“She looks beautiful. She’s drooling and she looks prettier than any girl in the bloody castle,” James slumped over, his bony elbows digging into Sirius’s legs. “You woke me so I could remember she’s got a boyfriend?”
“No,” Sirius said, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “I was awake, see, and she was talking about you.”
“What did she say?” James asked, suddenly wide awake and blushing like a sunset. “Sirius —“
“Mary and Marlene were saying how much you like her,” Sirius said casually, his hand resting on Remus’s shoulder, which softly rose and fell with each breath. “Antlers, my deer, she may not feel the way about you that you do about her, but she certainly doesn’t hate you as much as she pretends to.”
“Two deer jokes in one sentence?” James asked, messing up his hair with a nervous hand, and failing to pretend that this information had no impact on him.
“That’s fantastic,” James said, sounding pained. “But it changes nothing. She’s with Benjy.”
“MacDonald doesn’t like him.”
“Doesn’t she?” James asked, feigning disinterest. He glanced over at Lily once again, and back at Sirius, suddenly remembering the events which had taken place mere hours before. “How was your conversation with Moony? I didn’t want to ask while he was awake.”
“I don’t want to talk about that. He’ll hear you, besides.” Sirius grumbled, looking down at Remus. “Nonsense, he could sleep through the end of the world. Sirius,” James said affectionately, reaching for Sirius’s hand. He waited, in comfortable silence, for the other boy to speak. “Tell me.”
“He doesn’t think he can be with me, or anyone, because of what he is,” Sirius said, biting his lip. “You mustn’t speak to him about it.”
“The hell I —“
“Jamie,” Sirius warned.
“Alright, alright.” James stared into the fire. “Evans really doesn’t hate me, then?”
“Not as much as one would assume,” Sirius replied, and slowly pushed Remus’s head off his leg. He stood up, shaking out his charcoal black hair.
“What’re you doing?” James asked with mild amusement. He leaned back on the sound asleep Peter’s stomach.
“I need some air,” Sirius said vaguely.
“Your face has gone all red.” He sighed and stood, walking to the door with Sirius. “What happened?”
Sirius looked away, glancing at James out of the corner of his eye to judge his reaction. “Remus and
I kissed."
"You what?" James spluttered, staggering back as if Sirius had hit him. "Sirius, that’s fantastic!"
Sirius grinned. "It sort of was." His face fell. "But it’s never going to happen again."
"Mate, I hate to ask you this, but what was it like?" James pulled a face. "Odd thing to think about,
that," he said. "Ugh, never mind, don’t answer."
Sirius chuckled. "You look like you’ve just taken a bite out of someone’s dirty socks."
"Hello?" A muffled voice sounded from outside the common room. "Sirius, let me in!"
"Me?" Sirius asked. "Who in hell —" his face blanched. "Regulus."
He threw open the portrait door and glared into the small, scared face of his younger brother. "What
are you doing here, Reg?"
Regulus took a deep breath. "Mum and Dad sent a letter."
"Did they?" Sirius asked, narrowing his eyes. "What about?"
"You."
"Merlin, did they really," Sirius said tersely.
"They miss you. They said they wrote to apologize but you never answered."
"You’re damn right I never bloody answered!" Sirius said fiercely. "You saw what happened, you
—" he glanced at James. "Sorry, Jamie, will you give us a moment?"
James nodded and retreated into the common room, with a supportive squeeze to Sirius’s arm.
Sirius lowered his voice to a violent hiss. "They used the bloody Cruciatus Curse on me. You have
to hate someone to do that, Reg, you have to really want them to suffer."
"And maybe they did, in the moment, at least — but they feel differently now," Regulus said.
"I’m sure they do," Sirius said, cold in his fury.
"Just read it," Regulus shoved a neatly folded letter into Sirius’s hands. Sirius crumpled it between
his hands.
"Why?" Sirius demanded. "Reg —"
"Mum and Dad wrote to warn me about tonight."
"The storm? It’s only —"
"The storm isn’t the reason why we’re not to go outside, don’t you get it?" Regulus asked irritably.
"Then what is it? Do tell, I’m simply dying to know." Sirius’s handsome features had twisted in
anger. He looked positively mental, ready to hex his own brother into the ground.
"They wanted to warn us of the attack that Voldemort’s followers were planning on Hogwarts and
Hogsmeade tonight," Regulus whispered, with a suspicious glance at the Fat Lady, who was snoring
in her frame.
"What?" Sirius grabbed his brother by the shoulders. "Bloody hell, Reg, no one can get into
Hogwarts — and Dumbledore would’ve told us —"
"Not if he thought some idiot like you and your mates would go running off to fight them and get
yourselves killed for no reason," Regulus said hotly. "And yes, no one could get into Hogwarts, but
Mum and Dad have ensured that the Death Eaters know our family supports them to keep from
being killed if it came to a battle."
"Know that our family supports them?" Sirius scoffed. "You might -- I certainly don’t."
"Neither do I, Sirius, not really. I don’t want Muggleborns dead, or Muggles even, but He Who Must
Not Be Named has some other ideas I support."
"What other ideas?" Sirius demanded. "If murdering people is a good idea, it’s no wonder I don’t
spend holidays with your lot."
"My lot?" Regulus asked. "You might try to convince everyone otherwise, but my lot is your lot as
well."
Sirius clenched his fist around his wand in the pocket of his robes. "If you don’t leave now, I’ll be
forced to get James to help me hex you all the way back to the dungeon you came from."
"Are you referring to the Slytherin common room?" "Either that or the inside of our heartless
mother." Sirius said cheerlessly. "Goodbye, Reg. I hope you’re wrong about all of this."
"I assure you I’m not," Regulus said, but turned away, his footsteps clacking against the stone floors
as he walked away, rain pounding on the windows outside.
Sirius watched for a moment before retreating through the portrait hole, and running back into the soft, sleeping pile of the Marauders, of the brothers he had chosen.

“What’d he want, Paws?” James asked lazily, tying the laces of Peter’s shoes together as the other boy slept peacefully.

“Paws,” Sirius repeated. “I like that. Ah, he was spouting nonsense about how You-Know-Who’s followers are planning an attack on Hogwarts tonight. Something my parents told him.”

“Is it true?” Peter asked, suddenly alert with watery eyes bright and darting. “Could they be in the castle right now?”

“Of course not,” James scoffed.

“My parents have informants on their side,” Sirius pulled a face. “Doesn’t make it true, though. They wanted to make me choose a side.”

“Then have you?” Peter inquired.

Sirius laughed. “Of course I have, mate. I’m on whatever side you lot are on,” as he spoke, he looked at Remus’s peaceful sleeping face, the scars that crossed his nose and jaw, his long eyelashes. “No matter what happens.”

“What if we became Death Eaters?” Peter asked, looking down at his sweaty hands. “You’d always want to fight alongside us instead of against us?”

Sirius shook his head. "I'd not kill innocent people." He smiled, as though they were only joking about an entirely hypothetical situation, and not a war raging just outside the castle. I would, he thought, gazing into the fire. Sparks jumped from the fireplace and landed on the carpet, extinguishing in a hiss of ashes. For you lot, of course I would.

Remus blinked open tired eyelids, his blurred vision focusing on the others telling dramatized tales of all the battles they’d heard of. “What are you on about, then?” he asked tiredly.

Peter smiled at him. “The war.”

“What in Merlin’s name for?” Remus asked, his face growing hot. “We’re not involved in that—”

“There’s meant to be an attack tonight,” Sirius said. “I’m meant to declare I’m on the Death Eaters side if they reach the castle so they’ll spare me. But I’ll not be doing that.”

“Obviously,” Remus said dryly.

“We should go protect the castle like the teachers are,” Peter said, in a pained voice which suggested he hardly wanted to say such a thing at all. “If the attack really is happening.”

“Peter, darling, you’re simply full of ideas,” James said. “Shall we?”

“Lily will want to, if we go,” Remus said, a fear spinning through his mind that they would be killed for a cause they didn’t yet truly understand, that they would die or that they would fight and kill and Remus would be the same monster as a human that he was as a werewolf. “We should wake her.”

“Evans won’t involve herself in such a dangerous affair,” Sirius said disdainfully.

“Who says I won’t?” Lily asked, sitting up in a blur of pale skin and dark red hair. “If we’re defending people like me, and Muggles like my family, of course I’ll fight, and proudly!”

James blinked at her in awe. “You really are a Gryffindor,” Lily smiled slightly, but not at James. Never at James. “So I am,” she said, as if it surprised even her. “Between Slughorn and Sev, they’d almost had me convinced I should’ve been a Slytherin.” She stood and joined them at the door, and a crowd of Gryffindors snuck from the common room, burning with excitement and a lust for the thrill of battle with none of the knowledge of the carnage outside. They sprinted past the giant ticking clock and into the cold open air, rain stinging their faces and forming miniature puddles on the ground. Each drew their wands before they reached the village, with a sense that this was the most important thing they had done in their short lives.

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They charged over the Hogwarts grounds, to the source of the cries echoing from Hogsmeade. Fire blazed in one of the cottages, and a row of dark robed, masked figures marched from the scene, a dark mark burning in the air.

The small group stopped in their tracks, wands sinking back to their sides. "They're gone," Remus said, gazing at the burning scene. "It's already too late." A tear rolled down Lily’s cold face. “We have to go see if everyone’s alright. The battle’s over, it’s all we can do.”
Peter nodded, his voice steady for once. “She’s right.” Accompanied by a collection of other students, they descended into the village and into the wreckage of cottages and shops. Remus extinguished a fire with a flick of his wand, such a different beast than the warm light which glowed in the window of the Gryffindor Tower. The rain pounded relentlessly over their heads, and without offering explanation or apology, helped the teachers to repair the damage done.

“Was anyone killed?” Peter asked Remus tearfully as he waved his wand and sent a brick wobbling through the air and back into the wall to which it belonged. “Don’t think so,” Remus replied. “Thank Merlin.”

“This is worse than I thought it would be,” James said, his hazel eyes looking hollow. “This isn’t at all how I thought it would feel to be in a war. This is such a lovely place, and they’ve come here for no reason to —“ he pointed his wand at a collapsed bit of wall and it reassembled with a loud click.

“I don’t understand it, Sirius, really I don’t.” He attempted to dry his glasses on his soaking robes, smudging raindrops across the lenses. Sirius pointed his wand at James, sending a bolt of light which left his glasses gleaming and dry, repelling every drop of rain which rolled down his face.

“Thanks,” James said, his proud shoulders sunken to a slump.

“What if they’d made it to Hogwarts?” Peter asked, his soft voice barely audible over the pounding rain. “Would we have hid like they’d tell us to? We would be able to see —“ his voice broke, and he rubbed furiously at his bloodshot eyes.

“No, Peter,” Sirius said heavily, turning his face away from the others so they wouldn’t see the tears in his eyes. “We’d come here to fight, every time. That’s what Marauders do, isn’t it?” James looked at the other boy with equal parts pity and crushing misery. “I’d assume so.”

“I didn’t think we were soldiers, he thought, a bit of his boyish spirit dying inside him. I thought we hexed random people and made fun of Snivellus, became Animagi, made maps.

“It’s going to be like this,” Remus said, and helped the others to their feet, walking back up to the castle slowly, with heavy hearts and eyelids. “For the rest of our lives, it’s going to be like this.”

“Maybe someone will have got rid of You-Know-Who by the time we’re of age,” Peter said, rather hopefully.

“And maybe not,” Sirius replied.
A cold wind swept through McGonagall’s office as she regarded the Marauders, Lily, Marlene, and Mary with steely grey eyes narrowed to angry slits. “Care to explain yourselves?”

“Listen, Professor, we wanted to help, that’s all,” James said impatiently, tapping his foot against a leg of the desk.

“Potter,” she said, her voice bringing to mind the slick black ice which resided on the lake during the winter. “You willfully placed yourself, Mr. Black, Mr. Lupin, Mr. Pettigrew, Miss Evans, Miss MacDonald, and Miss McKinnon into what could have been extreme danger. What could possibly justify such a thing?”

“It was my fault,” Sirius said, a false charming smile erasing the sadness which had taken over his face. “My apologies, Professor. I heard there would be an attack on Hogwarts and encouraged my fellow students to join me in the defense of —”

“You’ve become a master in the fine art of falsehoods, Mr. Black,” McGonagall said. “And I do wish I could believe you. However, I trust you had no intention of turning against us and joining the Death Eaters.”

“Of course not,” Sirius said indignantly.

“Professor,” Remus said, distressed. “We would never —”

“I believe you, Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall said firmly. “I simply desire a more concrete explanation. How on earth did you know the attack was happening?”

“My parents sent me an owl to warn me,” Sirius said.

“My,” McGonagall said, having reached the conclusion that his parents had no regard for Hogwarts and cared for Sirius and Regulus only. “How considerate of them. Miss Evans?”

“Yes, Professor?” Lily asked.

“Is this the truth?”

“In part,” Lily said, with a quick glance at the Marauders, who had adopted the expressions they wore when attempting to escape from trouble. “We followed Sirius of our own free will. We couldn’t bear to let Hogwarts be attacked without at least attempting to defend it,” she added passionately, green eyes glimmering. “It’s our home!”

“Touching though your sentiment may be, you are underage, and thus must be punished accordingly. Although,” her eyes softened slightly. “I am proud of you for displaying the bravery that is a shared trait among Gryffindors.”

The Marauders grinned at each other.

“And extremely disappointed,” she added.

“Mostly proud, I hope?” James suggested.

McGonagall inclined her head slightly. "However, the severity of what you have done cannot be overlooked."

“You’re not going to take house points off, are you?” Remus asked, sounding concerned.

McGonagall gazed at him over the rims of her shining spectacles.

“We can’t lose the house cup again,” James said loudly.

“He’s right, we’ve worked so hard!” Mary insisted.

“You own niece is captain of the Quidditch team, you can’t set us up for failure —” Sirius said angrily, eyes blazing.

“I quite agree,” Professor McGonagall said coolly. “And I certainly don’t intend to. There will be a detention for each of you, in which you will be separated from each other to avoid future conspiring.”

“But Professor —” Sirius protested.

McGonagall held up a hand. “I feel I’ve been quite reasonable. I see no need to punish the pride of Gryffindor house for a fourth year running.”

“That’s not our fault —” Peter piped up.
McGonagall gave him a withering look. “In fact, Mr. Pettigrew, it is almost entirely your fault. As you and your friends seem to have a penchant for rule breaking.”
“Well, I suppose that’s true,” James said rationally.
Remus stared daggers at him.
“For some of us,” James remedied. “However, anything that puts the great house of Gryffindor in danger of losing the house cup once again is outside our realm of activity, I assure you.”
“And yet you walked all the way to Hogsmeade in the hopes of what? Sacrificing yourselves for an attack which lacked fatalities, or, indeed, any damage which could not be repaired with only the mildest exertion?”
“That’s not all that happened, though, is it, Professor? That’s not how Death Eaters do things,” Sirius demanded.
“Hold your tongue, Mr. Black,” McGonagall snapped. “The details of what happened in Hogsmeade ought not to concern you. You could have found yourselves in the midst of a disaster.”
“It was a disaster,” Marlene said. “Wasn’t it? Hogsmeade is a beautiful place, and they destroyed it!”
“Destroyed is rather the dramatic term, Miss McKinnon,” McGonagall said, her eyes softening slightly. “You may all go.” They all stood in a rush, except for Remus, who sat there, looking quite small and scared.
“We’ll wait for you outside,” Peter said as the others hurried from the room.
“What is it, Mr. Lupin?” McGonagall asked, beginning to mark essays with swift, harsh strokes of her quill.
“You see, Professor, I think I’d like to change dormitories,” Remus said, uncertain where this sentiment had come from, an overwhelming need to get away from the Marauders and the war and the secrets he was tired of keeping.
McGonagall looked up sharply. “Lupin, I understand that you, Potter, Black, and Pettigrew are quite close. Is there a particular reason for this?”
“No,” Remus shook his head.
“You realize that my hands are tied unless you can provide an adequate reason,” McGonagall said, not unkindly. “I’m sorry, Lupin.”
Remus thought back, with a rush of overwhelming nostalgia for the pillow fights and the mild hexes and all the nights spent talking well into the golden hours of the morning. “I’m afraid I can’t explain, Professor. I just think it would be best.”
“I see. Would you be willing to bring this request to Professor Dumbledore?” McGonagall asked.
Remus’s throat felt thick and his eyes burnt with tears. “Of course. Whatever’s necessary to have the change made as soon as possible.”
“I understand that your condition can make your life very difficult, but surely it is not impossible to coexist with your fellow students? Irritating though they may be, I doubt that your well being is in danger.”
“Professor —” Remus said, wishing simultaneously that he could take his request back and that he had never had to make it in the first place.
“If you insist, you can speak with Professor Dumbledore later today.” She paused, as if considering something. “Lupin, this doesn’t have anything to do with Black, does it?”
“Sirius, Professor?” Remus asked, forcing his face into a mask of false innocence.
“Forgive me, Lupin, but I have noticed there’s been a distinctive lack of note passing between you and Black in recent weeks. Are you quite sure you can’t manage to resolve this dispute?”
“It’s been resolved,” Remus said, unable to bear the memory of kissing Sirius, of Sirius’s face when Remus had told him there was no future between them. “I just think it’s the only solution. To prevent further conflict.”
“You keep them out of a great deal of trouble. I shouldn’t like to see Potter and Black left to their own devices with only the easily influenced Pettigrew to assist them.”
“Neither would I,” Remus said, scratching at one of his scars. “I’m sorry, Professor, I have to get to Astronomy.”
McGonagall nodded. “Please consider this, Mr. Lupin. As your head of house, I’m not certain it’s
the best choice for you.”
“I’m sorry, Professor,” Remus stood up and ducked his head as he left the room, wiping tears hurriedly from his eyes.
“What did you want to ask her, Moons?” James asked as he leaned against the wall, levitating his glasses over the heads of passing students.
“Nothing,” Remus said quickly.
James and Sirius exchanged a look.
“I swear, it was really nothing. C’mon, we’ll be late,” Remus started down the hall, fighting the gaping hole he felt growing where he knew his heart was supposed to be.
“Have you ever said those words about Astronomy before?” Sirius asked, with a joking smile that didn’t quite match his concerned demeanor.
“Maybe it won’t be as boring today,” Remus lied. “I hear we’ll be analyzing planetary positions again.”
“Excellent background noise for my daily nap, I think,” James said. He snatched his glasses from the air and placed them back on his nose. “Race you to the Astronomy Tower?”
“If you insist,” Remus sighed, and the Marauders pushed past crowds of students, their laughter a bit more forced than usual.
“Did you see that?” A passing Hufflepuff said to her friend. “That’s James Potter and Sirius Black! They’re the ones that hexed Henrietta’s nose green!”
“Not only that,” her friends added. “Frederick told me that Sean told him that Maria heard from Melody that James and Sirius were there when the Dark Mark was cast last night. I bet they have a plan to stop You-Know-Who.”
“But they’re fourth years, how are they going to do that?” the other asked skeptically.
“Well, they’re brilliant. They’ll think of something.”

“Dumbledore will see you now,” M told Remus as she was leaving Dumbledore’s office, adjusting her Head Girl badge, freshly restored from an unnamed member of the Gryffindor Quidditch team having charmed it to say Quidditch Head instead, after an early morning Quidditch practice in which three members of the team had sworn they’d gone partially deaf from all her shouting.
“Thanks,” Remus said. "Quidditch Head,"
"Potter's told everyone, hasn't he?" M said ruefully.
"Do you really need to ask?"
She shook her head. “The password’s Sugarcane,” she added, stalking off down the hall.
Remus watched as the eagle statue responded to her words by turning, allowing Remus to ascend into Dumbledore’s office with increasing trepidation.
“Good to see you again, Remus,” Dumbledore said, standing by the window as an owl flew from the windowsill and out into the air. He gestured for Remus to sit.
He sat, and glanced around at the cluttered shelves and the many paintings which hung on the walls. “Yes, it’s quite untidy, I’m afraid,” Dumbledore said, as if having guessed Remus’s thoughts. He crossed the room and sat at his desk, folding his hands and waiting.
“I don’t mind,” Remus replied.
“Professor McGonagall has informed me that you’ve requested to change dormitories,” Dumbledore said, matter-of-fact.
Remus held his breath, waiting for an answer. “I’m afraid I must decline.”
Remus nodded. “I understand.”
“I feel I owe you an explanation. I take it that this comes as a disappointment,” Dumbledore said, piercing blue eyes making Remus feel like an insect under a magnifying glass.
“That’s not necessary, sir. I realize how busy you are.”
“Ah, but I believe it is, Remus. You see, I simply cannot believe that the same people with whom you wreak havoc upon this school on a daily basis would so easily be rid of you.”
“They don’t know yet, Professor,” Remus said.
“I will not invade your privacy by demanding any sort of excuse from you. However, if there is any future problem, don’t hesitate to contact me immediately.” Dumbledore said. "Remus, you see, I understand that your parents made a poor decision in locking you away like an invalid for so many years. But in the future, see to it that you are not...how shall I put this? Following in their footsteps by not allowing yourself to take opportunities for happiness, I believe.''
"I will, sir. Thank you," Remus said reluctantly, and stood to leave.
“Oh, and Remus?” Dumbledore called mildly after him.
“Yes, sir?”
“Try to avoid telling tales of the attack on Hogsmeade to the first years. I daresay they’d never sleep again.”
“I’ll keep it in mind, professor,” Remus said.
Dumbledore chuckled.

“Where have you been, then?” James asked as dozens of pieces of parchment flew around the room, rearranging themselves in different shapes and forms, folding and creasing and, most frequently, crumpling into balls and hurling themselves at Remus as he walked through the door.
Remus caught a piece of parchment. “Walking. Is this going to be the map?”
“We had a bit of time to kill,” James said. "Well, by that, I mean that Snivelly was walking down the corridor at the same time as us and I’d forgotten to prepare a hex for him, so we'll be waiting until tomorrow for another run-in with the slime ball.”
“Actually, we have Arithmancy now…” Peter pointed out.
“Exactly,” James said.
“And I reckon we’ll figure it out for ourselves, won’t we?” James asked. “Moony, you look as if you’ve been crying. Has something happened?”
“Oh, no,” Remus said, pointing his wand at a stray piece of parchment. “There, that looks correct now, doesn’t it?”
“Think so,” Sirius said, and paused, pretending to examine the blank pile of parchment which hovered in the air. “Say, Moons? If you were only out walking, why did our dearly beloved Quidditch captain M herself come in here a few minutes ago to tell us — well, firstly that we have Quidditch practice tonight and if we’re late she’ll have our heads — but more importantly that you, our very own Remus Lupin was speaking with Professor Dumbledore?’”
“I was,” Remus said, and sat on his bed, fiddling with the holes in the sleeves of his robes. “What’s it to you?”
Sirius feigned a gasp. “What’s it to me? You hear that, James?”
“You’re being dramatic again,” Remus said, grinning despite himself.
“What can I say, it’s a family trait. In all seriousness, Moons, you’re going redder than Evans’ hair — “ Sirius said, and with a wave of his wand slammed the folded and neatly arranged parchment to the ground.
“Which is more of a burgundy sort of colour, really,” Peter piped up.
“And what I was going to say, Pete, is that Moony only goes this particular shade when he’s lying. Let's have the truth.”
“I should work on that,” Remus groaned. “It was nothing, really. I had a question, you know — “ he was struck by a sudden burst of inspiration. “Because the, er, full moon happens to be during exams this year.”
“Really?” Peter asked. “What did he say?”
“That he would figure it out,” Remus pulled a face, breathing a quiet sigh of relief. If they find out, they’ll never forgive me...who do I think I am, trying to ruin this -- they're the only people who've ever cared about me outside my own family... guilt descended over him like a shroud.
“It’s just like you to be worried about exams before it’s even Christmas, Moons,” James chuckled. Remus breathed a slight sigh of relief. “Er, yes, isn’t it?” I will not tell them, I will never tell them, he thought, digging his nails into his palms. “So, what progress have you made.”
“We’ve come up with a format for the parchment,” James said frustratedly, allowing it to flutter into the air and unfold before Remus’s eyes, blank, useless. “And not much else.”

“Isn’t this my Potions essay?” Remus said, looking at a corner which had a few scribbled words on it and a large inkblot where Remus had given up altogether.

“Technically, it was,” Sirius muttered.

The four of them gathered around the floating parchment. “We’ve got to draw the entire castle, don’t you think?” Peter suggested.

“Certainly, Pete,” James said, fluffing up his hair with his hands. He pulled a quill from the mess of hair, almost nostalgic for his antlers.

“You’re storing quills in there?” Sirius demanded.

“It’s getting long, and I’m hoping it’ll grow down instead of out this time,” James said absently.

“May as well put it to good use. Quills out, boys, we’ve got work to do.”

“How many windows are in Gryffindor Tower?” Peter groaned as he neatly sketched rectangles to represent them. “There’s got to be a hundred.”

“There are,” James said cheerfully. “Have fun, mate.”

“At least he’s not in charge of the bloody secret passages,” Sirius complained, and slashed a line of ink across the one under the Whomping Willow. “Moons, you know this one. How many stairs are there?”

“Twelve,” Remus answered, suddenly monotonous. “Four, then a landing, then three more in the tunnel to the Shack. In the Shack there’s another set of twenty.” His eyes shut, as though he’d fallen into a trance.

Sirius looked over at him and placed a hand gently on Remus’s knee, to drag him back from the Shrieking Shack, back to where the Marauders sat, the map on the floor between them. Remus blinked, his breathing quite shallow, and focused on Sirius, the elegant way a black tendril of hair fell across his face as he worked.

“Moons, you’ve gone white,” James commented. “You feeling alright?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” Remus muttered, directing his attention to the section of map before him.

“McGonagall’s desk is in the back of the room towards the left, isn’t it?”

“Think so,” James replied. “Siri? Thoughts?”

“We really ought to know it by heart,” Sirius rolled his eyes. “Seeing as we spend roughly half our time in detention.”

“Ah, old McGooeles loves us. I reckon she’ll be quite proud of this.”

“One hopes she’ll never find out,” Remus said dryly, and began to doodle alternating patterns of footprints around the edge of his section of the map, having given up on the exact dimensions of the transfiguration room.

“Anyone up for Wizard’s chess while we work?” James suggested, dragging his old chess set from under the bed. “Be careful with it this time, Peter, I still can’t get the Butterbeer off the poor knights.”

“They haven’t got feelings, you know,” Sirius said, beginning to juggle a few pieces from the board, all the while whistling a Muggle song. He didn’t know how it had gotten stuck in his head as if someone had applied a permanent sticking charm to it, or even where he’d heard it first, but he made a mental note to find a poster for the band and put it somewhere in his house where Kreacher would see it.

“Nonsense,” James snatched the king out of Sirius’s hand, smoothing dust off its crown. “Alright, as I have a desperate desire to watch Sirius cry like a girl when he loses, I’ll play against him first.”

Sirius scoffed. “You wish, Potter.”

“So, we’re on our own with the map, then?” Peter asked.

Sirius and James didn’t respond. “Pawn to B5,” James commanded, glaring across the board at Sirius.

Remus sighed. “Thought so.”

He flopped onto his stomach and began to draw the Astronomy Tower. “This is going to take years.”

“Not if you hurry, it won’t,” Sirius pointed his wand at the map, causing his drawing of a bookshelf to duplicate.
“There’s no need to use magic,” Peter muttered, looking at his wand with great distaste. “Just because you wish you were a Muggle —” Sirius said.

“No I don’t,” Peter said sharply. His voice lowered. “I just don’t think we have to use magic for everything. That’s why wizards like your parents follow He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, you know, because they use magic for everything and think they’re better than everyone else.”

Sirius’ eyes narrowed, but he shrugged, playing this off as if it had no impact on him. “You’re right, Peter.”

“I — I am?” Peter asked in surprise.

Sirius nodded and turned back to his game. “Jamie, deer, I’m going to destroy you. Knight to E4.”

“Horrible move, Paws, really.” James said, sliding his glasses up his long nose with a determined finger.

“How dare — I don’t — “ James sunk down in his seat, sharp elbows knocking over chess pieces. “Sirius,” he complained. “That was unfair!”

“Unfair that you’re so terrible?” Sirius asked. “Doubtful. Checkmate.” He stretched. “C’mon, Moons, you can play if you like. That is, only if you think you can beat me.”

Remus stood and stretched, his back cracking. “I know I can,” he replied.

James gave a loud wolf-whistle. “Interesting,” he said, folding his hands in his lap. “We’ll see about that. Now, Peter, if you were to draw the Potions chamber, would you draw where the tables are?”

Peter nodded.

“Damn.” James picked up his quill, dunking it in ink and spilling it over his hand as he did so. It ran over his skin like blood and dripped onto the carpet of their room, making Peter grimace and cast a quick cleaning spell over it.

“Peter, really, we don’t mind the mess,” Remus told him.

“I do,” Peter replied. “My mum likes a clean house, and so do I,” he said, with a degree of pride.

Among Peter’s few magical strengths, most prevalent was his skill in household charms.

James wiped his hand on the back of Sirius’s robes and turned to the map, his eyes narrowed in concentration. His overlarge glasses slipped down the bridge of his nose once again. “Anyone going home for Christmas?” he asked.

Remus turned away from the chessboard for a moment to reply. “Don’t think so. My dad’s going to Romania for a month to deal with a Ministry crisis over Christmas holidays, so I’ll be here.”

“I think I’ll be going home,” James said. “Mum and Dad want to redecorate the house, and they say they want my opinion.”

“Which means they want my opinion, as your taste is nearly as bad as — well, let’s say Snivelly’s.”

Sirius remedied.

“I’m offended,” James said mildly. “He thinks wearing robes three times the size they should be and treating everyone around him like dirt makes Evans interested in him. Shame she’s quite in love with Fenwick.”

“James, I’ve seen you trip jinx a first year to impress her.” Remus said briskly. “Now, for the love of Merlin, please draw the Potions chamber before I stick your quill to your forehead.”

James laughed aloud. “That’d be a sight, wouldn’t it?”

“People would still notice that rat’s nest you’re calling hair before they noticed the quill,” Sirius said, a wicked smirk playing around his lips. “And yes, Deer, I’ll go home for Christmas with you.”

“You will?” James asked. “Excellent. You’ll need all your pureblood taste to prevent my mum from turning the entire house pink. Moons, Ratty, are you interested in joining us?”

Peter nodded enthusiastically, and Remus shrugged.
“Alright, if you’re certain,” he said.
“I am,” James said, and turned back to the map. “Say, for our Christmas prank, if we were to
charm all the Slytherin’s robes to stick to the ceiling —”
“It would be fantastic,” Sirius finished his sentence for him.

Snowflakes swirled around the Marauders as they trudged through a snowbank one cold December
afternoon, scarves wrapped loosely around their necks. “ — and I didn’t see the poor bloke again for
a week,” Sirius finished his story about the time he’d transfigured his head into a lion’s head to scare
a first year who’d been sitting in his and James’ chair in the common room.
James snorted. “You should do that at a Quidditch game, give Madam Hooch a nice shock.”
The four of them finished the walk to Care of Magical Creatures in silence, footsteps in sync with
one another, leaving four lines of footprints behind them, crossing where James and Sirius had
chased each other around Remus and Peter, who both rolled their eyes and continued to walk.
Since the night before, the school had been filled with garlands, christmas trees, and lines of mistletoe
along the walls under which one Lily Evans was snogging Benjy Fenwick, causing James to nearly
choke on his own tongue mid-sentence.
Remus quickly charmed Benjy’s shoelaces to stick together and walked on before anyone had
noticed.
“Moony, you haven’t done the Arithmancy homework, have you?” Sirius asked.
“Course I have,” Remus replied, wrapping his scarf more tightly around his neck as he spoke.
“We’ve a test today, you know.”
“Yes I know,” Sirius said. “The question is whether or not I’ve bothered with it.”
“Am I wrong in supposing the answer is no?” Peter asked, guiding James down the hall as the other
boy glared over his shoulder at Lily and Benjy.
“You’re most certainly not, Pete. It’s Arithmancy, I could do it in my sleep.”
Peter wrinkled his nose, looking rather like the rat that was his patronus. “How?”
“Well, you couldn’t do it. You’ve got to have common sense, if you know what I mean,” Sirius said.
Peter looked down.
“How d’you manage it then?” James asked Sirius, his cheeky grin lighting up his face. Sirius
elbowed him in the ribs.
“Hurry up, you lot, we’ll be late,” Remus said, walking slightly ahead of them, ignoring his aching
limbs.
“It’s Care of Magical Creatures. One can only hope we’ll be late enough to miss the entire lesson,”
James joked, but followed Remus down the hill anyway.
“I’ve an idea for you, Jamie,” Sirius said, his eyes glinting. “We roll Peter down the hill like a
snowball.”
“I love it,” James replied. “On the ground, Peter.”
Peter obeyed, with the air of one very much put-upon. “If I catch my death of cold, it’ll be entirely
your fault.”
“Who will you leave all your possessions to when you do?” Remus asked, almost seriously.
“You lot,” Peter replied. “Alright, I’m ready. I never wanted to survive long enough to take Potions
for O.W.Ls, anyway.”
“Brave last words,” James nodded. The others started Peter rolling down the hill, and he closed his
eyes tightly as he was surrounded by snow. He rolled to a stop at the bottom, quite dizzy, at the feet
of none other than Mulciber and Avery.
“Well, well, well,” Avery said, folding his arms. “Pettigrew seems to have rolled directly to us. What
do you suggest we do with him, Mulciber?”
“Transfigure him into an actual snowball and leave him to melt,” Mulciber suggested, with a cruel
cackle. Peter let out an involuntary whimper.
“Bloody hell,” James said. “We’ve sent him to his death.”
“Only one way to get down there before they hex him into bits,” Remus said.
“What is it?” James asked.
Sirius grinned at Remus. “Rock and roll.”
“Is this really the time for puns?” Remus asked in exasperation.
“It always is,” James said gravely, and with those final words pushed Sirius down the hill in front of him and jumped after him, landing in the soft, powdery snow. They emerged at the bottom of the hill, where Peter was being dragged by the hood of his robes over to a large tree.
“Oi!” Sirius yelled, drawing his wand from behind his ear. He held it at eye level with Mulciber, face twisted with fury. “Drop him, or I’ll bat bogey hex you!”
“In all fairness you’ll likely do that anyway,” James said, wand pointed at Avery. “Now, boys, we don’t go looking for this sort of thing to happen, but I have to say that I’m not exceptionally displeased about it. Paws, Moons, care to do the honors?”
Sirius grinned like a child as he fired a bat bogey hex into Mulciber’s face.
“It’s been fun,” James said cheerfully, slinging an arm around the shaking Peter.
“We should really do this again soon,” Remus added.
“Ta,” Sirius turned, and the others followed without being prompted, their movements synchronized as though they’d rehearsed this exit several times.
“You alright, Peter?” James asked.
Peter nodded shakily. “I’m never doing anything you tell me to again.”
Sirius’s shoulders shook with laughter. “Sure, sure. Oi, Peter, why don’t you run up to Professor Kettleburn and ask him to shake your hand — or well, your finger,” he remedied, picturing the disfigured right arm belonging to none other than the crotchety, half blind, weather beaten professor they all knew and mildly disliked.
“Oh, alright. For a galleon?” Peter negotiated.
“Mm, try a sickle.” Sirius suggested.
Peter sighed and scampered off.
“Told you,” Sirius said proudly.
“Morning, Evans,” James said as he sat down in the seat next to her at breakfast. She gave him a look that could have made a troll drop dead. “Ooh, no response? We are in a bad mood. Sirius, thoughts?”

“What’s happened, Evans?” Sirius asked, enjoying this immensely. Lily took a large bite of toast and stared straight ahead, chewing determinedly.

“MacDonald, help me out here. I’m missing my morning insult, and I simply cannot function without it,” James said, his voice a low growl which was several octaves lower than normal. Remus, Sirius, and Peter all sighed in unison.

Mary, too, ignored him.

“McKinnon?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Did you hear something, Mary?”

“Absolutely not,” Mary said, glaring at James and Sirius now. “Dead silence.”

“We’ve done something, Jimmy,” Sirius said. James nodded gravely. “I fear we’ve crossed a line with this lot. We may never hear Evans call me a ‘cruel, slimy git’ again.”

“Are you sure she wasn’t talking about Snivellus?”

“Quite,” James said mournfully. Remus sighed. “Lily, can I at least give them a hint?”

Lily looked at him. “Inform Potter and Black that I am no longer speaking to them on the grounds that they’ve turned my boyfriend’s hair green.”

James and Sirius burst into raucous laughter, nearly falling out of their seats. “She thinks that — “

“We would — “

“Moons,” James said, laughing so hard that tears formed in his eyes. He took off his glasses to wipe at them. “Please tell Evans that it wasn’t us.”

“It — it wasn’t?” Peter asked.

“Course not, that prank’s been done. We’d’ve at the very least charmed his hair to yell ‘Gryffindor’ every five minutes,” Sirius said.

“Nice one,” James agreed.

Lily reacted as if she hadn’t heard them.

Remus gave a long-suffering sigh. “Lily, I’ve been asked to tell you that it wasn’t them.”

Lily scoffed. “Who else would have done it?”

“It wasn’t them,” Remus repeated. “Or me, or Peter.”

Lily sighed. “Oh,” she said. “Well, in that case.” She looked at James and Sirius with the utmost hatred. “You’re still arrogant gits, whether you’re responsible for this particular atrocity or not.”

She turned back to Mary and Marlene, her face breaking into a friendly smile. “What are your plans for Christmas?” she asked.

Marlene sighed. “My mother has become genuinely obsessed with singlehandedly defeating the Dark Lord, so I’ll be learning the fine art of barrier and shielding spells.”

“At least you’ll be ready for Defense next year,” Mary said optimistically.

Lily laughed, her smile so stunning that James’ breath caught in his throat. “Listen, Mar, at least your parents know who the Death Eaters are. I tried to explain to my family and they accused me of making up nonsense to scare them.”

“That’s the problem with Muggles,” a Slytherin interrupted Lily as she passed by their table. Her mouth curled in a sneer. “They don’t see it coming until they’re dead.”

“What’s she talking about?” Peter whispered. “What does she mean in the end?”

“Those are my parents you’re talking about,” Lily said, cheeks flushing. “Won’t make a difference in the end, will it?” the Slytherin asked, her voice a slow, drawling taunt. Lily gripped the edge of the table until her fingernails broke, her hands trembling with anger.

“What’s she talking about?” Peter whispered. “What does she mean in the end?”
Sirius’s face clouded. “If You-Know-Who wins the war, it won’t matter because they’ll be dead anyway.”

Peter looked down at his plate.

Snow fell outside the Gryffindor common room in large, wet flakes, sticking to the glass of the window as Gryffindors packed up their dormitories, prepared to go home for Christmas. Most people were carrying their trunks towards the door, but James Potter was sleeping by the fire, glasses askew, snoring loudly enough to drown out the howling wind outside.

“Hey, mate, do me a favor and wake up the snoring idiot by the fire,” Sirius told a passing first year, who had piles of books in his arms.

“No problem,” the first year chirped, poking James awake with the edge of a book. “Happy Christmas!”

“And a very happy Christmas to you, er…” James looked up at the first year. “What’s-your-name.”

“Franklin,” the first year said brightly. “I really love what you’ve done with the common room!”

James looked around at the Gryffindor common room, which the Marauders had filled floor to ceiling with ribbons and bows. “It is nice, isn’t it?” he mused. “Loads of color. Well, I have to be off to help my parents decorate our house,” he grinned at the first year. “You staying here for Christmas?”

“I am,” Franklin said earnestly. He reminded James vaguely of Peter, and James grinned.

“See you in the new year, then,” James said cheerfully, dashing up the stairs to his dormitory. “Oi, mates, hurry up or we’ll miss the train!”

“Which wouldn’t be the worst thing,” Remus said.

“Ah, hush, it’ll be fun. We can work on the map.”

“What’s the map?” Franklin inquired.

“Never you mind,” James said dismissively. “OI! RATTY! GET OFF YOUR LAZY ARSE and GET MOVING!”

“Sorry, James,” came Peter’s submissive reply as he struggled down the staircase with his large trunk.

“We’ve got magic for a reason, you know,” James said.

Peter’s face went slightly red, and he stared at his trunk. His stomach turned in embarrassment. Magic was never easy for him as it was for James and the others. His wand movement was always shaky, technique barely even effective. Peter didn’t know if he could handle the embarrassment of a failed simple spell in front of such gifted wizards, even though they cared about him.

Remus levitated Peter’s trunk the rest of the way down the stairs.

“Thanks,” Peter mumbled.

Mr. and Mrs. Potter met the Marauders as soon as they got off the train, with warm hugs, smelling of cinnamon like James did. “Happy Christmas, boys,” Mrs. Potter said, standing on tiptoe to ruffle James’ messy hair. “Jim, you’re beginning to look a bit scruffy, I think we’re going to have to cut that hair of yours.”

“How dare you,” James said, sniffing loudly.

“Monty, dear, you’re the hair professional,” Euphemia said. “What do you think?”

“Just a bit of Sleekeasy’s would work magic, I think,” Fleamont said, drawing up calculations in midair with one hand.

James rolled his eyes. “Dad, you know better than anyone that the potion of yours won’t work on Potter hair.”

“I’ve made a slight adjustment to it — here, I’ll show you,” he pulled a vial of experimental Sleekeasy’s from the pocket of his robes. “Sirius, will you allow me to —?”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Sirius said with a grin.

Fleamont chuckled and dumped a bit of the potion into James’ hair. “See, James, I’ve been working day and night on this, and I think it may even work on you.”

“It’d be a miracle,” James muttered, as the curls and twists in his untamable bushy hair relaxed,
“What do you think, Sirius? Green or red?” Mrs. Potter asked, holding up pillow covers. Both were covered in embroidered reindeer.

Sirius shook his head, trying not to think about Slytherin and Gryffindor and his family. “Red. Moons, thoughts?”

Remus shrugged.

“Green suits the walls better,” Peter said as he straightened the carpet on the floor.

“Jimmy, what do you think?” Mrs. Potter levitated the pillows over to the couch.

James lay on the ground, throwing his father’s potions ingredients at the ceiling. A jumping bean bounced off the ceiling and landed on Peter’s head. “What about gred?”

“That’s not a color —"

“Reen?”

“Also not a color,” Remus said apologetically.

“Make a decision, darling,” Mrs. Potter said to James with a tight smile.

“Oh, I don’t know,” James said, faking a conflicted expression. “I’ll have to go with red. Sorry, Peter. Got to support Gryffindor.”

“Thank you, boys,” Mrs. Potter said with a smile. “Jimmy, please stop throwing your father’s potions at the ceiling.”

James wrinkled up his nose. “But, Mum…”

Mrs. Potter pointed her wand at the array of jars, bolting them to the floor, and smiled at her son.

“Why don’t you put your energy to good use and start decorating the tree?”

“Absolutely,” James jumped to his feet and ran for the Christmas tree with a handful of ornaments, stretching on his toes. “Dammit — Moony, can you reach this?”

Remus gave a self-satisfied grin and reached easily to put an ornament on the tree.

“I bloody hate being shorter than you,” James grumbled.

“Don’t worry, Deer, maybe you’ll grow one day,” Sirius said from the floor, lounging on the Potter’s newly transfigured couch, which had arms now adorned in bells.

“Maybe I’ll put a shrinking charm on our Moony while he sleeps,” James said, with a gleam in his eyes.

“Peter, will you tell me something?” Mrs. Potter asked, levitating cushions across the room.

“Yes,” Peter said nervously.

“Why do you all use such strange nicknames for each other?” she said this amicably, with a confused smile and a shake of her head, and yet Peter reacted as if he’d been asked to murder someone.

“Er, well, I mean, I — ha, well, it’s actually —“ his voice shook, his face shiny and pink.

“Inside joke,” Sirius interrupted, slinging an arm around Peter’s trembling shoulder. “What Pete here is trying to say is that it’s a running inside joke. Can’t be explained. Very sorry. Anyway, let’s —“

James cleared his throat loudly. “Marauders meeting. Sorry, Mum, we’ll be gone for a while. You have fun with that…with your…” he gestured to the living room. “Y’know. Alright, c’mon you lot.” The Marauders followed James out of the room, shoulders slumped. “What do you want?” Sirius asked. “And, more importantly, what the hell is a Marauder’s meeting?”

“Works to get us out of an awkward situation, doesn’t it?” James asked.

“Suppose so,” Sirius said. “What’s this about, then?”

“My mum can never know about Moons — or about us almost being Animagi — any of it!” James hissed.

“Why not?” Peter asked.

“She may literally drop dead,” James said seriously. “Think about it — she loves the lot of us, and if she found out that we’ve done something this stupid and illegal, she’ll be devastated. It’s best if she falling over his eyes.

“James, it works,” Peter said in awe.

James rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his hair, which looked as close to the shiny elegance of Sirius’s as it was ever going to get. “Nice work, Dad.” Fleamont beamed.
just never knows, mates, you've got to trust me on this.”
“Alright, fine,” Sirius shrugged. “What do we tell her about the nicknames, then?”
“Well, we could turn tomato red and stutter for a few minutes like our Ratty here,” James teased.
Peter blushed. “I was under pressure,” he offered weakly.
“Boys!” Mrs. Potter called from the living room. “What do you think? Snowmen or Christmas trees on the curtains?”
The Marauders all rolled their eyes, perfectly timed to the second. “Just a moment, Mum,” James yelled. He turned back to the Marauders. “If any of you tell her, I swear I’ll break the Statute of Secrecy to Petrify you and push you down the stairs.”
“And we’d do the same to you,” Sirius lied easily, as though any scenario in which he would ever hurt James was even possible.
“Say, Remus, what are you going to do when, er…” Peter trailed off upon seeing Remus flinch and shift from one foot to the other.
“When his furry little problem arises once again,” James suggested.
Remus smiled. “I’ll be going home, and it’s all been arranged with my parents, there’s no need to worry.”
“What do I tell mine? You’ve gone out for a walk and you come back looking like you’ve been thrown off the roof?”
“No offense, James, but you’re an excellent liar, so I don’t think that should be a problem,” Remus said cheerfully.
“Jim! Come in here!” Fleamont yelled from the dining room.
“That’s my cue,” James said, making an attempt to ruffle his Sleekeasy’s smoothed hair. “Yes, Dad?”
“You won’t bloody believe what the idiots at the Daily Prophet have written!”
“My dad’s gotten into arguing with journalists recently. ‘Cause of the war, and all, Sleekeasy’s isn’t selling like it used to,” James explained. “Not that he’s not making money with his other potions — he’s got some healing ones out now, but he’s quite bored. Although,” he grinned. “It’s great fun watching him get angry at a paper.” He put a hand to his ear. “What’ve they said?” he yelled.
Fleamont stormed up the stairs, the Daily Prophet clenched in his hands. “This absolute idiot — this Merinda Something — said she bloody approves of the new Ministry decree that all Muggleborns have to register to prove their blood status! The nerve of these people — “
“I’m getting a strange sense of deja vu,” Sirius said. “Except when this conversation happens at my house, it’s usually my mother yelling about how glad she is that Merinda Whatever-her-name-is supports ‘us pure-bloods.’”
James nodded. “Alright, let’s see it,” he looked at the paper, squinting over his glasses. “What?” he spluttered. “Oi, listen to this. ‘All of us here at the Daily Prophet are in joyous support of the new Ministry decree that all Muggleborns have to register to prove their blood status! The nerve of these people — “
James nodded sympathetically. “He’s gone mad,” he whispered in Remus’s ear. Remus chuckled.
“The Ministry is full of idiots,” Sirius agreed emphatically with Fleamont. “I don’t know what they think they’re playing at, trying to convince people to support Death Eaters because they’re scared. These are people’s lives — ” his anger made it impossible to speak, this fuming, boiling rage that made him feel like there was a dragon about to burst from his chest and burn everything around him. Fleamont nodded and put a hand on Sirius’s shoulder. “You’re going to change things one day. All of you. It’s too late for old folks like me and Effie, but you’ve got a chance.” Sirius felt detached from his own body, aware that this was the first time someone had looked at him like he was their own son, and told them to do something important with their lives.
James snorted. “Dad, let’s relax a bit, shall we?”
“Boys, are you going to help me decorate or not?” Euphemia yelled.
“No,” the Marauders chorused.
“Why don’t you go outside for a while? Find the cat, I haven’t seen that ridiculous hairball in quite some time.”

“James, you have a cat?” Peter asked, face lighting up.
“Had,” James corrected. “The thing’s a menace. Runs away almost every week.”
“So what you’re saying is you think we should look for it for the rest of the day,” Remus said.
“Obviously,” James nodded. “See you later, Dad. Try not to get into a fight with the Minister of Magic while we’re gone.”

“Actually, dear, he’ll be at the party we’re going to tonight,” Euphemia called down the stairs.
“Don’t worry, Monty, I’ll stun him so you can get a good hex in!”
“Don’t even joke, Mum,” James sighed. “The last thing I need is to be breaking you out of Azkaban.”

Euphemia’s laughter echoed down the stairs as the Marauders stepped outside into the snow, the bright white light making them squint. “What’s your cat’s name?” Peter asked, with seemingly genuine interest.

“We call him The Beast,” James said grimly. “Because he’s enormously fluffy and he looks a bit like a furry dragon whose face got squished by a frying pan.”

“How oddly specific,” Remus grinned.

“His name’s Cheese.”

“Cheese?” Sirius asked, with eyebrows raised and a wicked grin spreading across his face.

“Cheese,” James repeated gravely. “I was five when we found him. He’s orange and round, and I wasn’t exceptionally creative. Cheese,” he called. “You great idiot, you’re going to freeze to death!”

There was a muffled meow from beneath a snowbank.

“That’d be him,” James said, looking at the snowbank with great disdain, but still full of affection.

“Not very bright, is he?” He dropped to his knees and began digging for the shivering cat, which crawled into his arms immediately, shaking snow out of its long fur. “Hey, Cheese, where’ve you been? Having fun?”

The cat meowed at him and pawed at his face.

“Are you seeing this?” James asked in a deadpan as Cheese crawled onto his head as if to make a nest out of his hair.

Sirius laughed so hard he fell into a pile of snow, his dark eyes crinkled as he gasped for air. “The only good thing, he chuckled. “About your hair at that length is that it serves as a pillow for your cat.”

“You’re so cruel,” James pouted. “Oh, about that party my parents are going to — “

“In which they’ve established their plans to assault the Minister,” Remus said, wincing at the pain in his back as he stood, tossing a snowball from one hand to the other.

“The very same,” James replied. “Anyway, they’ll be out all night, so if we want to break into their fire whiskey and get trashed tonight, we absolutely can.”

Peter froze. “What? Er, are you — no, we shouldn’t — I mean —”

“It’s nearly Christmas, Pete, why don’t you live a little?” Sirius asked.

Remus and Peter exchanged a look, Peter’s small, watery eyes pleading with Remus to fix this. “Er, actually, James…I don’t feel comfortable getting ‘trashed,’ as you put it, in your very lovely and kind parents’ house.” Remus said, quite firmly.

James blinked in surprise. “Oh, alright then. I suppose we’ll drink butter beer and eat copious amounts of sweets. Unfortunately, we’re also in charge of this pile of fluff, which, I assume from the way Paws here is looking at it, is going to be a bit of an issue.”

Sirius sniffed in distaste. “I’m not much of a cat person.”

“Yes, we know,” Remus grinned. “Likely because you’re literally a dog person.”

Sirius chuckled. “That was awful.”

“You laughed, didn’t you?” Remus asked, the smile quickly fading from his face. He was struck with an inexpressible feeling that there was a world, somewhere, beyond the snow and the dark, leafless tree that stood in James’ backyard, a world in which Remus and Sirius were in love and
knew it. A world in which Sirius would look at him as though he was the most wonderful person alive. A world in which, for once in his life, Remus was not second best, not only tolerable, but truly and unequivocally loved.

“Moons, you look as if you’ve forgotten how to speak. I’ll give you a hint — now, repeat after me — ‘let’s’”

“Let’s,” Remus repeated, his heart pounding. He could see Sirius’s cold hand, held slightly away from him as if waiting for someone to grab it. So Remus did, on an impulse he couldn’t have controlled if he’d wanted to. “Have a snowball fight.”

“Moons, I love your ideas,” James declared, and threw the snowball he’d been holding directly at Sirius’s face. Sirius ducked swiftly, a blur of pitch black hair and laughter so warm it could have melted the snow. The snowball hit Peter in the head, causing him to fall over onto poor Cheese. The cat screeched and raced into the bushes.

“Damn it!” James shouted, and threw a snowball after the retreating animal for good measure. “We won’t be seeing him again for a month. Well, it was a good five minutes, Beast,” he yelled. “I’ll miss you, even though you sit on my head sometimes. Now you’ve gone and done it, Peter.”

Peter was too ashamed to retaliate with a string of ‘you threw the snowball’s and ‘it wasn’t my fault!’s so he stayed silent and formed snowballs in his hands, dropping them instead of throwing them back.

“This is war!” Sirius yelled, and tackled James into the snow. The other boy landed with a muffled shriek, long limbs flailing. James hit Sirius in the face with a fistful of powdery snow, and both guffawed and pulled Remus and Peter into their fight.

“Goodbye, boys,” Euphemia said as she and Fleamont removed their broomsticks (top of the line, of course) from the cupboard next to the front door.

“Ooh, you’re flying?” James said, full of childish excitement. Euphemia adjusted the sleeves of her shimmering purple robes.

“I’m a bit out of practice,” she confessed. “But it seems ridiculous to take a carriage for such a short walk, doesn’t it?”

James nodded enthusiastically.

“He loves to see Euphemia and Fleamont fly,” Sirius explained to Remus and Peter. “Because both of them were rubbish at Quidditch when they were young, and they aren’t any better now. Look at ‘em, well dressed and classy and ready to get into an argument about Muggle rights with loads of Ministry idiots, and they can’t fly to save their lives. C’mon, let's go watch.”

Euphemia and Fleamont waved goodbye, rising into the glittering night sky. “We’ll be back late, boys.”

“Have fun,” James said. “Don’t drink too much.”

Fleamont ruffled up his hair much the same way James so often did, the Sleekeasy’s he’d applied to it barely effective. “Ha, ha,” he said with a grin. “Have fun, Jim.”

“Don’t call me Jim,” James called after his parents as they flew over the horizon and out of sight, wobbling slightly.

Hours later, half a moon framed the sky, casting light through the windows of the Potters’ house, and the Marauders lay on the couch, surrounded by bottles of butter beer, pillows, and books.

“What shall we do?” James asked, picking up another stack of books.

“Truth or dare,” Remus suggested dryly, taking a sip of extremely old butter beer that James had found in the attic.

“What even is that, Moons?” James said, flipping through an old copy of Magical and Mischievous Games which hadn’t seen the light of day since Fleamont had read it when he was James’ age. “Is it a game? A phrase? What does it mean?”

“I think we should play it. It’s fun, it doesn’t require anything life threatening, and all I want in this world is to see you attempt to climb the stairs on your hands as a dare,” Remus said with a grin.

“Oh, alright,” Sirius sighed. “Explain the rules.”

“It’s called ‘truth or dare,’ it couldn’t possibly be any more straightforward. It’s a Muggle game.”
“I had gathered that,” Sirius said.
“Peter, I assume you’ve played it?” Remus asked.
Peter nodded.
“Care to share your experiences for our cynical friends?”
“I played it with a Muggle, Samantha, who lives down the street from me,” Peter said.
"Ooh, Samantha," James said. "What's she like?"
Peter glared at him. “I ended up climbing the roof of her house. My dare was to jump onto the
chimney of the next house over, but I accidentally floated over all the houses on the road and
eventually falling down the chimney of my own house. It was the first time I’d shown any sign of
magic.” Peter said.
“Actually, that sounds quite fun,” Sirius said, slightly impressed. “If you insist, we can ply.”
“I’ll start,” James volunteered. “What do I do?”
“You purebloods have a serious lack of common sense,” Remus teased, savoring the image of James
and Sirius’s confusion. “You say ‘truth or dare,’ and then the other person says which one they’d
like, and you have to make something up.”
“Okay, Bark, truth or dare?”
Sirius groaned. “Dare. And I just want to let you know that your nickname creativity is decreasing
by the minute. It lacks finesse.”
“I dare you to come up with a better name for yourself, then,” James said with a smirk.
“Well now you’re just giving up. What are the terms? Do we try it out for a bit and see if it works, or
am I harnessed with this nickname for eternity?” Sirius asked, leaning against the couch cushions.
“I like eternity,” Remus commented.
“Seconded,” Peter piped up.
“Alright…er…claws! No…er…tail…tongue -- never mind, forget I ever said that! Er…bark…fur…NOT
fluffy…er…paws…nose…lick…snuffles — No, not Snuffles!” he said hastily as James burst into
laughter at the very prospect of calling Sirius “Snuffles” for the rest of his life. “Er, let’s go back to
paws. Paws…what are those things on dogs paws called?”
“Paw pads,” Remus said, rubbing the bags under his eyes.
“Paw pads…Pad paws…Foot pads…pads foot…Padfoot! Padfoot, yes, I like that.”
“Snufflefoot,” James said.
“That doesn’t even make sense,” Sirius grumbled.
“I’m sorry, Padfoot, I didn’t hear you over your nonsensical word combination,” Remus said.
“Peter, truth or dare?” Sirius said, glaring at Remus and James.
“Dare,” Peter said with a toothy grin.
“Alright, I dare you to balance as many bottles of butterbeer on your nose as you can,” Sirius said.
Peter shrugged and drank the last few drops of a bottle of butter beer, balancing it on the end of his
rather pointed nose. He grinned while the others laughed, helping him to pile a staggering five bottles
onto his face. They fell with a clatter, clanging hollowly on the ground, and Peter burst into giggles,
butter beer running in rivers down his face.
And then, eventually, James asked, “Remus, truth or dare?”
“Truth,” Remus said, the hairs on the back of his neck prickling.
“Alright, now, I’m sorry to ask this, but you have to tell the truth, don’t you?” James couldn’t stand
not to ask, after hours of this game, after skirting around the question and getting indirect answers
and lies.
“Yes,” Remus said suspiciously.
“Not to make anyone uncomfortable, but why did you lie to Sirius and tell him you’re not in love
with him?” James asked, hazel eyes dancing with the flames from the Potter’s fire. This question was
intended only out of kindness, out of a desire to see Remus and Sirius look each other in the eye and
not immediately look away.
Remus choked on his butterbeer. “I’m sorry, what?”
“I’m certain you heard me,” James took a long sip. “I realize this is a difficult subject for you, but it’s
driving me mad, seeing you and Sirius acting like nothing’s wrong.”
“I — I —” Remus stammered, looking at Sirius desperately. Both Sirius and Peter looked away. James put a hand on Remus’s shoulder. “I saw the way you looked at him during our snowball fight, Remus, and it wasn’t ‘I wish you weren’t in love with me’ and it wasn’t ‘I don’t love you’ and it wasn’t ‘I’m glad we’re still friends.’ That was an ‘I love you’ look, and I’ve grown up with parents who’ve been married almost forty years and who look at each other every day like they’ve only just fallen in love, so I know what I’m talking about. This is how the game works, so you have to tell me.”

“Because I’m scared he’s only doing it to get back at his parents,” Remus said. “I don’t want to be hurt by him, I don’t want to lose any of you, I couldn’t…"

James nodded. “Sirius, Peter, will you give me a moment with Remus?”

Sirius pulled Peter to his feet and dragged him out of the room, silent, heart pounding in his chest.

“Moony, you love Padfoot, don’t you?”

Remus nodded, watching sparks from the fire.

“Then I’m begging you, give this a chance, before you lose him.”

“James, I can’t,” Remus’s voice broke. He couldn’t stand it, the thought that he was somehow hurting Sirius. “I can’t, there’s a war on and our families are on different sides of it —“

“Sirius is not part of that family anymore,” James said fiercely. “Sirius is my brother, and my parents love him.”

“He may reject everything they stand for, but they’re still his family. His cousin Bellatrix killed twelve Muggles last week, that’s not just going to go away,” Remus confessed.

“What are you saying? You don’t trust Sirius because of his parents?”

“Do you?” Remus challenged. “He could turn on us —“

“But he wouldn’t, Moons, he would never do that, don’t you understand? I can’t believe you don’t trust him, after everything he’s done for you —“ James said hotly.

“Aright!” Remus put his head in his hands. “Aright, okay, I love him too, are you happy now?”

“No!” James ran his hands through his hair, curls standing on end. “I’m not bloody happy, because I swear to Merlin if you don’t figure this out I’m going to go mad!”

“Why do you care so much?” Remus asked softly, putting his hand on James’ slightly trembling shoulder.

“Because I know you went to Dumbledore to ask to change dormitories,” James stared into the fireplace.

“What? How?”

“I’m not an idiot, Lupin,” James snapped. Remus couldn’t help but notice that James had stopped calling him ‘Moony’ as if he’d lost the right to it, the right to be a Marauder. “I knew the second you walked in the door that you were lying, and of course I knew why. It was because of Padfoot, and it was because you’re scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Hell if I know, mate,” James said.

“You don’t hate me for asking to change dormitories, do you?” Remus said tentatively, afraid to hear the answer.

“Course not, I know it wasn’t because of me or Peter. It’s because of Sirius, it’s always because of Sirius, and you almost threw away your Marauder-ship for him, which means it’s gotten too far!” James yelled. He threw his mum’s favorite vase at the wall, and it shattered, glass shards spilling across the floor.

“What do you want me to do? We’re never going to be together, it’s never going to work. Sirius deserves someone who isn’t…” Remus closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, James, I know you just want us to be happy.”

James nodded, and laughed a bit. “I broke my mum’s vase. She’ll have my head for this.”

Remus chuckled.

“Moons?”

“Yes, Potter?” Remus said.

“I dare you to go talk to him.”
Remus stood. “Alright.”
Before he reached the door, Sirius was standing in the doorway, and they were looking at each other, and somehow they both knew.
Fairy Lights

Sirius and Remus stood in the Potter’s parlor, fairy lights reflecting on their faces, in their eyes. “James talked to you,” Sirius said, unable to hide the smile that was spreading across his face. “Yeah, he did,” Remus replied cautiously.

“What’d he say?”

“That I’m an idiot,” Remus laughed, brushing his hair away from his eyes. Sirius chuckled. “He’s wrong about that.”

“He also said I should tell you the truth,” Remus added. This was likely the most nervous he’d been in his life. His hands were sweating, he couldn’t breathe. “I’m sorry for everything,” Remus said. His eyes looked gold in the light. “Really, I’m —“

“Moons, forget it,” Sirius reached out and took Remus’s hand.

“I just...I’m worried that it’s not going to work between us, and I’ll lose you forever. You know I love you, but...it can’t, I can’t —“

“I’ve had enough of that, Remus, you’re scared and so am I, but I know we can do this,” Sirius said. This was the most he had ever appeared to care about anything — his hands shook, and there were tears stinging his eyes. “We’ve got to.”

Remus nodded. “Alright.”

“Alright?” Sirius asked, incredulous.

“A smile spread across Remus’s face. “Yeah, alright.”

“Excellent.” Sirius said, unable to contain his joy. “So you’ll go to Hogsmeade with me when we get back to school, then? As my boyfriend?”

Remus’s face went pink, unable to stop smiling. “I suppose I will.”

Sirius’s face broke into a beaming grin, proud, almost the way he looked when he pulled off a difficult prank or learned a new Quidditch trick. Remus couldn’t stand it anymore, and without thinking, he pulled Sirius towards him and kissed him.

James poked his head through the door for a moment and grinned so widely his cheeks hurt. He could be distinctly heard cheering, “Peter, they’re snogging!”

“Quite disgusting,” Peter replied.

“Patience, Rat, I’m certain there’s someone you’d snog if given the chance.”

“No,” Peter said calmly, adjusting his jumper as if it didn’t quite fit correctly anymore, as if nothing ever would. For what was not the first or the last time in Peter’s life, he felt completely apart from the Marauders, a different kind of person. James loved Lily, although she didn’t love him back, and Remus and Sirius loved each other, and Peter was alone. “No one.”

James shook his head and shrugged, and a dreadful thought occurred to Peter. He doesn’t understand me, Peter thought, and somehow the very idea made tears sting his eyes. Maybe no one does.

“Are you alright?” James asked.

“Oh, yes, I’m fine,” Peter said, wiping at his bloodshot eyes. “Absolutely fine. Really, perfect, no need to worry.”

The joking smile faded from James’ face, and he sauntered across the room, all casual arrogance even when being kind. “You’re not in love with Remus too, are you?” he asked. “Because I’m sorry mate, but I sort of just forced him and Sirius to go out, and it’d be a shame to ruin that.”

“No,” Peter gave a sniffling laugh. “It’s not that.”

“Sirius? I swear to Godric, it’d be just my luck to have three roommates who are all in love with each other.”

“I don’t love either of them.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Peter, if you’re in love with me, you’re out of luck. Sirius and I had this conversation just the other day, and I’m most definitely not into blokes.”

“Why have I got to be in love with someone?” Peter asked, much more harshly than he’d intended.
“Oh, I see,” James said softly. “You’re not, and it sort of scares you. Hey, don’t worry about it, mate, you’re going to be fine. It doesn’t matter.”
“It does, though, doesn’t it?” Peter said. “At our age, everyone’s got a boyfriend or a girlfriend — or, in Esmerelda Barrow’s case, both — and I’ve never even been interested.”
“Ah, who cares,” James said. “Trust me, it’s better to be alone than to be hopelessly in love with someone who’d just as soon see you dead as go out on a date with you.” He drained a bottle of butter beer, glaring into the fire, picturing Lily smiling and laughing and never looking at him the way he wished she would, never seeing the depth of his feelings. “Anyways, I hope Evans is having a nice Christmas holiday.”

At that very moment, Lily and her sister were standing on a snow-covered hilltop outside their house, the weak sunlight running through their hair. They stood facing each other, not quite willing to make eye contact.

“It's nice to see you,” Lily said, dusting snow out of her dark red hair. “Have you had a nice school year so far?”
“It’s been alright,” Petunia crossed her arms. Lily noticed that she’d gotten taller, and her face more pinched and bitter, her mouth permanently pursed in an expression of disapproval. She barely looked like herself anymore, like the sister who’d loved Lily before Lily had gone off to Hogwarts and ruined everything. “Had a nice time being a freak?”
“It’s been lovely, thanks,” Lily said coolly.
“I haven’t seen that Snape boy around here yet,” Petunia said. “Or has he been locked up?”
Lily flinched. “Severus is my friend.”
“What about Benjamin? Is he your boyfriend now?” Petunia sounded slightly envious.
“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Lily said hotly, her cheeks bright pink.
“I’ve got a boyfriend too,” Petunia said proudly. “His name’s Vernon. He’s Matilda’s cousin, you know. From school.”
“Oh,” Lily said. Her face broke into a smile. “That’s amazing, Tuney!” she held out her arms, uncertain if she would be hugged back.
Petunia ran into her sister’s arms for the first time in four years, and Lily felt hot tears stinging her green eyes. “I’m sorry for everything,” she said.

Over Petunia’s shoulder, the river by their house unfroze and began to flow once more, despite the freezing weather. Lily’s heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t let Petunia see, couldn’t ruin the temporary ceasefire in the war that had been waged between the two of them for years.

“It’s alright,” Petunia said, although her narrowed eyes suggested otherwise. “I forgive you.” Lily laughed. “Tell me everything that’s happened since I left last summer,” for the first time in months, her eyes were bright and truly happy, her cheeks blooming roses, the freckles on her nose like stars.

Severus was watching the two of them from behind a tree, sallow skin waxy in the winter light, his dark robes casting a shadow against the unblemished, cream colored door of the Evans family house.
“That boy is here again,” Mrs. Evans muttered to her husband as she hung the wreath on their door.
“Severus Snape. I know they’re best friends, but I really can’t stand the way he looks at her.”
“Good job he goes to that school all year, or I’d tell him to get off our property and never come back,” Mr. Evans huffed.

“Oh, don’t be silly, we can't do that,” Mrs. Evans said affectionately. “Anyway, isn’t it nice to see Lily and Tuney talking again?”
“It really is.”

Severus was walking swiftly behind the two sisters, up the hilltop where they sat next to each other, laughing. Severus's hand reached out to tap Lily on the shoulder, and Petunia shrieked, “Get away from her, you freak!”
He staggered back as if she’d hit him.

“Petunia, he’s not going to hurt me. It’s just Severus.” Lily scrambled to her feet.
The words made Snape recoil, and hurt registered briefly in his eyes before closing over an unfeeling
mask that no longer resembled the friend Lily had met on this very hilltop, when she was so young and had no idea of the ways of the world and the war.

“Sev, I’m so sorry,” Lily jumped to her feet. “It’s wonderful to see you outside school.” She was always saying things like that, Severus noticed with mild amusement. 'Wonderful' and 'fantastic' and 'incredible,' and she genuinely meant it. Every time. “Can Sev and I have a moment, Petunia?” Petunia nodded, her mouth pursing into an angry, thin line. “Of course,” she said, and stalked off into the house, slamming the door behind her. Lily flinched.

“I never see you anymore, Lily,” Severus said desperately, hoping she would say something like ‘I miss you,’ but she didn't.

Instead, Lily smiled. “Yeah, I know. Mary and Marlene are a bit possessive. And Benjy…”

“Benjy,” Severus scowled, spitting out the name.

“Oh, c’mon, I know you don’t like him —"

“I think you can do better,” Severus said. “It’s not about whether or not I like him.”

Lily rolled her eyes and sat down in the snow, drawing circles in the ice with one gloved hand.

“You’re only saying that because you think no one’s good enough for me. You’re like the overprotective brother I never had.” She said this with great affection, but it felt as if she’d stabbed Severus through the heart.

“Instead you got Petunia,” Severus said.

“Tuney’s not all bad. Like you always say, she’s only jealous that we can do magic and she can’t. I think she’s ready to be my sister again now, really.”

“That’s great,” Severus said. He didn’t voice his thoughts about how Petunia would only hurt Lily the next time she was reminded that Lily wasn't a Muggle. Instead, he sat next to her, and sketched a rather rude drawing of Benjy into the snow. Before Lily could see it, he swept it away. “Have you done your Potions essay?"

“I have,” Lily said proudly. “Slughorn’s going to love it. I drew the entire potions room and wrote half a side of parchment more than we needed. What about you?”


“We’re not meant to be learning that yet,” Lily said, a bit enviously. Severus had entire books full of new spell ideas and potions. “You’re really clever, Sev, you know that. You don’t have to hang around with people like Mulciber and Avery.”

“They’re not as bad as you think,” Severus said. “They’re nice to me.”

“And no one else,” Lily said, wrinkling her nose.

“I could say the same of your McKinnon and MacDonald, couldn’t I?”

Lily looked down. “I suppose so. Alright, we’ll drop it.”

“Will you swear to not talk about our being in different Houses for the rest of the holidays?” Severus asked, holding out his pinky finger.

Lily linked it with hers. “I swear.”

The two smiled at each other, and at once it was as though they were eleven years old again, with no notion of the divide that had already started to grow between them.

Remus woke up with the first twinges of the wolf picking at his bones on Christmas morning. Peter was so excited he was practically bouncing, because for the first time in such a long time, he was celebrating Christmas with a whole family, even if it wasn’t his own.

James was laughing, wearing reindeer antlers on his head and was wrapped in tinsel like a shroud, courtesy of Sirius and Remus who had swaddled him in Christmas decorations as he slept. And Sirius was smiling so widely it hurt his cheeks, because Mr. and Mrs. Potter had run into the room before the sun had risen to wish ‘their boys’ a happy Christmas, and for once, he felt overwhelmingly loved.

Christmas Day that year was cold, ice frosting their windows, snow falling heavily outside the door. The room was warm and full of light, and the Marauders were laughing and happy, all of them singing Muggle Christmas carols, led enthusiastically by a giggling Peter.

James’s eyes wandered towards the window, noticing someone standing in the yard. Someone whose
long robes trailed into the snow and who managed, even in the cold, to look warm.
James stopped singing suddenly, the smile fading from his face. “Er, Mum, Dad, I think you should —”
His parents exchanged a look. “One moment, please,” Mrs. Potter said anxiously, her hands clasped in front of her. She and Fleamont ran into the yard, the blood drained from their faces, to meet Professor Dumbledore where he stood in the snow.
“Hello, Fleamont, hello, Euphemia,” Dumbledore inclined his head. “I’m sorry to intrude upon your Christmas.”
“It’s no bother,” Fleamont said, exchanging a worried look with his wife. “I take it you haven’t come bearing good news.
“No one does these days.” Euphemia said fretfully.
“Regretfully not,” Dumbledore said. “May I come in?”
“Of course,” Mrs. Potter said. “Right this way.” She led him inside, her hand trembling. “Would you like some tea? I’ll put the kettle on.”
James looked around at the Marauders and ran into the kitchen, nodding politely at Dumbledore.
“Mum,” he said quietly, closing the door behind him. “What’s Dumbledore doing here?”
“Professor Dumbledore, James,” she reprimanded. “I don’t know yet.”
“But you know it’s something awful,” James persisted. “I can tell.”
She smiled and ruffled his hair. “You’re sweet, Jamie. But you’ve got Sirius and the others waiting out there, and it’s Christmas —”
“Mum,” James said, with arched eyebrows. "Seriously."
“I’ll tell you all I can after he leaves,” she said. Her hand was still shaking as she waved her wand to cause teacups to fly from the shelves and arrange themselves on the countertop. The tea poured itself into the cups, and Euphemia turned her back on it, shooting a stern look at James. “Don’t let me catch you listening through the door.”
“Me?” James feigned innocence. “I would never. Sirius, on the other hand…”
Mrs. Potter sighed and levitated the teacups over to the table in the dining room. “Please behave yourself, James.”
“I’ll do my best,” James said with a cheeky grin, and dashed after the Marauders into the living room, slamming the door behind him.
“What’d she say?” Sirius asked. “And what the bloody hell is Dumbledore doing here?”
“She told me to mind my own business,” James said, rolling his eyes. “She swore to tell me the truth later.”
“Oh,” Remus said, with a grin. “We could eavesdrop instead.”
Sirius leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “You’re brilliant.”
Remus went more red than the baubles on the Christmas tree. “Thanks.”
The Marauders exchanged a mischievous look, then scrambled towards the door, grabbing an empty glass from the cabinet to press against the door. “Peter, you’ve got the best ears, you listen.”
Peter pressed his ear against the door. “Dumbledore’s saying something about…the war…He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named…Muggle-borns…danger…” a sheen of sweat was breaking out on his forehead. “Someone else do this, it’s far too stressful!”
He handed the glass to Sirius, who tied his hair back and dusted off the glass with a disgusted expression.
“The Ministry is going to issue a decree next week,” Sirius said, eyes narrowed. “To force all Muggle-borns and non purebloods to wear a sort of magical identification to prove the Ministry has verified them as a witch or wizard.”
“What?” James demanded, slamming open the door and sitting down next to Dumbledore, nearly knocking over three chairs in the process. “They can’t do that! That’s Evans, that’s Peter and Remus and MacDonald — it’s absolute shit, if you’ll pardon my language.”
Dumbledore nodded. “Understandable, under the circumstances.”
The Marauders joined Dumbledore and the Potters at the table.
“James,” Fleamont said, a hint of a warning in his voice.
“Fleamont, I believe they’re all old enough to hear the truth, if you don’t mind,” Dumbledore said, looking at the Marauders over the edge of his glasses. Fleamont looked slightly pained, but nodded.

“I assume from your reaction that you heard about the new Ministry decree,” Dumbledore said. “How could you let this happen?” Sirius yelled, wanting to shatter the eternal calm on Dumbledore’s face. “Those are people, people who are going to be killed for their blood status — “

“I have no control over the Ministry’s decision,” Dumbledore said rationally. “Although your passion does you credit.”


“Your family comes from a long line of blood traitors,” Dumbledore avoided answering directly. “And while you are not at risk from the Death Eaters as such…”

“It’s because of Remus,” Sirius said, feeling his chest constrict. Remus glanced worriedly at Euphemia and Fleamont, who were gazing at him in confusion.

“Ah,” Dumbledore said, clearing his throat. “I see that Mr. Lupin has not yet informed you of his condition. I’m sorry to give you away in this manner, Lupin.”

Remus could do nothing but nod his approval of Dumbledore revealing to James’ parents what he had hoped they would never discover.

“Mr. Lupin has a condition known as Lycanthropy. He is a werewolf.” Dumbledore said. "He is not at all dangerous, and there's no need to worry for the safety of your son."

Euphemia tried not to look shocked. “I had assumed it was something like that,” she said, pursing her lips. Remus’s heart skipped a beat as he waited for her to speak again. “Please, Remus, don’t feel ashamed of your condition in our household. You’ll always be safe here.”

Remus fought the strange urge to hug her, and instead smiled, the scars on his face stretching.

“And as for Mr. Pettigrew, you will also have to report to the Ministry with your mother and register.”

Peter bit his lip. “Alright.”

“When will this new decree be announced?” Remus feigned a detached interest, reaching for Sirius’s hand under the table to keep his own from trembling.

“Relatively soon, I believe. Certainly within the week,” Dumbledore said. “I’m afraid that life at Hogwarts — and indeed, everywhere — is going to change quite rapidly.”

“But…you’ll protect everyone, right?” Peter asked. The childish question slipped from his mouth before he could stop it.

“Of course,” Dumbledore said kindly. “I shall do my best. And I trust that this conversation will remain confidential?”

“Of course,” Fleamont and Euphemia said.

The Marauders all looked at each other and shrugged. “Well, no promises,” Sirius said diplomatically. “I can keep a secret, but I won’t say much for this lot.”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I suspected as much.”

And in his typical fashion, Dumbledore was gone, with a loud crack that echoed through the suddenly silent Potter household.

Fleamont and Euphemia’s hands somehow found their way together, and the two of them exchanged a frantic, terrified look that James had never seen on either of their faces before. And it was then that the sinking feeling that something was wrong hit James.

“We should, er,” James’ mouth felt dry. “We should probably go, shouldn’t we?”

Sirius had already reached the door, and pushed his way out into the snow, jaw clenched. The others followed him, standing in a line in the Potters’ garden. Remus was holding his trunk, which he’d somehow packed and brought downstairs without any of them fully registering what was happening, or the fact that he was leaving.

“I don’t want your family in danger,” Remus said, in place of a goodbye. He stood by the garden gate, snow settled on his slumped shoulders. He did not explain any further, but stepped into the ice-slicked road.

“Will we see you again?” James called after him.
“Don’t be dramatic, Prongs,” the new nickname had emerged from his brain, sudden, and fitting perfectly. “I’ll see you lot at school. I just…” justification was impossible, it was impossible to speak over this new horror that had closed around his throat.

“Prongs, then,” Sirius said. “Actually, James, I like it.”

“Me too.” James said, straining against the sense that this was the last time he would see Remus for quite a while, maybe even ever.

“Do you need someone to take you home?” Peter asked Remus.

“I grew up in a Muggle town,” Remus said. “I know how to take a train.” His footsteps dragged down the road, and the others watched as his limping silhouette faded into the distance, into the snow and mist.

Sirius waited a moment before speaking. “Blimey, I completely forgot to kiss him,” he ran a hand through his hair, looking slightly embarrassed. “I’m such an idiot, we won’t see him again until next week.

"Well, Padfoot, how does it feel? You and Moony are officially dating, after these many, many weeks of suffering. Personally, I'm ecstatic," James grinned.

Sirius just smiled, his dark eyes bright.

“The war is coming to Hogwarts, isn’t it?” Peter asked, sitting in the snow. He had barely heard the others’ conversation. “There’s nothing Dumbledore can do anymore.”

James hesitated, uncertain, but Sirius nodded. “You’re right.”

Remus was alone, again, soul-crushing isolation burning through him. The cold floor bit at his skin, and he gazed through the small window into the yellow light coming from inside his house. The wolf inside him strained, desperately trying to remember where he was. Perhaps the Shrieking Shack…but no, the floorboards were not shifting beneath the weight of his feet, and there was no scent of mildew and blood...

Then he remembered, through the haze of pain, that he was at home. In the shed next to his house, the cold, empty space his parents would carry him to when he was young. He tried to remember the last time he’d felt no pain, the last time he’d been able to forget about the werewolf that never fully left him alone, and found nothing in his memories, nothing but kissing Sirius, and the marvelous idea that the two of them were in love, that once this was over he would see Sirius again.

The moon had not quite risen outside, but the wolf knew it’s time was near. It writhed within his chest, roaring, desperate to escape. There had to be something to stop this, to keep himself from transforming, but the moon was rising and he was losing control again, losing control of his thoughts. And then the wolf spoke to him, for the first time in his life, the werewolf began to whisper horrible lies into his ears, telling him that no one cared, that no one loved him, that he should let the werewolf consume his consciousness and never attempt to return. Remus hadn’t any idea whether this had actually happened, whether it was a figment of his imagination, a voice in his head that he blamed on the werewolf to avoid the awful truth. He could no longer distinguish his own thoughts from the wolf's. He closed his eyes, his heart pounding in his ears, the cold blue light from the moon shining onto his face. He could hear the Marauders' voices in his ears, telling him he was alright, was going to be fine, but he wasn't.

And then the light from the moon shone through the window, and his mind became a screaming blur of pain and a desire to kill.
I Love You

Chapter Notes

I apologize in advance

Despite the Marauders having spent most of their Christmas holidays at James’ house, James went to King’s Cross Station alone, head and shoulders slumped. He looked almost sad, which was so unlike him that several other Hogwarts students asked him if he was feeling alright. “Oh, yes, I’m fine,” he replied to all of them, quite unconvincingly.

“You seem to be missing something. Specifically, a set of idiots that you traipse around the school with, causing disaster?” Mary said, her arm linked with Marlene’s. Marlene raised her eyebrows.

“My dad’s bringing them round soon,” James said with a shrug. He did not owe them the truth -- that the Marauders were just on the platform at King’s Cross, waiting on the other side of the barrier so James could have a chance to speak to Lily.

“Not that I care,” Marlene said. “But I’m curious as to why you’re here, on your own, thirty minutes before the train arrives.”

“Shove off, McKinnon,” James muttered.

“Trouble in mischief-making-idiot world?” Lily approached James, a satisfied smirk on her face.

“What?” James spluttered. “Er, no, um,” he stood up a bit straighter, ruffling his hair. “No, course not, everything’s fine, I…oh, Sirius, you’re here, how wonderful!” he ran around a corner.

“What’s with him?” Mary asked.

“No idea,” Lily smiled, green eyes crinkling at the corners. “How was everyone’s Christmas?” Marlene grinned. “Well, I don’t mean to brag, but I met the absolute cutest bloke.”

“A Muggle?” Mary asked. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“So?” Marlene asked. “Anyway, we snuck out of the party for a while. I wish he was a wizard so we could keep seeing each other, but I figured just one time wouldn’t hurt.”

Lily rolled her eyes. “Let’s put your romantic escapades aside and talk about Mary’s Christmas. She’s clearly itching to tell us something.”

Mary’s eyes were wide and full of fear. “I got a letter from the Ministry of Magic telling us to register my blood status immediately,” she said in a rush.

“So did I,” Lily said, eyebrows knit together in confusion. “I didn’t think much of it, though. I’m Muggle-born, and I really don’t care who knows —”

“Lil,” Mary said, shocked. “You really don’t understand what this means?”

“Er…no,” Lily frowned.

“If they make us wear a magical identification of our blood status, it’s like painting targets on our backs so they can hurt or kill us,” Mary whispered, glancing over her shoulder at the group of advancing Slytherins. “It’s the worst thing they possibly could’ve done. It’s dangerous for us to even be here.”

“On the platform?” Lily asked incredulously. “On our way to school?”

Mary wiped tears out of her eyes. “Lily, we’re going to get killed, you know? If we’re not very careful.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” Marlene said.

“Oh, how would you know?” Lily demanded.

“I don’t,” Marlene replied, cheeks burning. “But you should know that my family and I will protect you if we’ve got to. No matter what.”

“Thanks,” Mary said, looking up at Marlene, who was now humming a Muggle rock song and
seemed to have forgotten their conversation entirely.
““The train’s here,” Lily said. “And on a more irritating note, Potter, Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew seem to be attempting to climb over the train.”

They all rolled their eyes simultaneously and marched aboard the train, laughing at the Marauders’ unsuccessful attempts to board the train through one of the compartment windows.
“Prongs, it’s your girlfriend,” Sirius pushed James off the side of the train. “Why don’t you ask her about her holidays?”
“She’ll hex me,” James said. “In the face.”
“But at least she’ll be acknowledging your existence,” Remus said. “Padfoot, please give up on this and get on the train like a normal human being.”
“Well, sounds like it’s worth the effort,” James leapt through the door to the compartment and tapped Lily on the shoulder. “Alright, Evans?” he asked, trying unsuccessfully to seem casual.
“Fine, thanks,” Lily replied, and continued walking down the corridor.
“Evans?” he called after her in a strange, strangled voice.
“Yes, Potter?” she replied, without looking back.
“Er…how was your Christmas?”
“Lovely,” Lily replied, slamming a compartment door behind her. James flinched.
“Peter,” Sirius said loudly. “I’d like a five letter word for ‘pathetic and obsessed idiot’, please.”
“James,” Peter responded, with a slightly nervous look at James.
“Yes, I know, I’m ridiculous,” James flopped into their compartment, the door clicking shut after him. “I’m a man in love, Padfoot, you simply must humor me.”
“You’re a prat in obsessiveness is what you are,” Sirius chuckled.
Remus nodded in agreement as the train pulled out of the station, towards endless green hills. The Marauders cast lights from their wands onto the ceiling of the compartment, laughing, talking.
““You know what we haven’t done in quite a while?” James asked.
“Pulled a prank so amazing that we even made McGonagall laugh?” Sirius suggested.
Sirius grinned. “Absolutely. Also, I was going to say we should likely do something to make good old Snivellus’s life a living hell. Look at them.” he glared at the Slytherins, leaning into the corridor to peer into their compartment. “It’s as if they’ve got ‘future Death Eaters’ written on their foreheads.”
“We could actually write that on their foreheads,” Peter suggested.
“Finesse, Ratface, it lacks finesse,” James said impatiently, tapping his wand against the window as he did when he was thinking too fast to speak. “Moons, hit me with your best ideas.”
“I like what Peter said, actually,” Remus said. “I suggest, however, the return of the cloak.”
“I assume you still have it,” Remus said, eyebrows arched.
“Obviously,” James chuckled. “One moment.” With that, he clambered up onto the rack at the top of the compartment, ripping his invisibility cloak from his trunk and wrapping it around his shoulders.
“Actually,” James voice came from the empty air. “They can’t.”
The other all groaned loudly. “You’re killing me, mate,” Sirius said. “There’s a reason we’ve been avoiding the cloak this year. Remember what happened last time?”
Peter crossed his arms. “We agreed never to mention the Invisibilident again.”
“We’re not calling it that,” James protested.
“Why not? Invisibility? Incident? They just go together, seriously, Prongs, you can’t fight Pete and I on this,” Sirius slumped in his chair, resting his feet on the opposite side of the compartment.
“Moons, deciding vote, please. And don’t let our relationship impact your decision.”
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Remus said. “I’m with James. I hate to force my love of proper English upon you, but it simply had to be done. It’s called the Invisibility Cloak Incident, and nothing else.”
“Fine,” Peter said bitterly. “Sirius, as you were saying?”
“Ah, yes,” Sirius continued. “The Invisibility Cloak Incident, as I’ve been forced to call it, took place
on one cloudy April afternoon. The wind howled through the — “
James faked a loud snore. “Get to the point, will you?”
“You were being an idiot, you dropped the cloak in the middle of the room without looking, and you
managed to make my wand invisible, thus accidentally stepping on it and causing it to not break but
—“
“We were all there, Padfoot, we know what happened,” Remus said.
“Shoot FLAMES at all of Peter’s BOOKS!” Sirius said, in a perfect imitation of James’ voice.
“Which we extinguished and repaired,” James said, adjusting his glasses. “I see no problem with it.”
He let the cloak slide to the ground, where it covered Peter’s feet. “I solemnly swear to be more
careful, alright?”
“Alright,” the others said in unison.

Loud giggling echoed down the abandoned Hogwarts corridor, both Lily and Benjy creating birds
with their wands which flitted around their heads and formed heart shapes in the air.
“I can’t believe we’re ditching dinner for this,” Lily smiled. The two of them continued to walk,
footsteps matched exactly.
“Well, I’m sorry to be selfish and steal you away from Mary and Marlene, but I’ve missed you.”
Lily grinned, barely able to stop smiling to lean up and kiss him.
There was a cackling sound from the thin air (Sirius) a muted giggle (Peter), and the depressed sigh
that could only have come from James Potter himself. “Did you hear something?” Benjy asked.
“No,” Lily said curiously, peering into the invisible space in which the Marauders were crouched
under the cloak. She blinked at the air, suddenly aware that there had to be something there, although
that was impossible… “No, nothing at all.”
“She knows,” Peter whispered in a panic.
The others all elbowed him in the ribs and continued to watch as Lily and Benjy resumed their walk.
“Lily, I really think we need to talk,” Benjy said suddenly, dropping her hand. The Marauders
waited under the invisibility cloak, James practically bouncing up and down with excitement.
“You think she’d go out with me if he breaks up with her?” he whispered.
Sirius shook his head. “Absolutely not.”
“Mm, about what?” Lily asked, her cheerful grin beginning to waver around the edges.
Benjy conjured a bouquet of roses out of thin air and handed them to her, smiling.
“She’s allergic to roses, everyone knows that!” James hissed under his breath.
Lily accepted the flowers anyway, stifling a sneeze behind her hand. “Thanks,” she said, her nose a
bit pink.
“I wanted to ask you if you’ll go to Hogsmeade with me.”
“Oh,” Lily’s smile returned, brighter than before. “Of course, I’d love to! Merlin, for a moment I
thought you were going to break up with me.”
Benjy shook his head. “Of course not. I love you, I would never…”
Lily’s eyes went wide and round. “What? You…you love me?”
Benjy froze in place for a moment. “Er, well, actually — I mean, yes, I do — but can I — do you
love me too?” His blue eyes were drilling into Lily’s heart, she had to tell him the truth, she didn’t
have a choice,
“I…” Lily stopped. “I don’t know. Can I think about it before I answer?”
“Take your time,” Benjy said, looking down at his hands.
“I’m just going to go, actually, and take some more time to…er…consider what you’ve said. I’ll see
you tomorrow,” she said, and turned on her heel to jog back down the corridor, nearly running into
the invisible Marauders as she did so. Benjy stood, confused, watching Lily walk away. At the last
moment, just as Benjy had started up a staircase and Lily was almost around the corner, her foot
caught on the edge of the invisibility cloak, and she tumbled to the ground, pulling the cloak with
her.
There was a sudden gasp from the now exposed Marauders, who backed away from her
immediately.
“What the bloody hell?” she demanded, rubbing her skinned knee. “Oh, it’s you lot,” she sighed. Benjy’s roses were in a pile on the floor, petals scattered on the stone and in her hair. “Funny, I didn’t see you in the corridor when Benjy and I were talking —“

She looked horrified and shocked for a moment, then pulled her wand from her robes and scrambled to her feet. “You! You were spying on us, listening in on our personal business — _Immobulus!”_ she shrieked, and the Marauders were barely able to move, just desperately looking at the invisibility cloak on the floor. “Which one of you does this belong to? Why on earth were you all —“ she glanced at the cloak in her now invisible hand, and raised her eyebrows. “I see,” she said, an idea occurring to her. A smirk twisted up her lips. “Well, I think I’ll be keeping this for a very, very long time. I’ll see you in class tomorrow, boys,” she said cheerfully, and skipped off down the hall.

“I hate her,” James said the next morning, his black hair even more unruly than usual, and his hazel eyes full of fire. “We were stuck like that for SEVEN HOURS. SEVEN. HOURS. That’s it,” he stood on the table in the Gryffindor common room, causing everyone in the room to look at him with a mixture of concern and amusement. “I am finally over her. I no longer have ANY sort of feeling for her! None, do you hear me?”

A first year raised his hand, and James pointed at him. “Yes, Franklin?”

“What’s her name?” Franklin asked shyly.

“For the love of Merlin, Prongs, get off the table before you hurt yourself.” Remus interrupted him, and dragged him by the arm to the couch.

“I’m not over her, am I?” James asked Sirius after a moment of silence, looking quite depressed.

“Not even slightly,” Sirius shook his head.

“Also, she stole your invisibility cloak.” Peter said, rather unhelpfully.

“And she’s probably going to say she loves him,” Remus added.


“If she didn’t at least think she did, she would’ve run away at least thirty seconds earlier.” James groaned and buried his head in his hands. “WHY?”

“Well, he’s attractive, they’ve been going out for almost a year now, and he loves her. There’s no reason not to say it —“ Remus said rationally.

“On that note, let’s go to breakfast before Prongs here throws himself into the fireplace,” Sirius said. “Hurry up, will you?”

The Marauders stumbled, exhausted, down the stairs, and when they reached the table, there was Lily, smiling ear to ear, holding a rose.

“Damn,” James said under his breath, staggering backwards. “I suppose this means they’re going to be together for a while, then.”

He looked across the room, inadvertently meeting eyes with Severus, who looked equally, if not more mournful. Severus scowled and turned away, back to his conversation with the other Slytherins.

“Did everyone’s parents sign the Hogsmeade form?” a third year asked, grinning ear to ear.

“Oh,” Sirius said. “That reminds me, Prongs, since I’m still legally a member of the Terrible and Most Evil House of Black, I can’t go to Hogsmeade this year.” He glared at Regulus across the room, who had just handed his Hogsmeade form to Slughorn.

“Damn,” James said. “Oh well, guess none of us are going.” He pulled the crumpled Hogsmeade form from the pocket of his robes and pointed his wand at it, blasting it into a pile of ash.

“Can’t we just use the —“ Peter’s eyes fell upon Lily, who was twirling her wand into her red hair, her green eyes glistening. “Right.”

“Listen, listen, I’ve got something,” Remus said. “We’ve got to steal the cloak back.”

James nodded, sipping his pumpkin juice. “We could ask her for it,” he looked down the table at Lily, who was laughing so hard she’d nearly fallen out of her chair.

“At which point we’d have to explain everything we’ve done. And she’d probably report us to McGonagall, who would get us expelled,” Sirius said.
“Well, Remus is my boyfriend, so I win,” Sirius said smugly.

“What?” Lily turned around, having heard her name. “You two are dating?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Evans, I’d forgotten that my life decisions revolve around you,” Sirius said, mouth twisted into a smirk.

Lily stuck her tongue out at him and turned to Remus. “I don’t know what you see in him, but there must be something.” She hesitated a moment, glaring at Sirius, but managed a begrudging, “I’m glad you two are happy.”

Remus’s cheeks went bright pink. “Thanks.”

Lily smiled and turned back to her conversation with her friends, talking animatedly with her hands. Sirius rolled his eyes and unrolled the Daily Prophet. “Breaking news: Minister letting everything go to shit, no one does anything to stop him.”

James leaned over Sirius’s shoulder to read. “Merlin. Here, read this,” he held the paper across the table for Remus and Peter to see.

“Padfoot?” Remus said, stunned, pointing to a sentence printed in finalizing black ink. The air felt as if it had been drawn out of Sirius’s lungs as he read, fingernails cutting half moons into the sides of the paper. “Because of the increasing number of Muggle-borns taking refuge in the homes of pure bloods by pretending to be related to them, all underage witches and wizards must be living in the homes of blood relatives at all times to prevent any illegal activity —”

Sirius could count the number of times he’d felt his heart stop in the Great Hall. First — being sorted into Gryffindor, seeing the judging eyes of his older cousins at the Slytherin table. Second — seeing the Howlers from his parents in his first few weeks at Hogwarts. Third — the first time they’d all seen Remus after the full moon that nearly killed him. Fourth — seeing Remus at breakfast the morning after they’d shared their first illicit kiss. And fifth, worst of all, at this moment, the sinking moment that he realized this playact of having a normal family — James’ family — was over.

Across the room, Regulus was reading the Daily Prophet amid a group of laughing Slytherins, and a
slight smile had spread across his cold face. He mouthed something across the room, but Sirius could no longer see, because his eyes had gone blurry and his vision faded almost to black.

“Sirius? Sirius, mate, you haven’t breathed in at least a minute,” James said.

Sirius smiled unconvincingly, corners of his mouth stretched wide. “I’m alright,” he said, and stood up. “Excuse me a moment?”

“Of course,” Remus said, golden eyes full of an understanding that gave Sirius an urge to hit him, to make him understand what he felt.

Sirius ran out of the hall, unable to stop the trembling of his lower lip. Do NOT cry, he screamed at himself in his mind. Don’t, don’t cry, don’t bloody do it —

During his desperate sprint to the abandoned third floor bathroom, swallowing the lump in his throat, he ran into Severus Snape.

“Black,” Snape said with a sneer. “I see you’ve read the new Ministry decree. Going to cry in the girl’s bathroom, are we?”

Sirius found his mind empty of any sort of comeback. “No, actually,” he said, with a sort of horrible cruelty that he had never seen in himself before, not even towards Snape. He pulled his wand from his pocket, not even sure what he was going to use as a hex, but certain he had to get Snape away from him. He thought about how simple it would be to use an unforgivable curse on Severus, and just walk away. But that would make him no better than a Death Eater, and if he was made to go back to his parents, he had to be different from them, he couldn’t go around having thoughts like this, no matter how easy it would’ve been to — “Impedimenta!” he yelled.

The jinx hit Severus squarely in the face, and he fell to the ground, looking stunned.

Sirius gave a slight, panting breath, and slammed the door to the abandoned girl’s bathroom behind him, sinking to the cold tile of the floor. There was water on the floor, icy and bleeding into his robes.

He pulled out his wand and pointed it at his wrist, trembling, and used magic to draw a slit in his wrist from the edge of his palm to the inside of the crook of his arm, not quite feeling the pain until blood had spurted from the wound and spread over the floor.

I won’t go back, I can’t go back, I’ll never go back to them. I’d rather die, I wish I’d die, I can’t spend the next three years with them, I won’t —

His head was spinning, blurring, his cheek pressed against the cold ground. There were footsteps on the floor, shined shoes on the ground next to his head, someone shouting words he couldn’t understand, warm hands on his stinging arm. There was blood everywhere, all around him, he feared he might drown in it.

Who was it, the person standing beside hi? One of the Marauders, certainly, they all had the smell of parchment and Quidditch sticking to them like a perfume. “James?” he asked in a hoarse voice. He couldn’t hear the reply over the roar of blood in his ears. If not James, then — “Remus,” he said, his heart fluttering in his chest. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

The unidentified person’s hands fumbled for their wand, and pointed it at Sirius’s wrist, creating quite sloppy stitches, and Sirius knew. “Peter.”

Peter burst into tears, and Sirius remembered, somewhere in a distant, slumbering part of his mind, that Peter did not know all the things that Sirius had done to himself to numb the pain, and that now they all knew, and it would be a Proper Conversation they would all have to have, and Sirius would rather fall into endless sleep than face it.

Sirius laughed dryly. “Sorry, Pete.”

Peter’s watery blue eyes were wide and horrified. “You didn’t do this to your — “ he covered his mouth with his hand. “No — Sirius, how could you?”

Sirius felt light, and the cold wasn’t quite so bad.

“It’s always you, isn’t it Peter? Finding people when they’re hurt.” He asked, his voice slurring. “No one else bothers to look, I suppose. Does it ever get tiring, being the only one who cares?”

Peter looked shocked to his very core. “For the love of Merlin, Sirius, don’t try to make this about me — “

“Everything’s always about me, isn’t it, Peter? Tell me the truth.”
“Yes, it is,” Peter admitted. “But not because you’re selfish, because you’re — you’re Sirius,”

“Well, I’m certainly not James, am I?” Sirius asked faintly.

Peter didn’t answer, but chewed his lower lip, wiping tears out of his eyes. Sirius was so pale, pale as a ghost, barely alive.

“Aren’t you going to run off and get Madam Pomfrey?”

“No,” Peter said. “I won’t leave you, not —” he left his words unspoken.

“So not?” Sirius asked faintly. “Everyone else does. It’s not as if James and Remus are here, are they?”

“No, they’re in class,” Peter said. “I left to look for you when McGonagall asked why you weren’t here.”

“They didn’t follow me,” Sirius said, his voice little more than a whisper. “They almost always do. I guess after the millionth time I’ve done this they got tired of looking.”

Peter shook his head.

“If I die, Peter, tell Regulus that —” his eyes drifted shut before he could finish his sentence, hand going still.

“No, no — no. Sirius, please, you can’t die now, c’mon, please wake up —” Peter stood, sobbing, and ran to the hospital wing faster than he’d run in his life, feet barely brushing the ground.

When he reached the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey was bent over a bed with a lifeless form on top of it, smelling of death and blood. The teachers were gathered around the bed with somber expressions. “Madam Pomfrey,” Peter said desperately. “Sirius — third floor bathroom —”

“No, Peter,” Madam Pomfrey snapped, her face ashen. “There’s been a death at the school.”

“No, please —” Peter said. “Really, you’ve got to —”

“Oh, what is it, Pettigrew?” she demanded, lips white and bloodless.

“Please, you’ve got to come —” Peter said. “Sirius has —”

“What’s he done now? Gotten stuck in a window?” Madam Pomfrey demanded.

“No, he’s —” Peter didn’t want to say it, not with all these teachers around, but he hadn’t a choice, he had to make her see. “He’s tried to — to — to kill himself, and I think he’s really done it this time!” Peter said, trembling.

Madam Pomfrey froze in place for a moment, then raced off down the corridor, Peter close behind her.

Sirius was in the hospital wing, pale, as dead looking as the unidentified student who had been removed from the hospital wing earlier that day, and next to his bed was James, who was openly weeping for the first time in what he was vaguely aware was likely his entire life.

“For the love of Merlin, Sirius, you bloody fucking idiot,” James said, his voice shaking. Sirius blinked open his eyes slightly. “I hope you’ve got a good explanation for this, you sodding prat —”

“I love you too, Prongs,” Sirius said hoarsely. His throat felt as if there were cotton balls shoved down it, and his head was still whirling.

“Sirius, what were you thinking?” Remus asked. Sirius reached for Remus’s hand but didn’t answer.

“You almost died, do you know what I would’ve —”

Sirius glanced around desperately, as if he could somehow escape this conversation. Madam Pomfrey was in a corner, filling out papers, too close by for him to attempt any last minute dashes for the door. He wasn’t sure he was quite strong enough to do so, anyway.

"Listen," Sirius said. "If I swear it won't ever happen again, will you all just forget about this?"

"No," James said fiercely. "I bloody will not forget it, because you've sworn up and down that you'll stop doing this, but when your parents are involved --"

"You don't understand," Sirius shouted, his ears ringing. "None of you, you can't understand, and I don’t --"

"No, I don't," James replied. "Explain it to me."

Sirius said the only words that would come to him, there in the hospital wing with bandages wrapped around his wrist, and tears in his eyes. "Not now."
“Her name was Belinda Jody. She was Muggle-born. First year,” Remus said as he dropped into his seat at dinner.
“I assume you mean the dead girl,” Peter said, a chill creeping up his spine.
“How’d you learn this?” James asked. There was a conspicuous empty space at the table where Sirius was meant to be sitting.
“Cast an amplifying charm in the corridor so I could hear what the teachers were saying,” Remus said.
“I think dating Padfoot is a terrible influence on you,” James said with a grin, before he remembered where Sirius was, what had happened. At the Slytherin table, Snape’s friends were gossiping loudly about Sirius and the dead girl.
“Bloody hell, I wish they would shut up about him,” Remus said, his teeth clenched, shoulders tense.
“Moony,” James said, “You never swear.”
“Well, I’ve started, haven’t I?” Remus said irritably.
James gave him a worried look and turned to Peter. “Did he say anything to you, before…?”
Peter’s face was still a queasy shade of green. “I’m not sure I should —”
“Peter, c’mon,” James said.
“Don’t be mad at me, then,” Peter said. “But he may have said that…he thinks you lot don’t care about him anymore, because of…”
James punched the table. “I could strangle him. Clearly we care about him, otherwise we’d never — Sirius is like my brother, we all love him — I can’t —” he growled, low in his throat, and ran his hands through his curly hair.
“Have you considered that there might be something else?” Remus asked. “This isn’t him, and I think one of us needs to talk to him. Since Peter’s the reason Sirius is still alive, I won’t ask him, and James —”
“I could make him tell us everything,” James said. “I want him to, all I want is to understand why that stupid git thought that —”
“Alright, maybe insulting him isn’t the best way to go about this,” Remus said. His hand was still shaking. “I’ll talk to him and see what I can find out.”
“He really could’ve died this time, you know,” James said hollowly. “I’ve lost my best friend, I don’t even know what I would’ve…”
Remus nodded. “The important thing is that it didn’t happen, and that it isn’t going to.” He scraped his food around his plate without eating it. “I’ll go see him.”
“Promise you’ll tell us everything?” Peter asked.
Remus’s eyebrows knit together. “I’ll try,” he walked out of the hall and into the corridor, up the stairs, bones creaking with each step, heart pounding.
He reached the hospital wing a few moments later to see Sirius asleep, ink-black hair spread across the pillow. “Sirius, I need to talk to you,” Remus said. Sirius’s eyes opened, Remus’s face blurring in front of him. “I’m sorry I have to ask you this,” Remus said, gazing up at the ceiling. “But I need to know why.”
Sirius’s eyes were dark pools in his face. “You really want me to tell you, don’t you?”
Remus nodded.
“You have to swear on the Map that you’ll never tell anyone, especially not James.”
Remus pulled the half finished Marauder’s Map out of the pocket of his robes and placed his hand on it. “I swear,” he said grimly, and set the map on the table next to Sirius’s hospital wing bed.
“I don’t know why I did it,” Sirius said. “I don’t even remember doing it. I ran into Snape and I hexed him and I… I don’t know, suddenly I just…I didn’t think. I needed it all to stop.”
“Sirius, you…you really could’ve died this time, that’s not something we can all just look past. We’ve trusted you to be sensible for years —”
“When did you find out about this?” Sirius gestured to his wrist. “I know that you’ve known for a long time, but…”
“I figured it out the day we became friends. When you and James got Severus to leave me alone.”
“Really?” Sirius asked. Remus nodded. “I never asked about it, because I trusted that you had it under control, and you clearly don’t.”
“Moony, I can’t go back to them,” Sirius said, looking Remus in the eye. “Really, I can’t. I used to think maybe I would be alright if I had to live with them again, if I would just keep my mouth shut and act like one of them. But I can’t, and — and I know you don’t get it, because your parents love you, and I know James doesn’t get it because he’s got the best family ever, and Peter doesn’t get it even though his dad’s died. You’ve all got families, and for a moment I really thought I had that, with Euphemia and Fleamont,” he said this with the same casual tone in which he said almost everything, but he was shaking, and there were tears stinging his eyes. “I’m so stupid.”
“No,” Remus said. “I think you’re just scared.”
“Scared?” Sirius scoffed. “I’m not scared of anything.”
“Yes, yes you are, I can see it in your face. I know you are,” Remus said softly. “What are you so scared of?”
Sirius looked up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. Remus, I love you, I really do, but I just…I can’t.”
Remus’s shoulders slumped. “I couldn’t stand it if something were to happen to you like it almost did today and I didn’t get a chance to…”
Sirius leaned over to kiss him; rain and blood and metal. Remus wrapped his arms around him, their bodies melting together momentarily before Remus gathered his willpower and pulled away.
“Padfoot — Padfoot, wait, we shouldn’t…not until we talk about this.”
The light was fading, stars twinkling outside the hospital wing window. Sirius was gazing at Remus in the moonlight.
“I promise it won’t happen again,” Sirius said.
“You can say that, and of course I trust you,” Remus said. “But I also can’t believe you, you know that, don’t you?”
Sirius nodded tightly, his mouth a thin line on his face. “I didn’t mean to ruin everything.”
“And somehow, you think your dying wouldn’t have ruined everything?”
“I don’t know!” Sirius yelled, jumping to his feet. The blood rushed to his head, blurring his vision, black and flashing around the edges. His bare feet were freezing on the cold stone floor. “I don’t know, but it wouldn’t’ve done this, would it? I wouldn’t have to think about my mother finding out about this and telling me I’m a disgrace, or people looking at me like I’m some sort of…”
“You’re bloody well right we wouldn’t, because you’d be dead, and I’d — “ Remus covered his face with his hands for a moment, taking a deep breath.
“You never used to swear,” Sirius noticed, a bit of a smirk on his face.
“Sorry,” Remus said. “I’m a bit…”
“Yeah,” Sirius nodded. Wind rattled the window in it’s frame, and suddenly he could no longer bear to see Remus’s trusting expression, the pain on his face. He closed his eyes, blocking out the strange, nauseating mixture of love and absolute hatred that he felt. “I didn’t think of you when I did it. Not you, or James, or Peter. I was only thinking of myself. I suppose I always do, don’t I?”
“Sirius, when was the last time you talked to someone you really trust about this?” Remus asked worriedly, brows furrowed. “Weren’t you supposed to have your weekly tea with McGonagall two days ago?”
“I told her I didn’t need to waste time that I could be practicing and studying. She agreed with me,” Sirius shrugged. “I really was doing quite a bit better when I talked to her. I think she almost believed me.”
“She’ll want to talk to you again.”
“And I’ll tell her what I’ve been telling her for years,” Sirius said with eyebrows arched. “That it’s none of her business.”
Remus laughed despite himself. “You’re…you’re mad, you know?”
Sirius nodded. “Mental. Bonkers. Absolutely lost it. Looking back on it, I think that’s why you love me so much,” he smiled easily, and the hospital wing seemed to fall away around them. They could’ve been anywhere; outside, lying in the snow; running through the halls with James and Peter; flying on broomsticks and chasing each other in the air in circles. Remus fought to remind himself why they were there.

“Padfoot, you make this quite difficult, you know,” Remus forced himself to say. He couldn’t bring himself to say what he was thinking, that every time Sirius smiled he got lost in the gleaming white teeth and crackling laughter, that it was hard to force Sirius to talk about anything, because one look —

“What?” Sirius asked, a look of confusion on his face. The color hadn’t quite come back into his skin, he still could’ve passed as a ghost without any question.

“Nothing,” Remus replied.

“Alright,” Sirius said, sitting up straight. “What’s the story about the Muggle-born girl, then? Madam Pomfrey was muttering something about it earlier.”

“I don’t know yet,” Remus said. “But, as with most things, I certainly intend to find out.”

“You should go, Mr. Lupin,” Madam Pomfrey said, turning out the lights in the hospital wing. “It’s been an exceptionally emotional day for the lot of us. I recommend we all get some rest.”

Remus nodded, and slowly shut the door behind him. When he stepped in the darkened, empty corridor, there were tears on his cheeks, flashing like shards of glass in the dark. He walked slowly down the corridor to the edge of the staircase, waiting as it swung from one side to the other as though it was trying to decide upon something.

“Moony,” James said, stumbling down the stairs. He was wearing slippers instead of shoes, and from the half flattened appearance of his hair, seemed to have fallen asleep on the couch in the common room. Peter followed close behind him, rubbing his eyes. “What did he say?”

Remus quickly wiped his eyes. “Er…nothing much.”

“I thought you were going to get him to talk to you,” Peter said, sounding slightly betrayed.

“It’s Sirius,” Remus said. “He never tells anyone anything. Prongs, the most he’s ever told you was when you two had that screaming match in our dormitory.”

James nodded. “You know, you do make a good point. Can you at least tell me something he said?”

Remus glanced around at the portraits snoring in their frames. “He told me he doesn’t know why he did it.” He let these words sink in, watched James stagger back as if he’d been slapped.

“What the hell does he mean he doesn’t know? Of course he knows!”

“Prongs, he’s telling the truth.”

“Of course he is, Sirius would never lie to us,” James snapped. He looked more irritable than Remus had ever seen him, his face burning. “I don’t understand, Moony, and I want to. I wish I did, but…”

he took a deep, shaking breath and turned his face towards the ground, tears dripping off the end of his long nose. “Sirius almost died —“

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, slow, with an easy grace that could only come from one person —

“Sirius?” Peter asked.

Sirius walked out of the shadows, a small smile on his face. “Crying, are we, Jimmy?”

James inhaled through his nose and wiped at his eyes, then threw his arms around Sirius.

“Prongs, my dear, I think you’re overreacting a bit,” Sirius said. James nodded, but didn’t release his grip on Sirius.

“How can you act like this is a joke?” Peter demanded, his high voice shaking. “Sirius, when I saw you, I thought you were going to die.”

“Listen, I’ve been thinking,” Sirius said. “I don’t want people to know about this. We’re the Marauders, and this really isn’t the sort of thing Marauders do. I thought about obliviating the lot of you, but I won’t do that. Instead, I’ll make a vow.”

“Listening,” James said, standing up straight. He smoothed down his hair, for what had to be the first time in his life.

“I solemnly swear, upon the Marauders’ Map, that nothing like this will ever happen again. I’d make
an Unbreakable Vow on that, really, I would.”
“But — Sirius, those are unbreakable!” Peter spluttered. “You might die!”
“Funny, Peter, I’m fairly certain that the name implies exactly that. However, I did say ‘would’ and
not ‘will.’” Sirius said. “In exchange, you lot have to make me a promise as well.”
“Alright,” James said, arms crossed. “Let’s hear it.”
“This never happened,” Sirius said. “All of this, everything, none of it. It didn’t happen, we don’t
ever mention it again.”
“No,” James said. “No, Sirius —
Sirius shook his head. “These are non-negotiable terms, mate.”
“Alright,” Remus said, putting his hand out to shake. “Fine. If you break these terms —“
“Allow me,” James said. “If you don’t keep your promise, we’ll hex your face green and hang you
from the chandelier in the Great Hall.”
“Seems like a fair agreement,” Sirius said. “Lumos,” light emerged from the tip of his wand, and he
held it over all their hands. “Repeat after me: I solemnly swear,”
“I solemnly swear,” they said in unison.
“To never mention the events that transpired involving the Marauders on January 11, 1975, on pain
of severe humiliation.”
This was repeated with less enthusiasm and a great deal of muttering.
“And in exchange,” Sirius added.
“Sirius Black, also known as Padfoot and/or Snuffles, will never allow anything similar to the
aforementioned events to happen again, on pain of severe humiliation,” James interrupted him.
Sirius cocked an eyebrow.
“Sirius, c’mon,” Remus said quietly.
“Alright,” Sirius said, and repeated James’ words. He extinguished his wand, and the four of them
assumed their usual formation of walking in a line, arms thrown across each other’s shoulders, and
aside from the glaring red scar on Sirius’s arm, and the tears that glimmered in the others’ eyes, it
truly appeared that nothing had happened.

As the Marauders walked to their first class the next morning, yawning, they were cornered by a
group of Slytherins, each smirking like they knew something the Marauders didn’t. “What do you lot
know about the Muggle-born?” they asked, backing the Marauders into a corner.
“She had a name,” Remus said, looking quite fidgety. He adjusted the sleeves of his robes and
glanced at the others, almost afraid. The corridors were beginning to fill up, and a crowd had
gathered around them.
“Who cares?” Mulciber asked, eyebrows raised. “Severus heard you talking last night.”
“Last night?” Sirius feigned innocence. “I’m almost certain we were asleep, like we’re supposed to
be at that time of night. And where, may I ask, was Snivellus?”
“None of your business,” Severus sneered. “Lie all you want, Black, but I heard you lot talking
about keeping something secret, and not letting something happen again. We can only assume that
you’ve done something stupid.”
“That’s funny, Snivelly, I could’ve sworn you were describing yourself just there,” James said
calmly. “Now, my question is, how did you manage to overhear a conversation that didn’t happen?”
“I don’t know,” Snape said, with a wicked sort of smile. “I suppose you’d have to be invisible.” He
drawled out the last words, waiting for the Marauders’ reactions.
James flinched, barely noticeable except to the well trained eye.
“Can I hex him?” Sirius hissed. “I’d really like to hex him.”
“You didn’t have anything to do with the Muggle-born's body being found, did you?” Regulus
asked. This question was delivered with the same cruel cadence that the Slytherins shared, but his
silver eyes were fixed on Sirius’s face.
“What exactly are you accusing us of?”
“Trying to make Slytherin look bad,” Avery said. He had a face like a snake, narrow, with wide-set
eyes. “Which is exactly the sort of thing you would do.”
“Well, that’s true, isn’t it, James?” Sirius asked.
“Indeed it is,” James agreed. “However, there’s a certain line there that we wouldn’t exactly cross. What’s that called…Peter, give me the term, if you please?”
“A moral code,” Peter squeaked, a sheen of sweat on his face.
“Exactly,” James said. “So, you see, your logic is full of holes. We’ll be off, if you don’t mind.”
“What? To cavort with mudbloods?” Mulciber asked.
“Better than cavorting with you,” Remus said.
“Nice,” Sirius whispered.
The Marauders drew their wands simultaneously and shouted a variety of hexes in the Slytherins’ direction, not bothering to turn around to admire their handiwork. They ran down the corridor, smiling for the first time in days.
“He knows about the cloak,” James shouted down the corridor, listening to the words echoing off the stone. “How can he bloody know?”
“Evans,” Sirius scoffed. "Must’ve been Evans."
“I heard my name taken in vain,” Lily said breezily, marching up to them. Mary and Marlene followed close behind.
“Just out of curiosity, Evans, have you been speaking to Snivellus recently?” James asked, his voice dropping several octaves.
“It wouldn’t quite be any of your business if I had, would it?” Lily demanded.
“It would if you happened to mention a certain item of ours which has fallen into your possession, causing Snivelly to make certain rash decisions,” Sirius said.
“Well, as thoroughly unenjoyable as this conversation has been,” Lily said. “I should get to Transfiguration. As should you.”
“Weren’t miss it,” James said with a wink.
Lily turned on her heel and stalked away.
“Why?” James yelled at the ceiling, fists clenched. “Why did I wink at her? What am I doing?”
“Being an idiot,” Sirius said rationally. “You know, we’ve really got to get that cloak back.”
Remus grinned. “Alright. Let’s do it.”
McGonagall’s steely eyes fixed on Sirius as the Marauders walked through the doors, and she adjusted her spectacles on her nose. “Nice to see you feeling better, Black,” she said quietly, with a hint of a smile.
Sirius nodded and dropped into his seat in the back row, propping his feet up on the desk. He began to write on the blank page at the back of his transfiguration textbook.
“What do you want to bet I can get McGonagall to talk about the Muggle-born girl?” he wrote, sliding the book over to James.
James dipped his quill in ink and quickly scribbled a drawing of what appeared to be five galleons.
“Deal,” Sirius grinned. “Professor?”
“Yes, Mr. Black?” McGonagall asked, interrupting her lecture on the theory of Animagi, which Peter was desperately trying to write down, despite not understanding half of what McGonagall was telling them.
“Are you going to tell us about the dead Muggle-born they found at Hogwarts?”
“Certainly not,” McGonagall said, turning back to the board. The words “the theory of Animagi” wrote themselves on the board in chalk.
“Why not?” Sirius persisted.
McGonagall ignored him. “To become an Animagus, one must register with the Ministry of Magic.”
“But Muggle-borns can’t do that, can they, Professor?” Lily asked, raising her hand.
“Lily,” Severus warned her under his breath.
“At this time, it would appear that you are correct, Miss Evans,” McGonagall said curtly. “I suppose we must all hope that will change in the future.”
A few Slytherins snickered.
“I do not tolerate blood prejudice in my classroom, Mr. Mulciber,” McGonagall snapped.
“Actually, Professor, I’d like to hear about Belinda as well,” Remus said.
McGonagall looked slightly surprised. “Belinda Jody was found in a Hogwarts classroom yesterday. We can assume she had been there since the start of Christmas holidays. Nothing is known about when or how she was killed, and we are trying to keep the matter quiet for the time being. Now, if we may return to my lesson?”

“Certainly, Professor,” James said, fishing five galleons out of his pocket and throwing them towards Sirius. “What were you saying about Animagi?”

“Watch your tongue, Potter,” McGonagall said. “This lesson, I will only teach the theory of Animagi and no practical transfiguration, because it is highly illegal. However, after a certain amount of practice, one can shift into their Animagus form with only limited effort. Like so,” she seemed to shrink, suddenly, whiskers sprouting from her nose, her clothes turning to fur, and suddenly a grey cat sat on the ground, calmly grooming one paw.

“Do you think we’ll ever be able to do that?” Peter whispered to James, eyes round.

James shrugged. “Eventually. I’m hoping she’ll tell us the last piece of transfiguration we need to become Animagi, otherwise I’ll be stuck with occasional antlers for the rest of my life.”

“Mr. Potter, is there something you’d like to share with the class?” McGonagall asked, now human once again.

“No, Professor,” James replied. “By all means, continue.”

McGonagall shot him a warning glare. “As I was saying, becoming an Animagus is based on theories of extremely advanced transfiguration. It’s exceptionally difficult, and requires years of work. This theory of transfiguration is known as —“

James feigned a yawn in the back row.

“Pardon me, Mr. Potter, is my lesson interrupting your nap?” McGonagall demanded.

“A bit, actually,” James said with a grin.

“I suppose we can discuss that in your next detention,” she turned back to the board and pointed her wand at the chalk as it hovered, waiting for further instruction.

“Looking forward to it,” James answered, and turned back to his notes, quickly scribbling one to Peter. He threw it at Peter across the table.

*Relax, I’ve got everything she’s said written down.*

Peter’s frantic scribbling scrambled to a stop, ink blotting against the parchment. He smiled sheepishly at James, who rolled his eyes.

Remus passed a crumpled piece of parchment to Sirius, his eyes glimmering with mischief. Sirius unfolded it on his desk with a smirk spreading across his face. “Brilliant,” he whispered. “Moons, you’re brilliant.”

“Black, would you like to join Potter in detention this evening?”

“Certainly, Professor,” Sirius said. “Unfortunately, I have other plans.”

“I hope your plans can be adjusted to include writing lines or cleaning the trophies in the trophy room,” McGonagall replied.

“Minnie McGee’s quite quick with her responses today, don’t you think?” James whispered. Sirius grinned. “Absolutely.”

“Oi, are you trying to get detentions for the lot of us?” Marlene demanded, whirling around to shush them.

“Yes…” Sirius asked, looking at Remus’s scribbled plan for how to get the Invisibility Cloak back.

“Yes, definitely.”

“Miss McKinnon!” McGonagall boomed. “What is the transfigurative name for animal transformation, if you don’t mind?”

“Animagus?” Marlene asked.

“Was that a question or an answer?” McGonagall demanded.

She assigned them two sides of parchment about the theories of transfiguration and Animagi. Her eyes glinted when she looked at James and Sirius, and neither of them were ever entirely certain, but it seemed that she muttered something which almost sounded like she was telling them to keep trying to become Animagi, not to give up.

“Was the goal to get us detentions?” Peter asked.
Sirius nodded apologetically. “Didn’t quite work the way we’d planned — er, the way Moonbeam here had planned.”

Remus rolled his eyes. “It was a brilliant plan. It’s alright, though. I have a backup.”

“Course you do,” James said affectionately.

Their plan to get the invisibility cloak back was possibly flawed in premise. Finding a way into Lily Evans’ dormitory was likely not the best idea, as Peter had reminded James at least a hundred times. And if she were to catch them, it would definitely not convince her that he was boyfriend material, or in any way persuade her that his intentions, while not entirely honorable, were genuine.

Sirius stopped a second year as she was about to walk up the staircase to the girls’ dormitory. “Oi, what’s your name?” He asked, grinning, dark eyes flashing.

“Amelia,” she replied, attempting to keep walking.

“I assume you know who we are.”

“Yes,” she said. “You’re the ones who turned the Slytherin banners in the Great Hall into owls last year.”

“And stole Dumbledore’s hat in our first year, and stuck all the Slytherin’s robes to the ceiling, among other things,” James said, with a degree of pride.

“So, Amelia, you see what we’re capable of,” Sirius said. “And threatening second years for the hell of it isn’t really part of the Marauders’ usual activity, but here we are.”

“See, we need you to retrieve something for us,” Remus said.

“Oh, and in exchange, we’ll show you how to get to the kitchens,” Peter said.

Amelia’s round face lit up. “The kitchens?” she repeated. “There are kitchens?”

“Well, where did you think all the food comes from? Thin air?” James asked.

She nodded, as if considering this. “Alright. What do you need me to do?”

“You’re familiar with Lily Evans, Marlene McKinnon, Mary MacDonald…and whoever the hell else shares their room with them?” James asked.

“Is Lily Evans the red-haired one who always talks to that Slytherin?”

“Very clever, Amelia,” Sirius said with a grin. “We need you to go into her dormitory and retrieve a cloak.”

“A cloak?” she repeated. “Listen, I need to go do some homework, so…”

“If you don’t do it, there will be bugs in your next seventeen meals,” James said seriously.

“What does this cloak look like?” she asked, at once becoming alert and ready for action.

“It’s sort of silver.”

“What happens if Lily gave the cloak to Severus?” Peter whispered to James.

“Then this little adventure will likely backfire horrifically,” James replied. “I suppose we’ll hope that she hasn’t done something so infinitely stupid.”

“Oh, and this last bit is very important. Do not, under any circumstances, put the cloak on.” Remus added.

“Why? Will it set me on fire or something?” Amelia asked.

“Or something,” Remus replied mildly.

“Bring it back here, immediately. And if you ever tell anyone we had this conversation, well…”

Sirius flipped his wand in his hand. “I’ve been needing a reason to stick someone’s feet to a moving staircase and leave them there all day long.”

Amelia scurried up the stairs.

“Do you think we were too harsh?” Remus asked.

“Nonsense. It’s a brilliant plan. Even if Evans finds out, she’ll never be able to prove it was us,” James replied. “Moments later, Amelia sprinted back down the staircase, red faced, empty handed. “It isn’t there,” she said. Peter thanked her as she ran out of the common room, looking bewildered.

“Well,” Sirius said. “Anyone have any other ideas?”

“If Evans doesn’t have it…” James buried his head in his hands. “Snivellus. Merlin’s arse, that’s a family heirloom! My dad doesn’t even know I have it, much less that it’s gone!”

“Wait, your dad doesn’t know?” Remus asked.
“Yeah, I nicked it from my parents years ago. Every time I come back to visit, I put it back where it was, in case they see it in my trunk.”
“What if they looked and it wasn’t there?” Peter wanted to know.
“Well, Ratty, it’s like this. If they looked and it wasn’t there, they probably wouldn’t question it too much, because what kind of cloak is this?” James pretended to take a question from an imaginary audience. “Ah, yes, an invisibility cloak. Obviously, it could easily come unfolded at any given time, causing it and whatever it covers to become invisible.
“Have you ever lost it that way?” Remus asked.
James looked mildly uncomfortable, and hesitated a beat too long before replying. “No…”
“Once, while you lot were sleeping, he forgot he was wearing the cloak and started to search for it.” Sirius chuckled. “It was hysterical. It looked like clothes were just flying around the room by themselves. At one point, one of Peter’s socks landed on his --”
“Oi, shove off.” James stood. “To the Slytherin common room?”
Sirius jumped up after him, with Peter close behind. Remus sighed and followed them, abandoning his transfiguration essay on the chair. Before the portrait slammed shut behind him, he flicked his wand, causing the essay, ink, and quill to rise into the air and fly into his hands.
“Coming, Moons?” Sirius’s voice echoed off the stone corridor.
“Yes,” Remus responded, climbing through the portrait hole. “Absolutely.”
“Do we have a plan?” Peter asked as James and Sirius dashed down the staircase effortlessly, sliding down the banisters with such grace that Peter, clumsy, fumbling Peter, could only wish to achieve.
“Who needs plans?” James asked. “We’ve got an ultimatum. If Snivelly Snoop doesn’t give the cloak back, I kill him.”
“Right, never mind. If I don’t find the cloak, and my dad finds out, he kills me. Or at the very least, gives me a bath in his new experimental version of Sleekasy’s. The last batch caught my hair on fire!”
“I thought it looked a bit singed,” Remus said. “Listen, we’ll get the cloak back. Without anyone dying.”
“If Snivellus did a damn thing to that cloak, I swear to Merlin…” James growled.
“Wait, what are you actually going to say? ‘Sorry to interrupt, could I just come into your dormitory and find the cloak you stole from me?’ Call me mad, but that doesn’t sound like the best plan,” Remus said. James stood, glaring at the stone wall in the dungeons.
“That’s not the plan,” Sirius said belligerently.
“Really? Please, enlighten me as to what the plan actually is.”
“It’s…it’s…” Sirius seemed to stumble over his own words, unable to look away from Remus. He leaned over to kiss Remus on the lips.
Remus tripped backwards, shocked.
“Sorry, Moons, had to,” Sirius said, sounding not at all apologetic. “You looked really nice in the light down here, and I figured I might as well take the opportunity to have a romantic moment…er, right in front of the Slytherin common room. Now, Prongs, please inform him what the plan is?”
“Wait —”
At that moment, Regulus stepped out of the dungeon. His face twisted into a scowl when he saw Sirius. “You.”
“Regulus,” Sirius replied coolly. “Good to see you.”
“I heard that over the summer you’ve got to move back in with Mum and Dad,” Regulus said, stepping away from the Marauders and motioning for Sirius to do the same.
Sirius looked apologetically at the others and followed Regulus down into the inky blackness of the dungeons.
“You were in the hospital wing,” Regulus said slowly. The shadows on his face made him look like their father, but his silvery eyes lacked Orion Black’s cruelty.
Sirius didn’t respond.
“Slughorn told me. He thought I’d want to know.”
Sirius was still silent, and turned away from his brother, looking back at the others, who were visible in the distance, talking, laughing.

“Sirius, I did want to know,” Regulus said, his voice betraying his emotion. He reached out and grabbed Sirius by the shoulder. “I’m not joking, stop. You’ve got to talk to me.”
Still, Sirius couldn’t bring himself to reply. His voice seemed to have died within his throat, retreated to a very small part of himself which was terrified of the truth.

“It was the day the Ministry decreed that to avoid any Muggle-borns hiding with purebloods, we all have to spend summers with our own families unless there are special circumstances. Siri—”
“No,” Sirius replied, his voice burning with anger. “These are special circumstances. I don’t want to be a Black anymore, and I swear I won’t, I’ll do what I have to.”
“And what do you have to do, exactly?” Regulus asked.
“Why do you care?” Sirius demanded.
“It doesn’t matter. But I do.”
“I thought you were best mates with Snivellus and his army.”
“They’re not bad, Sirius, I know you think we’re all headed straight to following He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named as soon as we’re out of school, but that’s not what’s happening.”
“Are you sure?” Sirius asked. “Are you really quite sure about that? A Muggle-born girl was killed here, at Hogwarts, the safest place in the world. It could only be a Death Eater, but someone had to help the Death Eaters get in here, didn’t they?”
“I’m sure that’s true, but it wasn’t us.”
“Why would I believe you? Give me a reason, Regulus.”
“Because…” Regulus looked pitifully small and young, the way he had when he was just a child, when Sirius had taken beatings so Regulus wouldn’t have to. “I don’t know, Sirius. But we’re brothers.”
Sirius shook his head. “Not anymore.”
“What are you talking about?” Regulus demanded. “How can even you say that?”
“We haven’t spoken in almost a year,” Sirius said.
“What can I do to show you we’re still family?” Regulus asked.
“I don’t want to hate you, Regulus. I wish I could make you see that you’re being stupid. You’re listening to our parents, and you actually believe them? That we’re doing the right thing?” He wasn’t certain when he’d started shouting, but all of a sudden he couldn’t stop. “Did Mother drop you on your head when you were a child? Are you such an idiot that you think killing people is a good idea?”

“Of course I don’t,” Regulus replied. “That’s not what it is. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”
“WHY ARE YOU APOLOGIZING TO ME?” Sirius shouted.
“Because it’s my fault!” Regulus walked towards Sirius, looking him in the eye. “Everything Mum and Dad ever did to you was my fault, because I was never on your side.”
“Well, you’re right about that,” Sirius said in an odd, choked voice. “But there’s nothing you can do now, is there?”
“Is there any way you’ll forgive me?”
“I don’t think so,” Sirius said, glancing down the corridor at James, who appeared to be swearing vehemently at the still closed entrance to the Slytherin Common room.
“What are you doing down here, anyway?”
“Oh, we’re getting —” Sirius cocked an eyebrow. “Actually, Reg, there is something you can do.”
“Then you’ll forgive me?”
“I can try,” Sirius said, not entirely certain whether he was telling the truth. “Will you help us sneak into the Slytherin common room?”
Regulus’s eyes widened, but he nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Sirius, what the bloody —“ James began. Regulus stalked up to them and read out a series of strange words to the blank wall. The wall seemed to vaporize.
“I won’t ask,” Regulus said. “As far as I’m concerned, you lot were never here.”

“Thanks,” Sirius said, not meeting his brother’s eyes. The Marauders crept down the hallway.

“What happens if someone sees us?” Peter whispered.

“No one’s going to,” James muttered. “Here, this must be it. I could smell the evil bastard all the way down the corridor.” He pushed open a door. “Ah, yes. Look at that.”

Splayed on one of the beds in the room was the invisibility cloak.

“Thank Merlin,” James said, gathering the silvery material in his hands. “I’ve missed this thing.”

“It’s only been missing for a few days,” Remus said, rolling his eyes.

“And in the hands of Snivellus,” James tutted. “What have they done to you?” he held up the cloak in the air, examining it.

“James, didn’t we go through this last week with your favorite quill?” Peter asked.

“Hush,” James replied, shoving the cloak into the pocket of his robes. “Wait, since we were here…”

“Way ahead of you,” Sirius replied, pulling his wand from his pocket. All the furniture on the left side of the room switched with the right.

“Are you sure that’s enough?” James asked. “Shouldn’t we flood their room, or something of that sort?”

“Just wait until breakfast tomorrow,” Sirius said with a grin, ushering them out of the room.

“All you did was move their beds around,” Peter said, as though this was something quite unclear.

“Wait,” Sirius repeated.

----- The next morning, Severus, Mulciber, Avery, and two other Slytherins slumped down to breakfast, looking only half awake. Severus fell asleep with his hooked nose on his plate.

“You see?” Sirius asked, with an air of pride. “It’s all about subtlety.”

“You once attempted to turn Avery into a bug. In front of Flitwick.” Remus reminded him.

“Listen, Flitwick may be good at Charms, but I could definitely outrun him before he tried to give me a detention.” Sirius stole a bite of egg off James’ plate. “Now,” he said with a grin. “Who wants to take that bet? Five galleons says I can do it blindfolded.”

“Alright, fine,” James replied. “On one condition.”

“What?”

“To get Flitwick’s attention by hexing Benjy Fenwick.”

“Not this again,” Remus groaned. “He and Lily are happy. Why can’t you leave him alone?”

“Because she’s the one,” James replied. “I know we’re young, and she doesn’t even like me, but I’ve known almost since the moment I met her.”

“Why don’t you try to get over her?” Peter asked.

“There’s no point,” James shrugged. “I’d be wasting my time. Anyway, will you do it?”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Alright. Before Charms, in the corridor.”

James glanced over at Lily, only to see that she was already looking at him. She seemed to want to say something, but she didn’t. Instead, she turned her back to them and walked to the Ravenclaw table to kiss Benjy full on the mouth. It seemed she was almost doing it to make a point, almost as if she glanced back at James to see his reaction.

James scowled into his pumpkin juice. “Or, you could, y’know, do it now.”

“No, Prongs,” Sirius said.

He and James stood at the same time, each stretching their left arm, then their right, perfectly synchronized. Remus and Peter followed, just a few seconds behind them, and they walked with the throngs of people out of the Great Hall.
Obliviate

Snow was falling outside the window the week before the first Quidditch match of the season, and the Marauders stood off to the side of the corridor, watching the snow through the window as the sun set outside.

“Oi! Potter!” Mary MacDonald yelled, stalking up to him. “You missed Quidditch practice yesterday! I thought M.G. was going to explode, she said one more time and you’re off the team —“

“Mary, Mary, Mary,” James said with a lazy smirk, spiking up his hair with one hand. “Relax.”

“If we lose the cup AGAIN, because of you —“

“I’ve been busy. I forgot.”

“Forgot,” Mary scoffed, her cheeks going bright pink. “I’ll show you bloody ‘forgot’! If we lose the House Cup because of you, I’m going to tie you to your broomstick and fly you through the window of the Astronomy Tower!”

“Well, someone’s angry,” Sirius commented. “I missed practice too, aren’t you going to tell me off?”

“No point,” Mary said. “You’ve got an excuse.”

Sirius noticed the pity in her eyes, and the trapped animal that he sometimes believed clawed inside his chest began once again to attempt an escape. “I haven’t got any excuses,” he said firmly. “I should’ve been at practice. I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

“If anything, haven’t you got an excuse, Mary?” Peter asked.

“No,” Mary said, momentarily confused. “Course I haven’t. What, do you mean because of the Muggle-born girl they found? Because I’m Muggle-born?”

“Well…yes?” Peter said nervously.

“Listen, whoever Belinda Jody was, I didn’t know her, and now I never will,” Mary snapped. “And I’d appreciate it if everyone would stop acting as if my mother’s died. Just because she was Muggle-born, and so am I, and so is Lily, doesn’t mean that I’m supposed to care about this more than anyone else. And that’s not what this is about. If you both don’t show up to Quidditch practice before the sun comes up tomorrow morning, we’re going to have to find someone to replace you.”

“Why isn’t M here to tell us this?” James asked.

“She shouldn’t have to,” Mary said. “If you don’t take this seriously, don’t bother.”

“Listen,” James said, looking at her down the end of his nose. “No one takes this more seriously than I do. Really.”

“Prove it,” she hissed, and turned away.

James was at Quidditch practice before the sun came up the next morning, mist swirling around his cold feet on the pitch. He gripped his broomstick tightly in one gloved hand and waited as the rest of the team slumped down to the pitch, looking exhausted. “Morning, everyone,” he said, smirking at Mary.

Sirius glared at him. “Don’t be so bloody cheerful.”

“Why not?” James asked, rising into the air. “MacDonald made it perfectly clear I was asking for trouble if I skipped another practice.”

“So waking up before the rest of the bloody castle is your way of staying out of trouble?” Sirius rubbed his eyes.

“Absolutely,” James rose into the air. “Morning, captain,” he saluted as M.G. McGonagall walked down to the field.

She ignored him. “Alright! It’s a new season of Quidditch, and my last year as your captain, and I assure you that if we lose the house cup, you’ll never hear the end of it. Also, my aunt may never speak to me again.”

“McGonagall does get a bit…er…intense about Quidditch,” James said. “Don’t worry, M, we won’t let you down.”

“Damn right you won’t,” M said briskly. “Because if you do, I may just have to extend my stay at
Hogwarts so I can spend next year finding ways to make your life hell.”
“That’s comforting,” Sirius said.
“Everyone in the air, now!” M shouted. “We’ve got to work on our teamwork.”
They spent the entire morning flying back and forth around the pitch, throwing the Quaffle to one another.
“Now, Ravenclaw has some good players. Pratt, for example. Fenwick. But we’ve got a better team, and we’re going to win the house cup if it’s the last thing we ever do.”
“Do we really want it to be the last thing we ever do?” Sirius whispered to James. “See, I’d like to go out having been lucky enough to throw a curse at You-Know-Who.”
James shrugged. “I dunno, dying whilst playing Quidditch has got to be first on my list of best ways to die.”
“You have a list of best ways to die?” Sirius asked, knowing full well that this list was quite different than the list that Sirius kept in his own mind, of all the ways he could finally end of his pain.
“Course I do. You know what they say, only the good die young. And I’m the greatest.”
Sirius chuckled. “You don’t want to be Dumbledore? Old and silver-haired?”
“Nah, seems more fun to go out with a bang,” James grinned, performing a flip on his broomstick with the Quaffle tucked under one arm. “Besides, who’s got time for sitting around and wasting away?”
“I dunno,” Sirius said, and suddenly, inexplicably, he was thinking of Remus. “I think once you find the person you want to spend the rest of your life with, it’s different. You want all the time in the world with them.”
James looked at Sirius for a moment. “You think you and Moony are like that?”
Sirius gazed back, his eyes thoughtful. “Yeah, actually. In a way, I think we sort of are. Soppy and romantic, isn’t it?”
“Well, it was until you just said that.”
“Shut up,” Sirius said affectionately.

The match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw started while it was snowing. All the spectator towers were dusted white, and snowflakes settled on the shoulders of the players as they faced each other, waiting for Madam Hooch’s whistle.

They rose into the air, up and up and — suddenly James’ thoughts were incoherent swirls in his head, white flashing behind his eyes.

James awoke on the floor, blankets tangled around his legs. “Merlin, what —” he looked up at the bed, where the sleeping form of someone — someone he couldn’t recognize in his bleary, half-awake state — was sprawled, arms thrown over the side of the bed. His head pounded. “What happened?”

He glanced around the room to find it empty of all life other than that of the stranger in his bed. “For the love of Godric,” he groaned. “What on earth…? Oi,” this was directed at the figure on the bed. “Mind filling me in about what just happened? I was on the Quidditch pitch, and then —”

Mary MacDonald’s blonde head rose above the blankets. “Morning, Potter.”

James’ eyes went wide behind his glasses. “Mary? I mean, er, MacDonald…do you remember anything from yesterday?”

“You mean last night?” She raised her eyebrows. “When we won the match against Ravenclaw?”

“We did?” James asked, a grin spreading across his face. “Where’s Sirius, he ought to be celebrating, don’t you think?”

“Oh, he definitely celebrated,” Mary said with a smirk. “We all did, including you.”

“Why can’t I remember anything?” James asked, racking his brain for anything to remind him what had happened the previous night.

“Probably because you drank so much fire whiskey you were barely awake,” Mary said, adjusting her wrinkled robes.

“What? Really?”
“Yeah, someone put fire whiskey in the butter beer bottles. And by someone, I mean you.”

“Merlin, we’re absolutely dead when the teachers find out, aren’t we?”

“They’re not going to find out,” Mary said. “If you can keep your big mouth shut.”

“I absolutely can,” James declared, his stomach churning. “Er…where are the others?”

Mary shrugged.

“And…well, I’m a bit afraid to ask, but…why are you in my bed?”

Her blue eyes were wide with outrage. “Excuse me? You don’t remember?”

“No, I’m not Sirius, I’m James —” he laughed. “Sorry. Yeah, I’m serious.”

“Alright, well, I was drunk and so were you —”

“Can I stop you just there?” James asked, with a rising sense of dread. “We didn’t…do anything last night, did we?”

Mary shook her head. “I’d rather make out with a troll. No, I came up here to crash because I couldn’t find my dormitory, and as far as I can tell, you didn’t know I was even here until just now. You really can’t remember?”

“Er, honestly, Mary, I wish I could. I think I may have been Obliviated.”

“Really?” she asked, suddenly interested.

James shrugged, trying not to panic. “I can’t remember anything. I need to find Sirius, immediately —”

“Good luck with that,” Mary said. “No one’s seen him since last night. Or Lupin, for that matter. Do with that what you will.”

“What about Peter?”

Mary shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. He wasn’t at the party, you know. We were all celebrating, but I never saw him.”

James’ eyebrows knitted into a line. “Er…well. I think I ought to go figure out who did this to me —” he paused to look searchingly at Mary. “MacDonald, it wasn’t you, was it?”

Mary shook her head. “I’d never —”

“Yes, alright,” he replied.

“Potter?” Mary said, just as he was about to leave the room. “Don’t mention this to anyone, or I’ll have to kill you.”

James smiled. “Wouldn’t dream of it. You either, MacDonald.”

“Never,” she replied.

James ran from the dormitory, feet pounding down the staircase. “BLACK!” he yelled.

Sirius jumped to his feet from next to the fireplace, his rumpled robes in a pile on the ground beside him. His jumper was inside out, one sleeve partially ripped off.

“Merlin’s sake, did you get in a fight last night?” James asked.

“Yeah, with Mulciber. I couldn’t find my wand, so I punched him in the face.”

“And you’re not dead? Mulciber’s the size of a bloody house!”

“Have a little faith, will you?” he paused. “Wait, you can’t remember?” Sirius asked.

“No.”

“You’re joking.”

“No.”

Sirius stood up and looked James straight in the eye. “You’re not…you really don’t remember anything?”

“Not a damn thing,” James said ruefully. “Any chance you do?”

“I do,” Sirius replied cautiously. “Oi, mate, you look a bit —”

The room seemed to spin, and James sunk to the floor, his vision going black and spotted.

“Prongs, are you alright?” Sirius asked, voice tinged with concern.

James nodded. “Er, think so. Just got a bit dizzy.”

Sirius thought back to the previous night — the Quidditch match, James laughing — but now James had an odd sort of look in his eye, blank, confused, like someone who had been Obliviated. “Did
someone take your memories of last night?” Sirius asked, almost afraid of the answer.

James nodded vaguely. “Almost definitely. I was hoping you knew who it was.”

“No idea,” Sirius said, stunned. “Last I saw you, you were hanging from the ceiling like a bat,

smelling like you’d bathed in firewhiskey.”

“Did I really?” James asked with a grin.

Sirius nodded. “Why would someone go to the trouble of wiping your memory?”

“I dunno,” James said, jumping to his feet. He paced back and forth, running his fingers through his

hair. “I dunno, I must’ve seen something or done something I wasn’t supposed to, and someone

decided that…” he buried his head in his hands. “I don’t understand,” he said, his voice crumbling.

“I can’t remember.”

“Relax,” Sirius said. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

James nodded. “Let’s find Moony, he’ll know what to do.”

“Actually, I haven’t seen him since —”

“Merlin, what did you do? What did you say to him?” James demanded. “Padfoot, I swear, if you did anything to ruin your relationship with him — “

“What if he did something to ruin his relationship with me?”

“Don’t make me laugh.” James scoffed. “Listen, Pads, I love you, but if anyone’s done anything, it was certainly you.”

Sirius shrugged. “I feel I ought to be insulted by that.”

“Perhaps,” James replied. “You don’t think it was Moony who took my memory, do you?”

“Nah, absolutely not.” Sirius limped up to the door.

“What’ve you done to your leg?”

James chuckled. “It’s a bloody crime that I can’t remember, I’m telling you.”

“I think Ratface took a picture.”

“You know, we can’t finish the map until we figure out a name for him,” James said. "And I’m telling you right now, we can’t call him Ratface for the rest of his life."

“About the map —”

James cocked an eyebrow. “Now, Padfoot,” he scolded. “What’ve you done to the poor map?”

“Me? Nothing. However, I may have, in my drunken state, put a charm on it so it only opens when we say a certain phrase.”

“That doesn’t seem to be much of a problem, does it?” James asked. “Likely for the best.”

“Well, yes, it would be. If I could remember what that phrase was.”

“D’you happen to know where the map is?”

“Yeah, I gave it to —” Sirius’s face drained of color.

“What? WHAT?”

“I think I’ve left the map in the possession of…Peter.”

“Oh, that’s not all bad, then,” James said with relief. “Blimey, Sirius, try not to give me a heart attack, will you?”

“And, you see, the problem with that would be that last night, McKinnon dared our Peter Pettigrew to jump into the Black Lake.”

“Did he?”

“Nah, she pushed him,” Sirius said. “Point is, our pride and joy now rests with the merpeople.”

“I assume you mean the map, and not Peter.”

Sirius laughed, brushing his long black hair out of his face. “Regrettfully, yes.”

“So it’s at the bottom of the lake.” James said mournfully. “Blimey, and after all that work.”

“Well, actually…no. Peter managed to retrieve the map, but he got bitten by a mermaid, so he’s in the hospital wing.”

“He is?” James asked. “Is he alright?”

Sirius nodded. “Yeah, of course. Most unfortunately, our map is…less alright.”

“What’s happened to it?”
“Well, we hadn’t really put a water-proofing spell on it, so…we’ve got wet parchment which occasionally spells out random letters, and a few smudged drawings of all the classrooms.” James groaned. “Why don’t we ever plan ahead?”

“It’s the Marauder lifestyle,” Sirius shrugged.

“So, I gather we won the match last night?” James asked, thoughts jumping back to Quidditch. He remembered the whole week of practices, remembered Sirius balancing on his broomstick and flying into the stands to kiss Remus, but when he thought about the match between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor, there was nothing.

“That’s what you’re concerned about?” Sirius asked. James nodded.

“Yeah, we won, no thanks to me.”

“What?” James asked, nose wrinkled. Without noticing, he’d begun pacing nervously again.

“One of the Ravenclaw Beaters — Paxton, I think it was — hit a damn Bludger into my broomstick halfway through the game. I could kill him.”

“Be thankful it wasn’t your head,” James said with a grin. “Did you fall?”

Sirius nodded. “It was a bloody brilliant match, shame you can’t remember it.”

James stood and glanced around the room. The common room smelled strongly of fire whiskey and butter beer, and there was half a Gryffindor banner hanging limply from the ceiling. The other half was wrapped around a corner of one of the paintings, and looked as if it’d been thrown into the fire and hastily extinguished. “Where is everyone?”

“Class,” Sirius replied.

“Oh,” James sighed. “We’ve got a Potions test today, haven’t we?”

“Yeah.”

“I wish whoever did this to me could Obliviate Slughorn as well,” James sighed.

“He’ll go easy on us since we’ve just done Quidditch,” Sirius said confidently. “You should probably go to the hospital wing.”

“Are you bloody joking? Madam Pomfrey will have my head if she finds out how much I drank last night.”

Sirius shrugged. “Race you to Potions?”

James was already racing down the hall, and Sirius started after him. “Cheater!” Sirius shouted.

“Loser,” James replied, his robes trailing behind him. They burst into the Potions room as Slughorn was demonstrating how to make a potion.

“Good morning, Potter, Black,” Slughorn said. “Nice of you to show up ten minutes late.” He glanced at his tarnished wristwatch as if attempting to verify this statement. “Wonderful coincidence that we’ll be brewing a Timeliness Potion this morning, isn’t it?”

“Thanks, Professor, but I doubt we’ll be needing it,” Sirius said, and sat down next to Remus.

“Mr. Snape, would you care to demonstrate the proper technique for cutting the root of Asphodel?”

“And while you’re at it, would you care to cut all your fingers off as well?” James asked in a perhaps unnecessarily nasty tone as Severus swept past him, sneering. He demonstrated how to hold the root at an angle and slice the pieces diagonally, carefully avoiding any tendrils.

“Excellent work, Mr. Snape!” Slughorn said. “Five points to Slytherin.”

Snape smiled proudly.

“You may return to your seat.”

Sirius casually stuck his foot out as Snape walked past, causing him to trip and fall into Lily’s lap. She shot a foul look in the Marauders’ direction and helped Severus to his feet.

“Best to watch those feet of yours,” Severus hissed at Sirius. “Before someone decides they ought to removed.”

“I’d love to see you try,” Sirius retorted, smoothly turning back to his cauldron.

“Oi, Potter,” Avery threw a bezoar at James’ head to get his attention.

“Did you hear something, Remus?” James asked, rather loudly.

Remus gave a long suffering sigh and a slightly apologetic look at Avery before replying. “No.”

“Potter,” Avery repeated. “How are your memories of last night? A bit hazy, would you say?” His
serpentine face twisted into a smirk. James ground his teeth together. “No,” he managed. “Not at all.”

“Mulciber, did you see Potter fumble that pass yesterday?” Avery asked. James clenched his fists. “Yeah. Bloody idiot, looked like he hadn’t held a Quaffle in his life.”

“Shut up,” Sirius snapped. “And Black falling off his broomstick? Looked like a first year in Flying Lessons.” Severus said, methodically chopping Potions ingredients without looking up. “Shame he wasn’t hurt. I’d’ve loved to see Potter cry like a little girl.”

“Is there a problem?” Slughorn inquired, leaning over Severus’s cauldron. “No, sir,” Severus said, with a slight smile. “Excellent work, Snape, excellent! Avery, Mulciber, well…” he turned away. “Perhaps a bit more practice. Ah, Mr. Potter, I see you’ve finished your potion!”

James nodded. Slughorn cleared his throat, leaning over the cauldron. He looked across the room. “Miss Evans, would you care to help him?” Lily’s nose wrinkled at the very idea. “Yes, sir,” she said, not sounding particularly cheerful. “Alright, Evans?” James asked. “Fine,” she replied. She glanced over her shoulder at Mary, who was shaking her head vehemently. She glanced at his potion, back at Mary, and then again at James. She leaned towards him and whispered. “Try adding a bit of eel tail. That should help.” “Thanks,” James said, not looking at her. “Oi, Evans?” Lily arched an eyebrow in response. “MacDonald didn’t happen to mention anything about last night, did she?” “Not a word, other than complaining about the Ravenclaws,” she said. “Although she wasn’t in our dormitory last night. Did you two —” Lily’s face went brilliant red, and she felt an odd sinking feeling within her chest. She could no longer meet his eyes, and felt as if she was boiling with jealousy. “Oh.”

“No, no it wasn’t anything like that,” he said quickly. “Evans, do you know a way to retrieve memories?” “There isn’t one,” Lily replied. “Once someone has been Obliviated, their memories are nearly impossible to retrieve. Only the person who originally took their memory can restore them.” She looked at him out of the corner of her brilliant green eyes. “Why do you ask?” “No reason,” James said, and ruffled up his hair with his hand, glowering down at his potion. “Lil,” Marlene called, and Lily flounced away, leaving the smell of daisy perfume in her wake. James stared after her for a moment, and shook his head to clear it. Slughorn began to ramble about their next assignment, but James was already halfway to his feet, and had drawn his wand. As they filed out of the classroom, he leapt in front of the Slytherins. “Which one of you took my memories?” he demanded, in a voice which did not seem to belong to him — it was savage, and angry, and his heart raced in his chest. “And why?” “What exactly are you accusing us of?” Severus asked. James was too angry to speak. “Well — I — it must've been you!” he shouted, pointing his wand at Snape’s throat. “That’s a new excuse for being dumber than a troll,” Severus hissed, reaching for his wand, his eyes darting around the room, everywhere but at James. “James,” Peter warned. James’ fist had closed around his wand, and he was shaking, furious. This anger was uncommon for James, he was quick-tempered, sharp-witted, but a stinging insult was usually enough to satisfy his fury. Now the anger felt as though it would swallow him whole, and he wasn’t certain, in the rage-drenched darkness of his thoughts, that he knew what would calm it. A jinx, perhaps, but not likely. Punching Severus in the face would feel fantastic, no doubt, but he would probably break his hand on Snape’s greasy, hooked nose. “James, c’mon,” Remus said under his breath. “Seriously, let’s go.”
James turned away from Severus for a moment. “WHY DO YOU WANT ME TO STOP? HE STOLE MY MEMORY!” he shouted. James was rarely so angry, rarely lost his composure. He felt shaken to his very core.

“While this is all quite entertaining,” Severus said, with a black hatred in his eyes. “I haven’t done anything to your memory.”

“LIAR,” James almost screamed, too angry to form sentences. “Why’d you do it, then? What did I do to deserve it?”

“I’m certain that you did something to deserve it, but I haven’t done anything. I don’t know anything about your bloody memory,” Severus snapped. “Now I’d appreciate it if you’d move so I can go to class.”

“Not likely,” James replied, his mouth twisted in a way which was not at all becoming on him. All of his boyish, lazy charm had gone, and he looked terrible and dangerous, which was not a very ‘James’ way to look.

He felt something hit the back of his head, a blinding white light flashed behind his eyes — and he remembered.

He remembered the Quidditch game. Wind whistling through his hair, his broomstick moving easily in the air, turning sharply. The Quaffle was tucked under his arm, and he tossed it to Mary with ease, flying down the pitch, sweeping up into the cloud filled sky, snowflakes falling on his shoulders; he felt them melt on his stinging face…

Then, the party. He was being held on his teammate’s shoulders, having scored the most points out of any of them. He remembered smiling, grinning so broadly his cheeks hurt. The muscles in his face twitched at the memory.

Another memory came flooding back, laughing, one arm thrown around Sirius’s shoulder. He remembered chanting, “Gryffindor!” and hearing the cheers of the others, seeing the faces of the Marauders, feeling the burn of fire whiskey down his throat.

“James? James!” Peter’s voice sounded as if it was coming from somewhere else. “What’s wrong with him?”

“His memories are coming back,” Sirius said, supporting James, whose hazel eyes were glazed, almost clouded over. “Moons, go after whoever it was who just hit him with that spell.”

Remus’s eyes narrowed as a response to being told what to do, but he listened, and sprinted down the corridor. He saw the flutter of Hogwarts robes as the person ran for the staircase, and shouted, “Petrificus totalus!”

The figure froze and toppled to the ground like a statue. Remus leaned over it, frowning. “Frank Longbottom?” he pointed his wand at him, reversing the spell.

“Remus, good to see you!” Frank stood, gangly and odd-looking as ever, but with a strange air of confidence that he hadn’t possessed at Hogwarts. “It’s been quite a while.”

Remus nodded. “Yeah. It has. Er… I suppose I’ll get to the point,” he scratched the back of his head, hesitating for a moment as if unsure what to say. “Why did you Obliviate James?”

“Sorry, Remus, that’s Auror business, Ministry business.”

“You work for the Ministry?” Remus asked. “But…you’re…”

“The Auror Office, not quite the Ministry,” Frank amended.

“What are you doing at Hogwarts?” Remus asked. “I expect you’ll want to see James, and Sirius —”

“No, I don’t think James will want to see me, not after remembering what I’ve done,” Frank said. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

“Frank, tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t tell you much,” Frank said, eyes shifting away from Remus’s face. “But it’s about Belinda. Belinda Jody.”

“The girl who was killed here,” Remus said, slowly, weighing these words, evaluating them.

Frank nodded.

“The Auror office didn’t have anything to do with what happened to her, did it?” Remus asked carefully.

“No, absolutely not,” Frank said firmly. “I swear.”
“So, why did you Obliviate James? What did he see last night that you didn’t want him to remember? Why did you give him his memory back, and why on earth did you try to make sure he wouldn’t find out?”

“Those are excellent questions, Remus,” Frank said. “Really excellent, exactly the sort of thing the Auror office looks for. You should really consider a career as —“

“Thanks,” Remus interrupted sharply. He could barely manage a smile, feeling such hatred for himself, for his condition, that it made his stomach turn. Maybe in a different world, a better world, he wasn’t a werewolf, and he could become an Auror and protect people, and no one would look at him like he wasn’t a wizard. Like he wasn’t even a person. “You still haven’t answered.”

“I wish I could tell you, but it’s all highly classified, and the last thing I want is to be suspended —”

“Alright, er, fine.” Remus said quickly. “I have to go to Charms.”

“I’m sorry,” Frank called after him, but Remus didn’t reply.

James was sitting at his desk next to Sirius in Charms, his head in his hands.

“Not any better, I assume?” Remus asked Sirius.

“Worse. He hasn’t said what he remembers, but from the look on his face, I can tell it isn’t good.”

James groaned and hit his forehead against the table.

“Are you alright?” Peter asked.

James sighed heavily.

“Mr. Potter, if you’re going to sleep during my lesson —“ Flitwick squeaked, looking affronted.

“Bugger off and leave me alone,” James mumbled.

“Pardon me!” he spluttered. “Mr. Potter, take out your wand and demonstrate the Seize and Pull Charm which we learned last year. Immediately.”

James pulled out his wand and rubbed his eyes. “Alright,” he pointed his wand at a book which balanced precariously on the edge of Flitwick’s desk. “Carpe Retractum.” A magical rope flew from the end of his wand and drew the book towards him.

“Good work, Potter,” Flitwick said, glancing at James over the rims of his spectacles. “Are you feeling quite alright?”

“Absolutely, sir,” James replied, looking up sharply. His glasses slid down the bridge of his nose, and he pushed them up with one hand. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead.

“What did you see?” Sirius asked.

James held up one hand.

“From the look on your face, I’m inclined to believe you’ve had the misfortune of seeing Snivelly’s arse.”

This, at least, elicited a slight chuckle from James.

“Muffliato,” Remus said under his breath. “There, now no one can hear us.”

“Did you see who it was?” James asked. “The person who gave my memories back?”

Remus nodded. “You’re not going to like this.”

“That’s never a good thing to hear,” James said apprehensively. “Who was it then?”

“Frank.”

“Frank Longbottom?” James demanded. “He finished his seventh year ages ago. What’s he doing back?”

“He’s an Auror, now, apparently. He wouldn’t tell me anything about why he’s here, only that it has something to do with the Muggle-born girl.” Remus replied. “Prongs, it’s important, and I’d never ask if it wasn’t. What did you see?”

“I saw the person who killed her,” James said in a hollow voice. This was all very unlike him — the lack of confidence, the fear in his eyes, and the others were scared for him. “I don’t know how I knew — I know things, sometimes, I don’t think I ever told any of you that.” He flicked his wand, and a pile of books rose into the air above his head. He focused on the words on the spines of the books, so he wouldn’t have to look anyone in the eye. “It’s strange, really, so I don’t talk about it. I do, though, sometimes I just know.”

“Yeah, whatever, you’re brilliant,” Sirius said, trying not to let James see how worried he was.
“Anyways.”
“Anyways,” James said, with a bit of renewed energy. “Anyways, yes, I saw the person who killed her. Not their face, but it was definitely a Death Eater, and that means that she wasn't killed here, and a student or teacher must’ve brought her here on the train. And,” he added. “Not to sound prejudiced against Slytherins, but I sort of want to blame the entire affair on the Slytherins. Specifically Snivellus and his band of buffoons.”

“Oi, mate, one of those buffoons is my brother,” Sirius said, not looking in the least offended.

“Sorry,” James replied. He glanced up at Flitwick, who was sitting at his desk and demonstrating different types of summoning charms. “Dumbledore hasn’t talked about her, the dead girl. I think he wants us all to forget so he can figure out what’s really going on.”

“If he has the Aurors involved, he must be getting worried,” Peter said.

“It’s not only Dumbledore, it’s everyone,” Remus said. “All the teachers. We’ve only been learning dueling in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and according to our textbooks, we’re meant to be learning about werewolves.”

“That would be a laugh, wouldn’t it?” Sirius asked. “At least you’d never have to study.”

Remus chuckled. “We’ve been learning how to use plants for defensive purposes in Herbology as well. They’re training us to fight in the war later, you know.”

“D’you think they have a choice?” James asked. “Really? Because it seems to me that they have to teach us this and we have to learn it. Maybe one day it could save our lives.”

“It shouldn’t have to,” Peter said, sounding on the edge of tears.

“It’s the way it is. Besides, we’re only in our fourth year. The war could very well have ended by then,” Sirius said, but he knew it wasn’t true. Even though Flitwick couldn’t hear them, his face was drawn, and he looked exhausted, his eyes shadowed. They were all beginning to look like that, Sirius thought grimly, his mouth drawing into a line. Tired and sick. The Marauders might try to fight it, with laughing and pranks and hexing Snape as if it was all just one big joke and life was the punchline. But it wasn’t, and they knew it wasn’t, and it was becoming more and more clear each day.
The Muggle-born Girl

Chapter Notes

sorry this is a bit late, i’ve been traveling and haven’t had internet access that much. I'll try to post the next chapter as soon as i can

Lily sat at the window in her dormitory, the sleeping forms of her friends motionless in the beds beside her. There were cold tears on her cheeks, but she couldn’t remember crying. She’d woken, dizzy with guilt, and crawled towards the window, looking out at the Black Lake and the sparkling lights of the castle to ground herself, remind her where she was. For some reason she couldn’t quite understand, she craved the company of the Marauders. Not Severus, not Marlene or Mary, not even Benjy...no, it was them that she wanted, and she didn’t yet know why. There was something that drew her to them, something about all the unanswered questions they left trailing in their wake. Where did Remus go every full moon, and why was Lily so reluctant to believe Severus’s theories? Why did Sirius pretend to be alright, even when he wasn’t, and why had he told the truth to Lily, years before, and no one since? Why did they all want to spend time with Peter, when he didn’t seem much more interesting than a brick wall? And James — James was one enormous question. Why, despite the awful things he’d done, especially to Severus, why couldn’t Lily quite bring herself to hate him?

“Lily?” Marlene whispered into the dark.

“Yeah?” Lily whispered back, hastily wiping tears off her cheeks.

“You were sort of...crying,” Marlene said. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know,” Lily said. “I don’t think so.” She paused for a moment, gathering the covers on her bed tightly around her shoulders. “Mar...I think I need to apologize to someone. And I don’t really know why, but I need to do it now.” Lily was intuitive, and often knew things about other people before they knew themselves, but she was careful where Marlene was spontaneous, and this was very much unlike her. “I think I’ve been really unfair, and cruel, and that isn’t the person I want to become. No matter what happens. Do you understand?”

“I don't think so,” Marlene said, confused. “Yeah, you’ve never been nice to Potter or Black or Pettigrew, but they’ve never been nice to you either. You’re nice to other people, though, always polite and everything. You’ve never hurt anyone for the fun of it.”

“What about Frank?” Lily asked, relieved at having located the source of her overwhelming guilt.

“Who?” Marlene asked. Lily couldn’t see her, sitting in the dark, but could tell how bewildered she was.

“Frank Longbottom. Severus and I meant to…” Lily buried her head in her hands. “I’m an awful person. I never even apologized to him. He just —” she stopped herself from saying the words in her head. Got in the way.

Wasn’t that why people were dying in both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds? Because innocent people got hurt while others were on a mission to hurt someone else. It wasn’t always intentional, but it still happened. “I have to go, now.” Lily jumped to her feet. “I have some people to apologize to.”

“In the middle of the night?” Marlene asked. “Why?”

“I’ve been stupid. I’ve been letting my friendship with Severus stop me from...” Lily shook her head and leapt out of bed, pulling a dressing gown on. “I’ll be back.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

Lily raised one shoulder in a semblance of a shrug.

“Wait until the morning, for the love of Merlin —“ Marlene buried her head under her pillow.
“Sorry,” Lily said, and dashed from the room, red hair blazing behind her. She didn’t quite know
where she was going, not really, but she found them soon enough. The Marauders.
They stood in the corridor, path lit only by the faint blue light coming from Peter’s wand. His arm
was bandaged, and he was holding a piece of parchment that looked as if it’d been flushed down a
Toilet.
“Someone’s coming,” Remus said quickly, and Peter extinguished his wand.
“It’s only me,” Lily said into the dark. “I won’t tell anyone you’re here.”
“Evans!” James said, as if this were not an entirely unpleasant surprise. “Out of bed so late? And in
her dressing gown, too.” He smirked at Sirius. “What’re you doing here, then?”
Lily wanted to run away, felt her courage shrinking inside her, smaller and smaller and smaller. “I
wanted to apologize.”
“Is this a joke? Evans, are you under the Imperius Curse?” James said, all mock concern and large
glasses framing his hazel eyes, which now glittered with some emotion that Lily couldn’t quite
understand, couldn’t read.
“No, it’s not a joke. I’m really, really sorry.”
“Why?” Remus asked.
“I don’t know. I’ve been letting—” she stopped. “I haven’t been very nice to you.”
“True,” Sirius said. The two exchanged a look, reminding both of them, instantly, that they knew
things about each other that other people didn’t.
“And the things I’ve said and done have been wrong,” Lily said, standing her ground. Her bare feet
were planted firmly on the stone floor.
Sirius chuckled savagely. “That’s a laugh, isn’t it, Potter?”
James nodded. Lily’s eyes were shining in the dark, and they looked strange and magical and alive in
their greenness.
“What’s this really about?” Remus asked. He had a way of talking softly that made intrusive
questions seem casual. “Why did you come here in the middle of the night to find us?”
“And don’t say it’s because you’re sorry,” Sirius added.
“No,” Lily said. It was difficult to remain calm whilst faced with four boys such as the Marauders,
brilliant and mischievous and not at all cruel, but not kind either. She did her best to look them in the
eyes. “It’s because of Frank Longbottom.”
“Don’t tell me you had something to do with my memory—” James said quickly. Sirius silenced
him with a deadly look.
“I saw him yesterday, and— I don’t even know if he was really there, but...” she looked down at her
hands. “Remember when someone slipped him the Draught of Living Death and he had to go to the
hospital wing until someone brewed a cure?”
“By someone you mean Snivellus, I presume?” James asked with cold indifference, one brow
arched.
“His name is Severus,” Lily replied. “And I had a hand in what happened.”
“Why would you want to poison Frank Longbottom?” Remus asked, with an air of one very much
surprised.
“I didn’t. It was meant for you.”
“Me?” Remus repeated.
“Well, one of you,” Lily amended. “I never apologized to you, or to him,” Lily lowered her head.
“I’m so sorry. It was an awful thing to do.”
“An awful thing to do,” Peter repeated, bright blue eyes narrowed. His nose was twitching slightly.
“You didn’t do it, though, Lily.”
Lily’s face burnt with guilt. “I didn’t stop it from happening, though.”
“And since all of us are fine, why are you apologizing?” Sirius asked.
Lily looked down. “I don’t know. I just... I thought I’d feel better if I said something.”
Remus nodded, as if this all made sense.
“Do you?” James asked.
For a moment, it sounded to Lily as if he actually wanted to know the answer.
“Yes,” she replied. “Slightly.”

“Why apologize to us instead of Frank?” Remus asked.

Lily’s brows furrowed. “Er…I don’t know, really,” it was odd to be talking to the Marauders like this. As far as she’d been aware, they weren’t capable of civilized conversation. “I wanted to apologize to him as well, but…”

“You found us first?” Peter guessed.

Lily nodded.

“You ran all the way down to the first floor, in your dressing gown, in the middle of the night…to apologize to us.” James repeated, sounding touched.

Sirius scowled in disgust. “Alright, apology accepted. Run along now, before I hex you.”

Lily did not run, and made no more attempts to repress her curiosity. “Why do you say things like that? When people are nice to you, all of you act like it’s an insult.”

“No we don’t,” Remus protested, thinking this quite unfair. But if he was honest with himself, as he very rarely was, Lily was right. Remus deflected every compliment he’d ever gotten, and gone out of his way to avoid being on the receiving end of any act of kindness.

“That’s certainly not true,” James added. “When people are nice to me, I add their names to a mental list of people who secretly adore me. You’re on that list, by the way, Evans.”

“You’re doing it again,” Lily said. “Why do you all try to pretend you don’t feel anything when you’re around other people?”

All of them looked uncomfortable. This, while inarguably accurate, was not something that other students noticed. It wasn’t really something that the Marauders were aware of themselves, but now that it had been said, they were all looking at each other and realizing how true it was.

Lily observed a peculiar series of looks between the four of them, almost as if they could understand each other’s thoughts. She thought, in this brief, bizarre moment, that to be connected the way the Marauders were must be an interesting thing, a different thing. To know what the others would say before they said it, to know what each of them was thinking at any given time.

“Well, it’s been nice talking to you,” James said, fake politeness and messy hair. He spiked it up with his hand again, and Lily’s jaw clenched in response.

“You’re still doing it,” Lily pointed out, and walked away.

“You’re not going back to Gryffindor Tower, then?” James called after her, almost as if he wanted her to stop walking, to come back.

“Would it be your business if I wasn’t?” Lily replied, not looking back.

“If you’re looking for Frank, he’s probably staying in Hogsmeade.”

“Good thing the Hogsmeade trip is next week, then,” Lily replied. “And thank you.”

“You’re — you’re welcome,” James stammered, with a confused look at Sirius, who was smirking. They watched her leave, and it did not need to be said aloud. Lily Evans had, in her own strange way, gotten under their skin.

The Marauders were wading through snow, Remus and Sirius holding hands. Although it was clearly making Remus nervous, no one seemed to think anything of it. “People with signed Hogsmeade forms, follow me,” Filch yelled, limping down over the snow covered hill.

“So, what do we do? Go to class? Sit around?” Peter asked, looking mournful as he watched gleeful students march over the hill.

“Oh, absolutely not,” James scoffed. “We’re going to Hogsmeade.”

“But none of us have signed forms,” Remus protested rather feebly. Once James Potter had a plan, there was no way to stop him.

“Moony,” James said. “Honestly. Have you forgotten about the One-Eyed Witch?”

Remus sighed. “Wouldn’t it be better to devote our time and energy to finding out why Frank had to Obliviate you?”

“It would,” James said. “See, much as I love Hogsmeade and desperately want a Fizzing Whizbee
right now, it seems you’ve forgotten that one Frank Longbottom is staying in Hogsmeade.”
“What are we going to do? Interrogate him?”
“No,” Sirius said, with a glint in his eyes. “We’re going to get under the cloak and wait for him to
start talking to someone about why he’s here, and what he’s doing.”
“Do you really think that’s going to happen?” Peter worried.
“Undoubtedly,” James said. “You remember Frank, he can’t keep a secret to save his life.” He
 glanced at the retreating forms of the other students. “Alright, let’s go.”
They seemed not to fit into the One-Eyed Witch passageway as well as they used to. Remus’s head
brushed the top of the passageway, and Peter had to squeeze into the narrow space.
“Oi,” Sirius said. “Cloak.”
James handed it to him. “If we lose the thing again, I’m going to tear out my hair.”
“Would that really be such a tragedy?” Sirius asked, slapping the back of James’ head.
James glared and continued through the passageway, smiling mischievously. The light from the end
of his wand illuminated the cold, damp stone of the passage.
“It’s times like these when I miss the map,” Peter said miserably. “We could take a wrong turn and
end up trapped underground forever.”
“Blimey, Pete, lighten up, will you?” James asked. “I’ve got the map here, no thanks to you. Why’d
you have to get yourself pushed into the lake?”
“Marlene pushed me!” Peter spluttered.
“I was there,” Sirius said. “I may have encouraged her. In all fairness, it wasn’t Ratty’s fault.”
“Still not good enough as a nickname, that,” James said. “Pete, why’d you have to be a rat? Why
couldn’t you be a cat? Or a bird?”
Peter shrugged. He hated having a rat for an Animagus. It made him feel less than human, less than
animal. He felt like something disgusting and vile and distinctly not Marauder-like, but he swallowed
these feelings and made a note to store them where he kept all other feelings of this sort.
This place was a little box inside his trunk in front of his bed, which could only be unlocked using
magic, and was full of little scraps of paper that said, in his spidery, small handwriting, exactly what
he felt. Most of these, he would later find when reading them again, said simply, “I’m afraid.”
Still, these were not feelings that Marauders had, so he smiled. “I don’t know. Probably to annoy
you.”
“Well, you’re excellent at that,” Sirius said, not noticing the way Peter flinched at this. “Ah, look,
we’re here. Prongs, after you.”
“What, are you scared?”
“Scared, no,” Sirius rolled his eyes. “Don’t want to ruin my hair by rolling it in dust, yes.”
“I’ll go,” Remus said, pulling himself up through the trap door in the cellar. His foot narrowly missed
colliding with James’ face, and he leaned back into the door to apologize. “Sorry, Prongs.”
“Watch where you’re putting that thing next time,” James grumbled, crawling up after him.
The Marauders emerged from the cellar of Honeydukes wrapped in the invisibility cloak, their feet
mostly visible underneath it. “C’mon,” James hissed, leading the others towards the Three
Broomsticks. Four sets of footprints appeared in the snow as they walked, invisible.
Rosmerta, the barmaid, was talking to Frank Longbottom at the bar. Her smile was bright and cheery
as she handed him a butterbeer, and Frank’s eyes fixed on the foam. “I’m afraid I didn’t just come
here to talk,” Frank said, head bowed.
“Sh,” James hissed from under the cloak, although none of them had spoken.
“I’m here to ask what you know about Belinda Jody,” Frank said.
“Oh,” Rosmerta’s expression soured. “Well, I’ll tell you what I told the Daily Prophet when they did
their report. I never met her.”
“But you are familiar with a group of Death Eaters who presumably killed her?”
“I doubt a Death Eater would bother with a first year Muggle-born student. If you want to know
what I think, Longbottom, and this doesn’t go back to the Ministry, mind you — “
“I can make no promises,” Frank said. “But I’m not a Ministry official. I’m an Auror.”
“I think it was a Hogwarts student that killed her. Death Eaters don’t risk that sort of thing, but a
“student, someone whose parents are Death Eaters, someone who’s only looking to prove themselves to You-Know-Who…” Rosmerta glanced quickly over her shoulder. “And I think it’s very suspicious that her parents never showed up to collect her body.”

“Her parents were killed two days before she was,” Frank replied. “She hadn’t heard the news yet, before…”

“That’s awful,” Peter whispered.

“It could happen to anyone, these days,” Sirius replied.

Remus looked at him, surprised, almost, that Sirius could be so unfeeling. Surprised he was capable of acting as if it didn’t matter. He supposed that it was what they were all learning to do, learning how to pretend they didn’t care because if they did, they wouldn’t survive.

James crept forward, and the others followed.

“Yes, as I said, it’s all very suspicious,” Rosmerta said. “But I don’t much like to talk about that sort of thing. I mind my business,” this was sharp, daring Frank to disagree.

“Of course,” Frank replied, staring into the foam on his butterbeer.

“This Auror job must be difficult these days,” Rosmerta said kindly. “I promise, it’ll all calm down eventually.”

Frank shook his head. “I wouldn’t have gotten the job if I didn’t know exactly what to expect,” he replied. “I know how dangerous it is. Can I tell you something, Rosmerta?”

She nodded.

“This is it,” James whispered excitedly. “He’s going to say — “

“I’m getting married.”

“What?” James hissed from under the cloak.

“Shut up, someone will hear you,” Sirius whispered.

“Her name is Alice,” Frank said, his hardened face now recognizable as the boy he’d been at Hogwarts. “She was a Hufflepuff at Hogwarts, and we didn’t really know each other until our seventh year,” he smiled. “I love her, Rosmerta. I love her so much, it makes all of this seem alright.”

“That’s lovely,” Rosmerta said with a smile. “I’ll be right back, Frank, I’ve just got to go check something in the kitchen.”

Frank jumped. “James!”

“Congratulations to you and Alice.” James said with a cheerful grin.

Frank relaxed slightly. “Thanks.”

“Now, would you care to explain why you Obliviated me?”

“Er…James, I’m very sorry. The truth is, I was aiming for someone else.”

“Who?” James asked.

“Alright, well, I trust this won’t get back to any of your friends, will it?”

“Of course,” James lied, with a glance at the space where the other three Marauders were standing, invisible.

“I saw someone return to the third floor classroom where Belinda Jody’s body was found. I don’t know who it was, but they saw me and tried to run away. I meant for them to forget they’d seen me, but it was dark and you were just walking back from Gryffindor tower, and…”

“It was an accident,” James finished for him, shoulders slumped in relief. “And when you realized it was me you’d Obliviated, you gave me my memories back.”

Frank nodded.

“Are you any closer to finding out who it was?” James asked.

“No,” Frank said, sounding defeated.

“D’you think Belinda would come back as a ghost? Like…I dunno, Moaning Myrtle?” James asked.

“Maybe she’d know who killed her.”

“I think if she was going to, she would’ve done already,” Frank replied. “I have work to do, James, but I’ll see you at my wedding? You and your other…More-otters?”
“Marauders,” James replied, drawing himself up to his full height. Marauder was, in his eyes, in all their eyes, a title to be proud of, a title which had to be earned. “We’ll be there.”

“I hope so,” Frank replied, and with a loud crack, he Disapparated out of the Three Broomsticks.

James turned back to the Marauders, eyes round behind his glasses.

“What now?” Peter asked, his voice seeming to come from thin air.

“Now, my dear Wormtail,” James said, and the nickname seemed to fit perfectly; Peter was smiling under the cloak, wishing James could see him. “We finish our map and find out who killed her.”

A disembodied hand, attached to the invisible Peter, held out the soggy parchment which was the map.

James groaned. “Why are we so bloody stupid?”

A wizard passing by gave him an extremely odd look. It must’ve looked strange, James mused, three invisible boys talking to their extremely visible friend. But everything the Marauders did was strange in its own way.

“Is there a way to fix it?” Peter asked. “I’m sorry I ruined it —“

“Peter, you were bitten by a mermaid, and quite honestly you’re lucky to be alive,” Remus said.

Peter shrugged, adjusting the sleeve of his robe to cover his arm.

“And yes, I’m sure there is,” James replied. “C’mon,” he led them out into the snow, glancing discreetly over his shoulder before ripping the Invisibility Cloak off of them, leaving them stark and visible in the seemingly endless white space.

“Where are we going?”

“Zonko’s first,” Sirius said before James could.

“Then Honeydukes,” James added.

“And back to Hogwarts before anyone sees us!” they said in unison.

Remus rolled his eyes.

“Oi, don’t give me that look, mate,” Sirius said.

“Then don’t call me ‘mate,’ we were snogging in a broom cupboard less than three hours ago.” Remus replied before he could stop himself.

Sirius grinned. “What would you have me call you, then?”

“I’ll settle for my name,” Remus replied with one arched eyebrow.

“Whatever, darling,” Sirius replied, and as the words left his mouth he stiffened suddenly, hand clenched around his wand in his robe, his heart pounding uncontrollably.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“His mum used to always call him ‘darling.’” James whispered.

Peter’s eyes widened in a display of what was unmistakably pity, and Sirius closed his eyes so he wouldn’t have to see it. “Whatever,” Sirius said, eyes still closed tightly. “I’m alright, it’s fine,” he heard the cold, trickling laughter of passing Slytherins, and it didn’t matter whether Regulus was among them, not to Sirius. They were all made of the same cruelty, all alive because they had found it in themselves to judge other people’s right to live and to die.

Remus’s hand was on Sirius’s arm, where a long scar carved the length of his pale skin. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, though, as if daring someone to comment. Once someone had, and Sirius had put them in the hospital wing with a flick of his wand, like it didn’t matter. It mattered, though, and Sirius knew. He felt, sometimes, that a part of him was trapped in the space between slamming doors and flying curses, in the shadowy corners of Number 12, Grimmauld Place, and until he found a way to get his mind out of there, he would never really be alive. He could feel it, how alive the others were — especially James. James burnt with life, radiated it, while Sirius sometimes felt like a walking corpse, like less than a ghost. He could tell as he looked at Remus that he felt the same.

“Oi, Potter, what’s that?” a boy from the Quidditch team asked, pointing to the map in James’ hand. It showed Hogwarts, ink smudged, all their hard work still in place but buried under smudges and ripped places.

“It’s —“ James was at a loss for words. He pulled out his wand and tapped the parchment, and the ink disappeared. “Nothing. Joke parchment from Zonko’s, y’know.”
“Oh, alright,” Arnold Pierce was short, slim, the Seeker of the Quidditch team. He was fairly good, James mused, but then again, they all were. “So, you hear Longbottom’s back at Hogwarts? That ought to be a laugh.”

“He could probably kill you,” Remus said. This was not meant to sound threatening, but it almost did.

Pierce smirked. “Whatever,” he swaggered off. “See you around, Potter, Black.” He was never unkind, but rather adopted the reckless persona of James Potter and Sirius Black whenever he was with them, and this meant disregarding other people.

“Oh, no,” a soft voice said despairingly behind them, and Remus glanced over his shoulder to see Lily standing next to Severus, eyes cast determinedly downwards.

James was oblivious, and a grin spread across his face. “Evans,” he said, and then, with significantly less excitement, “Snivellus.”

“It’s Severus, actually;” Severus muttered, absently drawing his wand. “I see you’ve been walking around with that cloak again.”

“I’m certain I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sirius said, although he did, they all did; James’ hand was clenched in the folds of the Invisibility Cloak as they spoke.

“Now, Snivellus,” James said carelessly, his face inches away from Severus and his hooked nose. “There’s an investigation on, and Dumbledore’s pretending he doesn’t know about it and it’s meant to be a secret, and now I say this with the most possible offensive intent: I can only assume you’ve got something to do with it.”

“Talking out of your arse, now, aren’t we, Potter?” Snape sneered.

“That depends,” James said with a cheeky grin. “Am I right?”

“Course he is,” Sirius cut in before Severus could begin to answer. “Care to explain, Snivelly?”

There was a loud crash behind them, a splattering of dust. Heat blazed against James’ back, but he was almost afraid to turn to look. Once he did, he found Sirius gazing into the wreckage, almost as if he’d anticipated it. There was something unfamiliar in his silvery eyes.

“Blimey,” James said, wiping dust off his face. “What the hell was that?”

“Everyone stay back!” a voice roared from the wreckage. There was someone lying petrified in the dirt, surrounded by broken floorboards. Green and black Slytherin robes were crumpled in the dirt next to the figure — no one they knew personally, the Marauders were instantly certain of this, but it was definitely a Hogwarts student. And the person standing above him, wand pointed, eyes blazing, was Frank Longbottom.

“I caught him trying to sneak out of the castle through a secret passageway,” Frank panted. “He killed Belinda Jody.” He planted one foot on the Slytherin’s back, and pointed his wand at him, reversing the jinx instantly.

“Takin’ out of your arse, now, aren’t we, Potter?” Snape sneered, his voice slightly muffled, face pressed against the cobblestones on the street.

“Who is he?” a whisper came from the crowd, uttered by a third year who, though only slightly younger than the Marauders, looked impossibly small and terrified.

“Evan Rosier,” the Slytherin spat.

“I know him,” Remus said under his breath, sounding deeply shocked.


“I mean, I know of him,” Remus said. “He’s an acquaintance of Severus’s. I’m not sure that they’re friends, not exactly, but I saw…”

“What?” James asked, not taking his eyes off Rosier.

“They were talking about something. It sounded...I dunno, like they were planning something. I
didn't tell you because I didn't want you to jump to conclusions when nothing had happened.”
“You don’t think Snape had anything to do with this?” Peter asked, and for a moment he seemed almost afraid of the answer.
“No,” Remus said adamantly. “Evans would never be friends with him if he had, if he’d even hinted at it. But I think Snape is spending time with people who would and possibly have done things like this. For example, well…” Remus gestured towards Rosier, who was sneering at the crowd with hate in his glimmering eyes.
“They’ll put him in Azkaban,” Sirius said hollowly.
“Not yet. They’ll give him a trial first, unless he tells Frank he did it.” James said.
“He almost has,” Sirius replied, in the same empty voice.
“Are you alright?” Remus asked quietly, in a soft voice only Sirius really heard.
“Yeah,” Sirius said, brows furrowed. “Yeah, I’m fine. I was just thinking that it could be Regulus in a few years, if he follows down the same path as the rest of…” his voice trailed off in disgust.
“Rosier killed someone. Belinda was a child.”
“A Mudblood,” Rabastan Lestrange sneered.
“Everyone, quiet!” Frank said, and the crowd fell silent, opening and closing their mouths like merpeople. He spoke into the end of his wand.
“I’ve caught Belinda Jody’s killer. I’m transporting him to Azkaban.”
Frank grabbed Rosier’s arm, as if to Apparate, but Rosier responded too quickly, and Disapparated.
“Rosier is at large,” Frank said into his wand, and with a loud crack! he was gone.
“Everyone, leave Hogsmeade immediately,” McGonagall said, her face grave. “Follow Professor Filch up to the castle and into the Great Hall.”
“Bloody hell,” Peter said, eyes wide.
“Watch your language,” James said, half-joking, his hand clamped around his wand, his eyes darting between Sirius and Remus and Peter, and occasionally over to Lily, who looked grief-stricken, and was talking to Severus.
He looked like he was desperately trying to convince her of something, and she didn’t seem to be willing to listen.
James looked away. “So it was a Slytherin, then. Why am I not surprised?”
“Not all Slytherins are bad,” Remus said objectively.
“Have you met one who hasn’t at least flirted with the idea of being a complete arse?” Sirius asked. Remus laughed at this, a real laugh, entirely inappropriate considering the circumstances, and then they were all laughing, arms slung around each other. Even though someone was dead, and someone had killed her, it was almost too late to do anything but laugh about it.
Remus sat stiffly in an armchair in the Gryffindor common room, every muscle tense. His jaw was clenched, his teeth ground together. It was the angriest most people had ever seen him, but really, he didn’t look particularly angry, more like he was trying to avoid breathing.

Some groups of younger students gave him a wide berth, while others walked past, barely glancing at him.

“Where are the usual suspects, then?” Gideon Prewett asked, a fifth year, excellent at Defense Against the Dark Arts, a friend of James and Sirius. Most people were, though, so this didn’t mean much.

Remus shrugged, the purple bags under his eyes seeming to darken. Of course, he knew that James, Sirius, and Peter were running around the castle, working on the map, but Remus had barely been able to stand that morning, much less join the others. He’d told them he would stay behind and catch up on work he’d missed, but he’d finished his essay several minutes ago and was now sitting, trying to find the strength to walk up the stairs to their dormitory.

“Alright,” Gideon shook his head and walked away, not without some confusion. “Oi, Lupin, you feeling alright? You’re not sick again, are you?”

Remus’s back straightened in anticipation of telling a lie. “Afraid so,” he said tightly.

“Feel better, then,” Gideon said over his shoulder as he started up the stairs.

Remus looked down. “Thanks,” he muttered. Pain arched up from low in his spine, around his ribs, burning. He sat uncomfortably straight, staring into the fire. Relax, he hissed at himself, as if that could possibly stop the wolf. As if anything would. Even James, Sirius, and Peter had likely given up on trying to help him, and he could hardly blame them. What was the point? What's the point what's the point what's the point what's the point --

Another wave of pain reached from his shoulder-blade down to his stomach, and he clenched his quill tightly in his hands, determinedly scrawling one more line of parchment. The quill sputtered in his slightly trembling hand, ink blotting across the page. “Damn it,” he said fiercely, before he could stop himself, and the pain throbbed in his arm. He jumped involuntarily, and the inkwell toppled onto the parchment, leaving his hours of work soaked in ink.

“Rotten luck, there,” the casual voice of James Potter behind him said.


Peter was already kneeling to pick up Remus’s essay and ink, setting them back on the table.

“Thanks,” Remus said.

Peter did not reply, as usual.

“Mate, just go to sleep, you’ve been up since yesterday,” James said worriedly, looking at the dark circles underneath Remus's eyes.

“Yeah, we’ll wake you up when it’s time for —” Sirius cocked his head towards the window, where clouds blocked the sun. Remus felt the fear shoot through him, as it always did, at the idea of the full moon, the white light holding his gaze, the horror of the wolf rising within him, making him sick.

“Don’t worry.”

“I’m not,” Remus said, closing his eyes. “I’ve got you.”

Sirius smiled, a warm feeling spreading through his chest, familiar and unfamiliar all at once. I didn’t love him before, Sirius thought. I thought I did, but the way I feel right now, that’s love. I’m in love with Remus Lupin. He was, and it was awful and agonizing and every time Remus wouldn’t meet his eyes, he felt like dying, but it was also the most wonderful his life had ever been.

Remus looked up at Sirius and smiled, a bruise on his face from the previous full moon still slightly aching. He had never found himself at such a loss for words in his life; everything was wonderful and blurry when he saw Sirius, and nothing could hurt. He felt like the luckiest wizard in the world. He was a monster -- but he couldn’t be, not really, because it was impossible someone as amazing as Sirius would be interested in him if he was.
Remus fell asleep by the fire, surrounded by his friends, and for just a few moments, the wolf slept as well.

“It worked,” James said at length, as the Marauders sat just outside the reach of the Whomping Willow, watching the place where Remus had disappeared into the secret passage to the Shrieking Shack. “He thinks we’ve given up.”

“I think we should tell him,” Peter piped up. “About us becoming Animagi.”

“He doesn’t know how dangerous the next step is, Pete,” Sirius said. “If he did, he’d try to stop us.”

“But we’re in agreement, right? We’re going through with it?” James asked. “It’s not too late to change your mind, y’know.”

“No, we’re doing this,” Sirius said firmly.

“Brilliant. It’s been too late to change your mind since the day we started.”

“Thanks for that,” Sirius replied with a grin.

“Alright, so what we have to do is individually transfigure each part of our bodies into our Animagus. It’s alright if you make a mistake on your arm, and infinitely less alright if you make a mistake on your heart or liver or something.” James said. “And if it doesn’t work, we’re pretty much fucked.”

Peter shuddered.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” James said. “C’mon, follow me,” he led them into the dark, into the Forbidden Forest. Remus’s tortured howl rose over the trees, hanging in the air, and the others cast their eyes towards the ground.

“What’s the spell?” Peter asked in a very small voice, dwarfed by the shadows and the taller boys on either side of him.

“Don’t you ever pay attention?” James asked, exasperated.

“No,” Peter replied, and to his relief, James chuckled.

“Ready?” Sirius asked.

James nodded decisively, drawing his wand from his robes. He pointed it at his foot, and thought as hard as he could about seeing a hoof there instead. There wasn’t a verbal spell for this sort of transformation, and depended just as much on willpower as the combination of their years of hard work.

“Er, what does a rat foot look like?” Peter asked.

“I dunno, figure it out,” James said.

“And for Merlin’s sake, be quiet,” Sirius said, squinting in concentration. He felt the moment it started to work, his toes shrinking into claws, the soles of his feet morphing into paw pads.

“What happens if we get stuck like this?” Peter asked, looking down at his now fully formed rat foot.

“If we never get any further than this?”

“We’d walk around the rest of our lives like this,” James said. “But it won’t happen, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“What? We wouldn’t go to McGonagall to help or something?” Peter asked, sounding panicked.

“She’d have no choice but to report us, and we’d be convicted,” Sirius said, as if this didn’t matter.

“And we’d go to Azkaban?” Peter’s eyes were wide and round. “For trying to help Remus?”

“I dunno,” James said, leaning on one foot, his shoe lying abandon next to his newly transfigured hoof. “We could.”

“Mate, can you even walk like that?” Sirius asked, chuckling.

“Yes,” James said defensively; then, looking at his feet, “no. Merlin, I hope this works.”

Sirius nodded. “What if it doesn’t? What if he gets back after the full moon and we’re gone, or we’ve gone mental, or —“

“You’re as bad as Wormtail,” James said, glaring down at his other foot. “If it doesn’t work, we’ll figure it out. Mistakes that awful just don’t happen to people like us, Pads.”

“We’ll see,” Sirius replied grimly. It was the first time his faith had ever wavered in what James was capable of, what they were all capable of.
They awoke the next morning in the forest, shivering from the cold. Sirius blinked open his eyes, and was aware of something different, blurrier, colorless. “It worked,” he attempted to say, but it came out as a bark.

He glanced over to see a rat lying in the snow, tail curled under its legs. He nudged the rat, which must’ve been Peter, with the end of his nose. It worked, he thought, and had he not been in Animagus form he might’ve smiled.

James stood in the trees, his antlers branching from his head. Prongs, Sirius thought, with a rush of overwhelming joy.

Prongs, it worked, we did it.

To his surprise, James looked back and dipped his head in Sirius’s direction. This is wicked. Sirius heard it as if James had said it aloud.

Haven’t you been able to transform before? I could do it last summer, Sirius thought.

I could, James replied. Not like this, though. I was more me, then, less...Prongs.

I wish Moony could see this, Sirius said softly, lowering his head so Peter — small and trembling and terrified — could climb up over his nose, onto his back.

James nodded. One day he’ll be able to. The day we can do this and we know it’s safe, we’ll show him.

Do we try to change back? Peter asked, small pink nose twitching.

We’ve got to, James replied. Before Moons gets back.

Can we? It took us all night to get this far. Peter worried.

James blinked in a way that probably would’ve been one of his exaggerated shrugs and stared at one of his hooves. Is that starting to look more like a foot? he asked.

Depends, Sirius said, and if a dog could possibly look sarcastic, he did. Whose foot? Peter’s or yours?

Rude, Peter commented, and James chuckled.

Would it be possible to transfigure myself into Peter while I’m turning back into a human? James wanted to know. That’d be a laugh, wouldn’t it? Give Moons a nice fright when we see him.

Probably, Sirius replied. But would you want to, really?

Nah, I wouldn’t sacrifice these good looks. James tossed his antlers much in the same way he would toss his hair.

Mate, your feet are back, Sirius said.

James looked down and made an odd braying sound, almost like a laugh. He did look ridiculous — covered in a fine coat of fur, on four legs, with shockingly pale and pink human feet trembling in the snow, his shoes lying abandoned next to him.

And slowly but surely, they all began to change back, an act both simple and wondrously complicated. As the sun rose high in the sky, they were lying together, human, in the snow.

“We really did it,” Peter whispered into the air.

“We did,” James nodded. “Only took almost three years. And we’ve yet to be able to do it the way Minnie McGee does.”

“How?” Peter asked.

“You’ve seen her, she hardly has to think about it. That’s what it’ll be like for us someday, I’d like to think,” James said.

“Unless we screw it up,” Peter commented.

“Your negativity hurts my soul,” Sirius said. “Have faith.”

“In what? Our ability to make bad decisions?” Peter asked. “You and James and Remus are the most talented wizards in our year, but I’m…” not. He just wasn’t.

“No,” James said. “In the Marauders. If we say we’re going to do something, we do it.”

Peter nodded, eyes shining. If there was anything he really did have faith in, it was the Marauders, what the four of them could do together.

“C’mon, Pete, say something,” James complained. “If we’re not Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers, then what are we?”

“The Magical Mischief-Makers themselves,” Sirius said with a grin.

James laughed, real, roaring, delighted, fueled by Peter’s quiet giggling and Sirius’s exaggerated
wheezing.
“Let’s find Moony,” he managed in between guffaws.
“And have some breakfast?” Peter asked hopefully.
“If you insist,” James shrugged.
“You’re not hungry?” Peter’s stomach growled loudly as though emphasizing his point.
James shrugged. “I could eat a horse, but…”
“You have Quidditch?” Peter guessed.
James nodded. “I heard Evans saying she’d stay to watch Mary practice.”
Sirius groaned. “Won’t you just give up?”
“I can’t,” James said cheerfully, failing to make this sound as if it was unimportant.
“Listen, mate, I overheard Gillian Hartly saying she liked you, and while I wouldn’t call old Gillian
conventionally attractive, she’s got, you know,” he made a crude gesture suggesting breasts of some
sort.
James snorted. “You’re lucky McKinnon isn’t here. She’d hex you.”
“Probably,” Sirius said. “Really, though, mate, you don’t have to be hung up on Evans forever.”
“What if I want to be?” James asked.
“Because we’re still in school, and also you treat her and her friends like absolute shit, if you don’t
mind my saying.”
“Wouldn’t have to if it wasn’t true,” Sirius said. “Sorry, mate.”
“Whatever,” James said, adjusting his glasses on his nose. He slung one arm around Peter, then with
hesitation, his other arm around Sirius. “Alright, alright, if it’ll shut you up, I’ll go out with Gillian
Hartly. Once. But if you think Gillian Hartly is going to make Evans even slightly jealous, I’m afraid
you’re wrong.”
“Lily has nothing to be jealous of, though,” Peter piped up. “Because she isn’t interested in you.”
“Y’know, I think I liked it better when you weren’t talking,” James said, looking only mildly
offended. He forged ahead, snowflakes melting as they hit the lenses of his glasses.
Peter went pink and pretended to be busy dusting snow out of his hair. “I hope Remus is alright,” he
said.
James nodded absently. “Oi, Padfoot, I’ve a question,”
Sirius arched a single eyebrow in response.
“What’s it like?”
“What?” Sirius asked warily.
“You know, you and Moony.”
“What about me and Moony? I swear, Prongs, we’ve got to have a few boundaries here, you can’t
ask me things like that.”
“What I meant,” James remedied, chuckling, “is what’s it like to be dating someone. Do yourself a
favor and wait for a bloke to finish his sentence.”
“It’s alright, I guess,” Sirius said, bewildered.
“I’m going to need a bit more detail than that,” James said. “Seriously, what’s it like? You’ve been
dating what, a couple months?”
“Sirius-ly,” Peter said with a grin.
James’ eye began to twitch slightly behind his glasses.
“It’s…I dunno, honestly it’s the same as it was, but we kiss quite a bit more. It's...it's nice, I
suppose,” Sirius's cheeks felt uncharacteristically warm.
“Ask more questions,” Peter said excitedly. “Look at his face!”
“Oh, aren’t you meant to be on my side?”
“I don’t take sides,” Peter said defensively. “There aren’t sides. We’re a team.”
James and Sirius exchanged a look and both nodded. “Fair point, mate,” James said — or maybe it
had been Sirius, but when they spoke like that, perfectly in sync, they were almost interchangeable.
Sirius was just a rougher, sadder version of the same energy that burnt in James. There were
differences, of course, but to Peter they were people to look up to, to aspire to be.
They burst through the hospital wing doors, disrupting a large group of people gathered around a Hufflepuff Quidditch player. Remus lay in the hospital wing, bruised eyelids shut against scratched cheeks. As the others walked in, he barely opened his eyes.

“You look terrible,” James said bluntly.

“I’ve had worse,” Remus replied; one of his standard responses.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Peter said quietly. Without any of them really noticing, he had crept to the side of Remus’s bed and cast a pain relief spell, one of the only spells that ever came naturally to him.

“You don’t have to do that, really,” Remus said. “I’m alright.”

“You’re absurd,” Madam Pomfrey said, with more affection than the others had ever heard in her voice. “Off with the lot of you, let Mr. Lupin get his rest.”

“They can stay —” Remus protested.

“Hush,” she said sternly. “Go on, get out.”

With an excessive amount of groaning and grumbling, James, Sirius, and Peter were thrown out of the hospital wing, left staring at the barred doors.

Sirius’s knuckles were white, and his jaw held at that determined angle which others had come to fear. “He looks worse, doesn’t he? I swear, it’s worse every time.”

James shook his head. “He looks… I dunno, really sad.”

Peter nodded in agreement. There was a marked difference between this Remus and the one they knew. This one had lost all hope of some normalcy, all hope of finding a cure.

“He thinks we’ve given up,” Sirius said, eyes downcast.

“We haven’t though, right?” Peter asked.

“Course not,” James said lazily, casting a trail of sparks with his wand which flew into the shocked faces of the eavesdropping second years behind them.

“Given up on what?” one yelled, batting at the sparks.

“None of your business,” Sirius shouted back. “Now run off before we hang you by your toes from the ceiling!”

They sprinted off in the opposite direction, and James and Sirius laughed.

“They’ll all be scared of us now,” James chuckled. “Hey, c’mon, I want to practice my turns out on the pitch.”

“You don’t need to practice,” Peter said. “You’re amazing.”

“Amazing at Hogwarts doesn’t mean amazing when you want to play for the Chudley Cannons, does it?” James asked, not waiting for a response. “Accio Quidditch robes.” They flew down the stairs into his hands.

“You practice too much,” Sirius commented.

“And you don’t practice enough,” James said, a grin spreading across his face. “C’mon, mate, McGonagall gave the team a one day break because of everything with Rosier and Frank -- and only on Dumbledore's orders, at that -- but that’s not an excuse to not practice.”

“I think it’s a good excuse,” Peter said.

“Aha, Wormy, you’re not on the team, you don’t count.”

Peter’s face fell, but he shrugged his shoulders and the look faded. “Whatever,” he said, in a poor imitation of James and Sirius's uncaring tones. “I’ll just sit in the stands over there.”

“You’re getting dramatic, Pete,” James warned.

“You’re not that dramatic,” Peter said earnestly.

“Yeah, best watch yourself before you turn into me,” Sirius said.

“That’s simply not true,” Sirius said, and his broomstick flew effortlessly into his hand. He rose into the air, and did a loop around one of the spectator’s towers as if to emphasize his point.

“We’re not supposed to be out here when there’s no practices,” Peter called after Sirius. James kicked off the ground.

“If no one knows about it, it doesn’t count as breaking the rules,” James said. “It’s only a violation if we get caught.”

“McGonagall can see the pitch from her office,” Sirius yelled down, voice half lost to the wind.

“What’s she going to do about it?” James demanded, spreading his arms wide, daring the universe to
defy him. James had a strange way about him of making things true by believing them, getting away with things because he honestly believed he could. It was what had drawn the others to him and what made him so impossible and wonderful.

“Give us detention,” Peter suggested weakly from the ground. He felt so small underneath the open sky, feet buried in snow, eyes fixed on the darting forms of James and Sirius above him. He remembered the night before, being an animal, feeling alive.

“I’d like to see her catch me first,” Sirius said, black hair whipping around his face. “Oi, Pete, toss Prongs that practice Quaffle, why don’t you?”

“All right,” Peter said, and threw it upwards, begging himself all the while not to make a mistake, not to throw wrong in front of them, not to have to see them laughing at his expense.

James caught it and grinned, sunlight glinting off the lenses of his glasses.

“Thanks,” he called down. “C’MON SIRIUS YOU LAZY ARSE!”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “You’re sweet, Prongs.” he flew into one of the hoops. “Alright, hit me.”

“Much as I’d love to, I think the idea is to stop the Quaffle,” James said sarcastically.

“Ha.”

That night, the winter shadows had enveloped even the warmest parts of their dormitory. James slept soundly, burrowed in blankets, three pairs of socks layered on his feet. Peter was snoring loudly, sprawled across the bed, curled around his pillow. Sirius was crying in his sleep, which wasn’t unusual for him, and the Marauders knew by now when it was time to wake him. All of them slept, save for Remus, who lay awake, eyes bloodshot and exhausted, unable to sleep.

Remus tried to force himself to say something into the dark, to hope for someone to be secretly awake, but couldn’t get the words out. “Why did you give up on me?” he whispered into the dark.

“All of you.”

There was no response; the quiet breathing, the soft whimpering from Sirius and his nightmares.

“I know it’s dangerous,” he continued, desperate to say something, or anything at all. “I know, and I’d never want you to put yourselves in danger for me. I’m being an idiot, anyway,” he laughed into the dark, laughed at the waning moon outside the window. “And I never say things like this because I know that’s not...the sort of friends we all are, I suppose. It’s stupid that I thought, for a moment, at least, that...maybe my condition doesn’t have to ruin everything, that it can get better. And I don’t want to be selfish and make this about me, because it takes an incredible amount of work on your part, and I understand that you may not want to continue, and I don’t blame you for it,” he sighed and close his eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m tired, and I’m — technically apologizing to no one, since you’re asleep.”

There was silence in the dark room.

“MUM, DAD, PLEASE!” Sirius roared in his sleep, shaking, twitching. It was horrifying to watch, and Remus almost wanted to look away.

“Sirius,” Remus said, at once feeling embarrassed and ashamed. He stood, pain aching in his bones, and crept to Sirius’s bed. “Sirius, wake up.”

Sirius’s dark eyes flew open, sweat plastering his hair to his forehead. He focused on Remus’s concerned face and gave a long, shuddering sigh. “Remus,” he said hoarsely.

“It’s alright,” Remus said. “It’s okay, you’re safe, you’re with me.”

Sirius nodded tiredly, eyes shining in the dark. “Moons?” he said, grabbing onto Remus’s hand.

“Yes?” Remus asked, heart thundering traitorously in his chest. The voice in his head sneered, you don’t deserve him, but he was there, tears on his face, and he was looking at Remus like they were the only two people alive.

“Stay,” Sirius said, moving over so Remus could lie next to him.

“You’re shaking,” Remus told him, setting a hand on his arm.

“Sorry,”

“No,” Remus said. “It’s alright. If you want to tell me about it, I’ll just listen.”

“I don’t want to give them any power here,” Sirius said honestly. It was easier to be honest in the darkness, when they couldn’t see each others faces.
“Padfoot, I —” Remus didn’t finish his sentence, and instead closed his eyes, his hand still entwined with Sirius’s.

“Moony,” Sirius muttered, half asleep.

“Yeah,” Remus said.

“We’re not gonna give up on you, y’know? Not yet, at least.”

Remus’s breath caught in his throat for a moment, and then, at length, he said, “thanks.”

But Sirius was already asleep, his head nestled into Remus’s shoulder. Remus looked at him, unable to identify the feeling that spread through him. Maybe this was what love felt like, maybe this was what people talked about. He thought, bitterly, that he hadn’t experienced enough of any kind of love in his life, and wouldn’t really know. At this disheartening thought, he, too, was finally able to fall asleep.

The cold began slowly to blow out, fading into spring. The snow stayed in half melted patches on the ground, but with the return of the sun, a bit of the old cheer had returned to Hogwarts, despite recent events. The entire Slytherin house had been individually interviewed about Evan Rosier, which had inspired a great deal of laughter in the Gryffindor common room.

“It’s a bit narrow-minded of them, isn’t it?” Remus asked. “Assuming only the Slytherins are at fault.”

“If it wasn’t true, they wouldn’t have to assume it,” Sirius replied.

James and Peter shrugged their agreement.

“You know they’re trying to avoid expelling anyone or making something out of this,” James said. “Because if they do, they’ll lose the support of the Pureblood families.”

“Since when does Dumbledore give a damn about the support of the pureblood families?” Sirius asked.

“He doesn’t. It’s the ministry trying to make everything look nice and calm,” James took a sip of tea. “Y’know, while the whole world’s going to shit.”

Sirius laughed as if this wasn’t painfully accurate, a truth all of them were denying and refusing to let themselves believe.

“Do you think we’ll live to see the end of the war?” Peter asked, almost scared to know the answer.

“What the hell kind of question is that?” Sirius asked. “Don’t tell me you’re getting depressed about it. ‘We’re all going to die’ ‘the world is ending.’ Let the Muggles panic, but for Merlin’s sake, not us.”

“Sorry,” Peter muttered. “Just wondering.”

“Don’t wonder,” Sirius said. “Don’t think about it, we’re safe here.”

“Yeah,” Remus nodded. “Yeah, right now, we are. I don’t know if that’s going to last forever.”

“As long as Dumbledore’s here,” James decided, and because he’d been the one to say it, it seemed like it must have been true. “I think everything will be alright.”

“I overheard a few seventh years saying they were going to join the war once they finish school,” Peter said.

“Merlin, Wormtail, you’re worse than the second years with your eavesdropping,” James said. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said. “I mean…is that all there is now? The war?”

“Godric,” James said. “Lighten up. We’re safe, alright? And if a Death Eater tries to come in here, I’ll punch him right in the face.”

Peter giggled.

“I would. Sirius, back me up here.”

“Me too,” Sirius said.

“I’d probably hurt my hand more than his face, but me too,” Remus said.

“Thanks,” Peter grinned.

“Let’s go get dinner, I’m starving,” Sirius said jumping to his feet from the armchair that, even after all these years, he and James still tried to fit into.

“Nah, kitchens are better,” James said. “More food down there. Besides, we’re almost done with the
map, we just have to figure out how to get the damn tracking spell to work for everyone in the castle.”
“You might be able to figure it out if you’d done the Arithmancy homework,” Remus suggested.
“I did it,” Sirius said defensively.
“Yeah, five minutes before you had to turn it in, and all it said was ‘I make my own decisions.’”
“Yeah,” Sirius said proudly. “He wanted to give me detention for a week.”
“Did he?” Peter asked.
“Nah,” Sirius ran a hand through his hair. “I ran out of the room before he could catch me.”
“Nice one,” James laughed. “Alright, let’s go, or the house elves will start doing dishes before we’ve a chance to eat anything.”
The Marauders stood and left the common room, the portrait hole swinging shut behind them.
Remus woke one morning to see a rat lying on his chest. “Oi, Prongs?” he said tiredly, careful not to take his eyes off the thing. “Does Hogwarts have rats? I just assumed Mrs. Norris had eaten them all.”

There was no response, but a loud crash from the corridor outside.

“James?” Remus asked. As he looked over, craning his neck to see James’ bed, he felt the rat crawl up onto his chin. “Sirius? Peter?”

There was a loud bark, and Remus sat bolt upright, flinging the rat down onto the bedcovers. It flailed on its back, tiny paws scrabbling in the air. He glanced over to see a large, fluffy black dog next to him. “What the —” he remembered, suddenly, what the others had been doing since they found out about his condition, and what he’d thought they’d put on hold until further notice. “It worked,” he said, shocked. "You...you really managed it, you did it." He smiled. "You did that...for me, you could go to Azkaban..." the consequences of what they’d worked to do for him sunk in.

"Change back before someone sees you, Merlin." He sighed, his fear for them manifesting as exasperation.

Sirius (in dog form) cocked one ear upwards.

“What?” Remus asked, exasperated. “You’re going to make us late for breakfast. I assume you’ve already missed Quidditch practice —" he narrowed his eyes. “Where’s James? Have we got a full sized stag wandering about the castle?”

Sirius smiled as much as a dog possibly could and dipped his head down.

“You can change back, can’t you?”

There was no response.

"You can’t," Remus exhaled through his nose. "Alright, I'll make excuses for you in class, and you lot try to figure this out." Remus buried his head in his hands. “Blimey.”

Peter clambered over his foot.

“Do you know where James is?” Remus asked.

Sirius looked pointedly at the door.

James stood outside, in full stag form, his antlers caught in the doorframe. He made a loud sound of distress.

Remus stifled a laugh behind his hand. “I suppose you want a bit of help getting out of there?”

James glared at him.

“I wish I had a camera,” Remus chuckled.

James made another extremely loud noise.

“Alright, alright, try not to wake anyone else. I’m not certain I can explain this.” Remus drew his wand. "Deligare,"

James antlers were freed from the doorway, and he charged into the room, knocking into a bedpost. Sirius rolled over, clearly thinking this was hysterical.

“Anyone mind explaining how this happened?” Remus asked. “Oh, that’s right, you can’t, because you’re all in Animagus form and can’t say anything!”

Sirius whimpered, burying his nose between his paws.

“It’s alright, Padfoot,” Remus sighed. “I’m not angry.”

James gave Sirius a look which very clearly meant, told you,

"I've got to get to class, I'll tell everyone you're sick."

James and Sirius looked unperturbed, though Peter was squeaking at what had to be the top of his tiny lungs.

“We’ve got Transfiguration today. Maybe I can ask McGonagall to help you.”
James shook his head vehemently, his branching antlers tearing down the curtains on Peter’s bed. “I might be able to sneak Peter into class so he can listen, but you two definitely won’t fit under the Invisibility Cloak, and I certainly can’t bring you to —” Remus paused, recognizing the mischievous expressions on their faces. He wondered, bizarrely, if animals could really make facial expressions, but decided that was a question for another time. “You think I should bring you to class.” Sirius had already sprinted to the door, pausing so Remus could scratch his ears. “You make a good dog, Padfoot,” Remus said affectionately. “Snuffles.”

He walked out of the room, limping slightly; his legs sometimes hurt in the morning, especially if it had rained the night before.

“We’re not allowed dogs, you know,” someone said as Remus passed, Peter perched on his shoulder, Sirius and James trailing behind him, looking only slightly apologetic. “And we’re definitely not allowed deer.”

“Technically he’s a stag,” Remus replied, and kept walking.

“Oi, Lupin, I didn’t know you had a rat,” Fabian Prewett said.

“Oh, right, er…he’s new.” Remus said, brows furrowed.

“Looks like he could stand to lose a little weight,” Gideon teased, appearing on the other side of Remus. He and Fabian were nearly identical, but Remus, strangely, had always been able to tell them apart. “That thing’s the size of a cat.”

“Yeah, er, guess I should watch what I’m feeding him,” Remus said, forcing a smile. “Sorry,” he whispered to Peter, who was examining his fur covered leg, looking extremely self-conscious.

People gave the four of them extremely strange looks as they walked down the staircase that morning, Peter clinging with all four paws to Remus’s shoulder, James tripping over his hooves, Sirius padding along next to Remus and tripping random passerby, looking happier than he ever looked normally.

“Morning, Professor McGonagall,” Remus said, sitting in his usual seat near the front of the class. Peter crawled off his shoulder and sat on the desk, looking attentively at the board.

“Good morning, Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall replied, and as she greeted her other students her eyes wandered towards the door, where Sirius Black stood, a black dog, a shadow. She felt she recognized him, but shook the thought off. Yes, he was gifted, but it was surely impossible that he’d achieved what had taken her years to achieve under Dumbledore’s esteemed tutelage.

She looked at the rat on Remus’s desk, and could do nothing but watch as the black dog bounded over to Remus and sat next to him, looking (if possible) extremely smug. Professor McGonagall was only just beginning to suspect that she might have been right when James walked in, purposefully knocking all of Severus’s books onto the floor with his antlers before continuing on his way and standing at one end of the classroom.

“Mr. Lupin, I trust you have an explanation for this?”

“I do,” Remus said, and was silent.

“I’m waiting, Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall said.

“Oh, right, of course,” Remus said. “Er…well, honestly, I’m not really certain how this happened.” That, at least, was the truth.

“And would you mind informing us why Potter, Black, and Pettigrew aren’t present today?” McGonagall asked, her piercing grey eyes a warning to make up something believable, and quickly.

“Well, Professor, they would’ve liked to be here today, but we decided that…” he tried to think as James and Sirius would, and found the answer had been there, waiting, on the tip of his tongue. “I missed class last week, and they were here, so we’re just trying for a bit of variety.” Someone behind him laughed, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. Peter glanced up at him, whiskered nose twitching.

“Well, then, Lupin, please inform them, wherever they may be, that the four of you will have detention this afternoon.”

Remus shot a panicked look at James, who tilted his head to the side. It was blatantly obvious that James was convinced they would be able to fix whatever had happened to get them trapped in their Animagus forms by the end of the day.
James looked at Sirius. *This is probably the funniest thing that’s happened all year.*
Sirius nodded his agreement. *Moony’s better under pressure than I thought he’d be.*
*Yeah, I know. If we ever figure out how to change back, I’ll tell him I’m proud of him.*
*McGonagall knows,* Peter panicked. *She knows!*
Whatever, James replied, ears cocked forward. *It’s too late now, and she can’t turn us in without revealing that she told us where to find information on Animagus transformations.*
*You really think so?* Peter worried, tapping his toes against the desk.
*Definitely,* Sirius said confidently, looking up at Remus, who was diligently taking notes and ignoring comments from other students. *Great way to tell him we’ve almost managed our transformations, don’t you think?*
*I think it was a great way to tell him we’re idiots who have no idea what we’re doing,* James replied. *But yeah, let’s go with that.*
As class ended, Remus nearly sprinted from the room to avoid people’s questioning gazes. He ran to the Astronomy tower, chased by the others, and hid behind a corner as the class sat in a semicircle on the floor behind the massive telescope. He sat at the back, praying that the others wouldn’t find a way to follow him up the ladder into the observatory.
Sirius barked after him. *The bastard, he knows we can’t climb a ladder.*
Actually, *he’s got class, so he didn’t really have a choice,* Peter rationalized.
Sirius shook out his long black fur from nose to tail. *I’ll bark and see if anyone notices.* He howled loudly, throwing his head back.
“What was that?” a Ravenclaw whispered to his friend.
Remus faked an extremely long coughing fit, trying to drown out the sound of Sirius barking like his fur was on fire. “Are you alright, Mr. Lupin?” Professor Sterling inquired, peering over the frames of his glasses.
“Fine,” Remus choked, eyes watering.
Sterling shrugged and returned to talking about star patterns and the nonsense which was Divination, and how Astronomy was much more practical. James was jamming his antlers into the cracks in the floorboards, which a few people had caught onto and were stomping their feet intermittently to avoid Sterling noticing.
“What’s all this racket?” Sterling demanded.
“Nothing, just, er…” Remus said. “A mouse is on the floor and we’re all trying to scare it off.” *A really big mouse,* Remus thought, glaring down at James. *A mouse with antlers.*
“Oh, alright, then,” Sterling said suspiciously. “Try to be quieter about it.”
“Will do, Sir,” Remus said, fighting to keep his face expressionless.
*I think I’m getting somewhere with this,* James said. *The whole changing back thing.*
*Doesn’t look like it,* Sirius scoffed. *Oi, Wormtail, can you try to get up the ladder? I don’t think so,* Peter’s small voice said. *I can’t.*
*C’mon,* Sirius said, flicking his ears. *It’s not all that hard.*
*Then you do it!* Peter said, pawing tentatively at the ladder.
*Do I look like I can?* Sirius asked.
*Probably not,* Peter admitted. *Do I have to?*
*Yeah,* James said. *Sorry, mate.*
Peter climbed onto the first rung of the ladder. *What if I fall?* he asked, eyes round with fear.
*I’ll catch you,* Sirius said. There was no irony in his tone; he truly meant that he would, that he was there. It was the first time in all the years they’d known each other that Peter had really believed Sirius cared about him, really thought of him as a friend.
And so, Peter climbed up the ladder and crawled next to Remus’s hand, which was trembling slightly. He wanted to say something, to somehow communicate and assure Remus that it was all going to be alright, but he didn’t honestly know if it was.
He thought that maybe if they stayed in their Animagus forms forever, it wouldn’t be so awful, it might even be alright. Yes, it would leave Remus alone, but…perhaps Peter could finally feel accepted, equal. Would that be too much to ask, too much to even hope for?
As class ended, Remus picked Peter up and set him on his shoulder before climbing back down the ladder. “Could you possibly not be so irritating?” he demanded of James and Sirius. They both looked at him with expressions that very plainly told him they did not intend to do any such thing.

“Right,” Remus sighed. “Well, we’ve got History of Magic now. If Binns even notices that you’re not there, or that there’s a stag, a dog, and a rat in the classroom, I’d be shocked.”

James wanted to say, *five galleons says he won't notice if we're actually there,* but he remembered that he couldn’t speak, and had no way of telling Remus how truly scared he was, scared possibly the most he’d been in his life. More even than the time he’d gotten lost on a road in London as a child and had searched for his parents in the crowd, reaching for a hand he couldn’t find, more than when he found out about Remus’s lycanthropy, even more than when he’d heard Sirius was in the hospital wing and had tried to kill himself.

Because to James, to be trapped as a stag forever was to lose everything. Being a wizard was such an integral part of him, something he felt made him different, had changed him, had shaped him. Losing that, to be stuck as a stag forever, would be devastating. And the Marauders would never be the same again — Remus would forever exist apart from them, alone, and the thought of the four of them being separated in such a way was intolerable.

Remus walked slowly into McGonagall’s office that afternoon, not meeting her eyes. He was followed by the others, who seemed to be waiting for her reaction.


Remus did both, eyes darting between the window, the door, and the professor in front of him. “I trust these are not common animals you’ve collected during your visits to the Shrieking Shack?”

McGonagall said, a question which did not expect an answer. Remus liked the way she’d said it, ‘visits,’ as if it was something somewhat enjoyable.

“No, Professor,” Remus shook his head, heart pounding. Sirius rested his chin on Remus’s leg.

“And, as I’m sure you’re all aware, becoming an Unregistered Animagus is entirely illegal, especially at your age, not to mention remarkably dangerous?”

“I’m so sorry, Professor,” Remus said. “They were just doing it to help me, please, don’t turn them in to the Ministry.”

“I do not intend to,” McGonagall said, and at this, Sirius lifted his head hopefully. “Although I absolutely should. I remember this difficult time in my own study of animal transfiguration.”

“It’s supposed to happen?” Remus asked, relieved.

“Yes,” McGonagall inclined her head slightly. “While I shouldn’t strictly be telling you this, you are all clearly very gifted and it would be a shame to waste that talent in Azkaban.”

“How long does it last?”

“As I recall, approximately a week. I would advise you to refrain from bringing them to class in future, as they do attract quite a bit of attention.”

“Yes, Professor,” Remus said, brimming with uncontrollable relief. They all seemed to release the breaths they’d been subconsciously holding for the entire day. “Thank you.”

McGonagall’s lips seemed to twitch upwards into a rare smile. “Of course, should anyone find out about this, I shall have to deny my knowledge of any of your illegal activities.”

Remus nodded.

It was more than a week before they finally managed to change back, bit by bit. Remus had, in that time, been eating meals with Lily, Mary, and Marlene, who were, as always, glad to have him present. He’d almost gotten in a fight with Benjy Fenwick, who had been (wrongfully) jealous of the time Remus was spending with Lily. This had caused Sirius, still a dog, to fall over in sheer hilarity. Remus had been sneaking food back for the other Marauders, who were extremely content to roam the grounds freely at inopportune times, despite McGonagall’s warnings.

“Morning,” Remus said cheerfully to James, Sirius, and Peter, who were lying on the floor and looking extremely miserable. James had been the most effective in transforming back, and now had his own eyes and hair, but still looked in most other respects like a stag. He was now looking at
Remus with an expression of extreme betrayal. “This is about Lily, isn’t it?” Remus asked, with mild amusement. “Look, like I told Fenwick, there’s nothing going on between Lily and I. Not only am I in a relationship with this gigantic pile of fluff,” he gestured to Sirius, who looked vaguely offended. “I’m not interested in her.”

James glared. “Y’know, I sort of enjoy the silence around here,” Remus teased.

“Bullshit, Lupin, you miss us like hell,” Sirius’s voice came from the black dog sitting next to him. “Padfoot,” Remus said, grinning. “Thank Merlin, I thought I was going to go mad.”

“Knew it,” Sirius said proudly, standing on his hind legs to lick Remus’s cheek.

“Gross,” Remus said, with arched eyebrows, but he was grinning. “Listen, I’ve got Potions, but I’ll be back later.”

“Bring food, Peter says he’s hungry.”

“I’ll stop in the kitchens later,” Remus said, rolling his eyes. It was such a relief to talk to Sirius and finally hear him talk back, no matter how bizarre it was that his voice was coming from a dog. Remus ran down the stairs, unable to stop smiling. “Lupin, you’re looking…happy,” Marlene said suspiciously.

“Yeah, er, sorry, it’s—”

“So are you going to tell us what’s going on with your friends or not?” Mary asked.

“No. Maybe. They’ll be back next week.”

“You’re endearingly secretive,” Lily said. “C’mon, let’s go to class.”

“Where you’ll undoubtedly work with Severus,” Mary said bitterly. Everyone knew that Mary, especially, hated Severus. It was likely because, like Lily, Mary was Muggle-born, but unlike Lily, she was not protected from prejudice because of Severus.

“Oh, come on, we have this conversation at least once a day,” Lily said. “Severus is my friend.”

“Can’t understand why,” Marlene said. “My cat makes a better friend than that git. Think of all the terrible things he made you do!”

“He didn’t make me do anything,” Lily said, face burning. “I made my own choices.”

“They were choices you never would’ve made without him!” Mary argued.

“Maybe they were,” Lily replied.

“Lily—” Remus attempted to say, to diffuse the argument the way he usually did. “No need to ask what you believe,” Lily said, her eyebrows furrowed, green eyes flashing. She was more herself when she was angry, because it happened so much more often than many people assumed. There was a wildfire that blazed inside her, and sometimes it rose and devoured everything in its path, and sometimes it smoldered beneath the surface. “I know what you Marauders think of him.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say,” Remus said. “I was going to tell you no one can tell you who to be friends with. I don’t much like him, but I do trust you.”

“Thanks,” Lily said, with a fleeting smile. As they left the common room, Benjy Fenwick greeted her with a kiss, warm and lovely. He smiled — also lovely. Everything about Benjy Fenwick was nice, and intelligent, and the very picture of what her parents would like her to marry. She did love him, because he had a flair for romanticism and she had always appreciated old-fashioned romance. She wasn’t sure if she felt about him the way she was really supposed to. There was no passion, no fighting, just a feeling of always being cared about, like a light breeze in the summer. It was nice, but that was all it really was, and Lily didn’t know if that was supposed to be enough.

Remus liked being friends with Lily, Mary, Marlene, and even Benjy. In some ways, it was better than being part of the Marauders, because there was never any question whether he was really wanted or needed. However, there was something missing, something that existed between the Marauders but not between Lily and her friends. Something that meant they would all have died for each other if given the chance. And Lily loved her friends, but she wouldn’t die for them, and they all felt the same. Somehow, that made a difference.

Slughorn was already droning on when they reached the dungeons, and they took their seats, Remus alone in the back row where the other Marauders were supposed to be. He didn’t say it, but he
missed them unbearably.

“Now, there is a potion that has the potential to someday minimize the negative effects of many magical maladies such as Lycanthropy,” Slughorn said, not seeming to realize the gravity of these words.

Remus suddenly felt awake. “Pardon me, sir, but I thought Lycanthropy had no cure,” he said, his heart racing. Could there be a chance, somehow, that he could be cured?

“No, no, my dear boy, it doesn’t at this time. However, as the werewolf community seems to have allied themselves with The Dark Lord, some potion makers who oppose him are trying to create a cure in order to lure them back.”

“Would it work?” Remus asked, heart pounding.

“It very well may, yes, but at the moment the research seems to have reached a dead end, as it were.”

“Oh,” Remus said, feeling, despite himself, disappointed. As much as people had tried to tell him there would one day be a way to help him, the idea of living out the rest of his days in agony was extremely unpleasant.

“You alright?” Benjy asked.

“Fine,” Remus said, forcing a smile.

“We appear to still be missing Potter, Black, and Pettigrew,” Slughorn noticed, recording this on an attendance sheet.

“Yes, Sir,” Remus said.

“It appears they’ve taken ill,” Slughorn continued. “Please be kind enough to bring them the homework they’ve missed.”

“Of course, Professor,” Remus said, smirking slightly at the thought.

“Shame about Lupin, isn’t it?” Marlene asked over dinner one night, looking down the table. The Marauders were reunited once more, and James was exaggeratedly demonstrating his fight with Avery, in which he’d thrown an exceptionally good punch and cracked one of his fingers, which was now splinted.

“Yeah,” Lily said. “It’s alright, though, look how happy he is.” Remus was laughing, one arm around Sirius.

“Can’t imagine why,” Mary wrinkled her nose. “Potter might be good at Quidditch, but he’s still a bloody git.”

At this, Lily grinned. “True,” she said, and took a bite of mashed potatoes.

“Pettigrew’s alright, though. Bit shy for my taste, and with abhorrent tastes in friends, but overall, not a complete arse.” Marlene mused.

“Such high praise,” Lily laughed.

James turned his head at the sound of her distinctive laugh, like summer and rain and flowers.

“What about Black, though?” Mary asked. “I mean, I’m on his Quidditch team, and I know next to nothing about him.”

“Mm,” Lily nodded, and held up a finger for Mary to wait while she finished chewing. “His parents are really rich, and he doesn’t get along with his brother. He’s a bit of a prat, but they all sort of are.”

“Which? Boys, or Marauders?” Marlene asked.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Lily nodded. “Sev told me about Potter’s fight with Avery.”

“And I’m certain we’re all very interested in what Severus had to say about it,” Marlene said dully.

“You ought to be,” Lily replied. “He said Avery started it.”

“It’s very unlike Potter not to start a fight. What’d Avery say?”

“That’s why Sev told me,” Lily said, her face a brilliant red. “He said something about me being a Mudblood, so Potter hexed him.”

Mary and Marlene both looked stunned. “What? Potter?”

“I mean, I know he hates Death Eaters and everything they stand for, but…to hex someone, for…”

“You,” Marlene said. “Potter hexed someone for you, and got in a fight for it!”

“Keep your voice down,” Lily hissed, her hair falling in front of her face. “Maybe he did,” she said. “It doesn’t change anything.”
“You should thank him,” Mary said.
“Are you joking? Do we really need his ego to be any bigger than it already is?”
Mary shrugged. “It’s your decision.”
Lily shook her head. "If I go over there, he'll probably hex me."
"I don't think so," Marlene said with a mischievous grin.

As the professors began to discuss end of year exams, the Marauders were just beginning to finish the Map.
“Does it work?” Peter asked, sitting on James’ bed.
“It’d better, we’ve been working on it all bloody year,” Sirius grumbled. As summer grew nearer, a summer he’d be spending with his parents, he’d become more and more irritable. The previous day, he’d hung an entire classroom of first years upside down over the Black Lake for no reason at all, using a spell which had, inexplicably, gained excessive popularity towards the end of the year. It was called levicorpus, and no one knew who had invented it, but it was extremely entertaining to watch. Sirius used it on practically everyone he saw, and the only person who had been able to use it on him had been James, who had only done it as a joke.
It was actually getting a bit out of hand, in Remus’s opinion, but he did nothing to stop it. Being held upside down by one’s foot was somewhat humiliating, but he supposed everyone had gotten used to it, and very rarely was it used out of cruelty.
The teachers, also, did nothing to put an end to the reign of levicorpus. Some whispering voice in the back of Sirius’s mind knew it was because of the war, because they thought all the students should be able to have fun before the war got any worse.
“Look,” Peter pointed, eyes wide with awe. Footsteps appeared on the map, where the four of them were sitting, each labelled with their name. As they looked down, more and more names appeared, too many of them, hundreds, footsteps crossing and overlapping. Dumbledore paced back and forth in his office, Lily was outside by the lake with Severus, M was locking up the Quidditch shed, Hagrid was tending to the Bowtruckles, Professor Sprout was standing in the greenhouse — it was Hogwarts, with all the magic and wonder and light and pain and cruelty and secrets it contained, and they’d made it happen. It was beautiful.
“We did it,” Remus said, and then, a smile spreading across his face, so wide it almost hurt. “We really did it, it worked.”
Sirius kissed him on the cheek, laughing, his eyes bright, and then threw his arms around James, who was beaming, his glasses knocked askew on his nose. Peter sat back on his heels and grinned, looking between the three of them and thinking, this is what I want to feel like for the rest of my life.
“There’s one more thing, though,” James said. “We left room for all our names at the top, but which order do we put them in?”
Sirius groaned. “Mate, it doesn’t matter.”
“Fine, you’ll be first,” James said.
“Oi, I don’t want to be first. Make Wormtail do it.”
“I don’t want to, either,” Peter shook his head vehemently.
“Fine, I’ll do it,” Remus said, not appearing to care much either way.
“Alright, Moony, Prongs, Padfoot, and Wormtail,” James said. “Does that work?”
“Do I have to be last?” Peter complained.
“In the name of Merlin’s saggy left — fine, I’ll be last.” James said. “Happy?”
“Yes,” Peter said with a smile.
“Alright,” James pointed his wand at the map, and the names, Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs appeared at the top of the map.
“It looks good,” Peter said.
“It does,” James said, in awe of what they’d done — the hours of research, the complicated magical equations and the long nights of working and not really understanding how difficult this was going to be, how long it would take. He cleared his throat. “Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs, are proud to present The Marauders’ Map.”
“We should make it so not just anyone can read it, y’know. In case Snivellus finds it,” Sirius said.

“Alright, shouldn’t be too hard,” James said. “What should it say? It’s already charmed to insult people who aren’t Marauders.”

“Yeah, but at the risk of us one day passing it down to our children or something, there should probably be a way to make it work,” Sirius said, then smirked. “Merlin, can you imagine me with children? What a nightmare.”

James chuckled. “I think I’d make a good dad.”

At this, the others burst out laughing. “Yeah, alright,” Sirius guffawed. “Maybe you would be if you weren’t, I dunno, constantly losing things.”

James sighed. “This is going to go on for a bit, isn’t it?”

“It might,” Remus said apologetically.

“No if you were capable of minding your own business.”

“True,” James nodded.

“Possibly if you cared about Quidditch less and people more.”

“That hurt, mate,” James said.

Sirius shrugged, looking wholly unapologetic.

“And if you didn’t try to hex everyone you see.”

“That’s you,” James reminded him.

“Right, sorry,” Sirius laughed. “Actually, you’d be a great dad, come to think of it.” For Sirius, with his significant grudge against all parents and families in general, this was an exceptionally kind thing to say.

As they were having this discussion, Peter had crept over to the map and whispered, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” It seemed to respond to his words, to know what he wanted to happen, and it unfolded before his eyes, ink spreading across the page.

“Oi, look, Peter’s done it,” James said gleefully.

“Nice work, Wormtail,” Remus smiled, and Peter beamed.

The four of them gathered around the map, one at each corner, and held their wands over the parchment. “Mischief managed,” they said simultaneously, knowing, as they frequently did, exactly what the others were thinking. The ink disappeared, the map folding into a small rectangle of parchment, and they all smiled.

**Chapter End Notes**

I hope you had fun reading this chapter because I had a lot of fun writing it (also I really appreciate comments so if you have something you want to say about this chapter please say it)
“Still studying?” James yawned, walking down to the common room in his pajamas, his hair even more unruly than usual. He observed the aforementioned students hard at work: Remus, Peter, Mary, and Marlene, all gathered around a table and piles of parchment.

“Not my fault some of us can get O’s without studying.” Remus grumbled, looking half asleep.

"Not mine, either," James replied.

“Leave him alone, Potter,” Mary said, studying a long roll of parchment. “We’re almost done for the night.”

“What night?” James asked with a lazy grin. "It's three in the morning."

“Great,” Remus sighed. “Thanks.”

“Looks like someone’s got the right idea,” Marlene said, glancing down the table at Peter, who was snoring over his Charms notes.

“Evans!” James said, eyes lighting up as she walked down the stairs, carrying a plate full of biscuits. Her red hair was piled on top of her head in a lazy sort of way which James very much liked.

“I brought food,” she said, grinning, not having noticed James. “Anyone up for another hour of Charms?”

“We would be if you weren’t so much better at it than the rest of us,” Marlene said, reaching over Remus's head to take a biscuit. “Thanks, though.”

“The charms exam is tomorrow,” Remus groaned. “And I still can’t make a bloody teapot whistle.”

“That’s not quite fair,” Marlene said sardonically, and handed him the plate. “You’re better than, say, Peter.”

“Thanks,” Peter muttered sleepily.

“Not that you’re bad at all, Peter,” Lily amended, since Marlene wasn’t one for taking back her statements. “You’ve improved loads since the beginning of the year.”

Peter blushed and put his head back down, almost instantly falling asleep again.

Lily glanced over to see James standing there, surprisingly quiet. “Alright, Potter?” she asked with a smirk, too tired to think about consequences or politeness.

“Fine,” James said, almost scared to smile back. She looked away quickly.

“Oi, Potter, where’s Black?” Mary asked, her short blonde hair rumpled around her face.

“Sleeping,” James said. “As you all should be.”

“You’re probably right,” Remus said, getting slowly to his feet and shaking Peter awake as he started for the stairs. “Good luck, everyone.”

There was a tired chorus of “good luck” in response.

“You’re really going to stay friends with them?” James asked, spiking up his hair with his hand. His eyes were squinted in exhaustion behind his glasses.

“What’s the problem?” Remus asked, following James up the stairs to their dormitory.

“Evans hates me, in case you hadn’t noticed, and has, on multiple occasions, told me that I’m an insufferable prat.”

“Is she wrong?” Remus asked wryly.

James hit him in the shoulder.

Their Charms exam went surprisingly well, though Remus did, in the end, make a small error in the casting of the Whistling Teapot charm, causing it to sing “Happy Birthday” instead. The others chalked it up to nerves, although Remus had been so humiliated by it that he refused to speak for at least an hour afterwards.

The rest of the exams seemed to drag slowly by, like hours of detention polishing floors, but
Eventually they were over, and the last Quidditch match had arrived.

“Alright, listen,” M yelled over the pitch. The wind whipped her black hair in strands around her face. “This is the last Quidditch game of the season, my last game with you lot, so please, please, for me, for Alix — “ this was the first time the deceased Quidditch captain’s name had been mentioned on the team since his death, and everyone drew in a sharp breath. “We have to win this. By some streak of insane luck, the only team we have left to beat is Slytherin, which means we have a fighting chance at getting the House Cup.” she smiled at this, Professor McGonagall’s wry smile on her young face. “We’ve trained hard, every day, and I know some of you have really devoted every spare moment to this,” she looked at James, who grinned. “We’re a good team, a great team, and we have gifted players and a hell of a lot of energy.”

James and Sirius whooped loudly.

“Case in point,” she said. “Alright, I need you all to be focused today. Let’s go.”

The Quidditch team mounted their brooms and flew into position, a blur of red and gold against the bright blue sky.

“The Quaffle is released,” the commentator said, a fourth year girl who hadn’t made the Gryffindor Quidditch team and instead commentated on the games in order to be in close proximity to the sport.

“And the game begins!”

James, Mary, and M swept upwards.

“Potter in possession of the Quaffle,” the commentator said as James flew towards the Slytherin hoops, keeping the Quaffle tucked under one arm and expertly dodging the other players as they approached him. He spun it easily through the hoop. “Potter scores! Ten points to Gryffindor!”

As a slim, wiry Slytherin elbowed his way between James and Mary and grabbed the Quaffle, shooting towards the hoops, Sirius wasn’t really looking. His eyes were fixed in the distance on Regulus, who had not looked back.

“BLACK, KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE BLOODY QUAFFLE!” James shouted at the top of his lungs. Sirius barely stopped the Quaffle, and shook his head, disoriented.

“Sirius Black saves the Quaffle!” the commentator yelled into the microphone.

M grabbed the Quaffle before the Slytherin team had noticed her and went flying across the pitch, passing to Mary just before she reached the other side.

“Are you sure?” Mary asked, but her voice was lost in the air. A Bludger narrowly missed James, who turned his head briefly to swear at a Slytherin beater, who’d clearly done it on purpose.

Mary threw the Quaffle into the lowest hoop, but the Slytherin Keeper kicked it into Avery’s hands. Before Mary could react, James sped after him, reaching for the Quaffle fearlessly, although he was barely balanced on his broomstick. Avery managed to score anyway, narrowly missing Sirius, who looked positively murderous.

And then, before James had even really noticed, when it was beginning to look like Slytherin might have won, Pierce had caught the Snitch.

The entire Gryffindor team was silent, stunned, as the commentator shouted, “Gryffindor wins!”

Their speechlessness continued only a few seconds before the entire team erupted into loud cheering and clapping, and they abandoned their broomsticks on the ground to surround M in a group hug and lift her on their shoulders. She was laughing, and McGonagall practically ran down from the pitch to congratulate her niece.

Remus and Peter were standing in the stands, cheering as loudly as they could, Gryffindor colors smeared across their faces, and the moment was filled with so much joy that it felt as if nothing bad could ever happen to them again, because nothing would dare to disrupt such a moment, such a memory.

The end of year feast was full of hearts racing. “Now, you lot didn’t lose that many points this year, right?” M asked anxiously, her eyes fixed on the teachers, who were calmly eating their meal and talking amongst themselves, minus their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, who’d disappeared a day before and not returned.

“Unfortunately not,” Sirius said. “By our usual standards, we were fairly good. Shame, isn’t it?”
James nodded. “I’m extremely disappointed in us, actually. We’ll have to make up for it next year.”

“Fine by me,” M said. One of her friends had an arm thrown around her shoulder, and she was trying to eat without moving as not to disrupt him. “I’ll be playing with the Holyhead Harpies, and I’m sure my aunt will write to tell me about all of your ridiculous pranks.”

“Oi,” Sirius said around a mouthful of chicken. “They’re not ridiculous. Right, Remus?”

“They’re ridiculous,” Remus rolled his eyes. “We once filled Quentin Inkton’s mattress with peas because he accidentally tripped James in the corridor.”

“Does McGonagall really talk about us that much?” Peter asked.

“No,” M replied. “She doesn’t ever talk about her students, really, unless they’ve done something really fantastic. Sometimes she mentions you lot if you master a really difficult spell.”

“The time has arrived,” Dumbledore said, climbing up to the podium at the front of the Great Hall. “To count the points and announce the winner of the House Cup.”

The entire Gryffindor Quidditch team grinned, hopeful, excited.

“In fourth place,” Dumbledore said. “With five hundred and sixty three points, Ravenclaw.” There were muted, depressed-sounding cheers, and Dumbledore clapped as well. “In third place, with six hundred and seven points, Hufflepuff.”

This was received slightly more enthusiastically.

“Hufflepuff’s always happy if they aren’t last,” Sirius whispered to James, who laughed.

“In second place, with six hundred and ninety two points,” Dumbledore said, and all Gryffindors and Slytherins held their breath. “Slytherin!”

The Slytherins all clapped half-heartedly, Severus and his friends glaring openly at the Marauders as if every point Slytherin had lost throughout the year could be blamed on them.

“And, in first place, with seven hundred and five points, Gryffindor!”

“YES!” M shouted as the others applauded.

Dumbledore clapped his hands, and all the banners changed to red and gold. "Well done, well done!" he said. "On that celebratory note, have a wonderful summer holiday, and let us hope you will return rejuvenated and ready for another year at Hogwarts."

And then, as the Great Hall ceiling went darker alongside the sky outside, it was summer. Summer, for some of them, meant freedom, and for others, it meant slamming doors and yelling and wondering if you were going to survive to see the next year.

“Stupid Ministry decree,” James muttered as they boarded the train, his owl not in her cage but resting on his arm instead, which no one he passed seemed particularly bothered by. This, in turn, bothered James quite a bit.

“Can’t stop us from writing to each other, can it?” Remus asked.

“It’s not the same,” James groaned. “I’ll be so bored.”

“My mum’s going to make me clean the entire house,” Peter complained, sitting down in their usual compartment. “She’ll even make me wax the floors. And because we’re out of school I won’t even be able to use magic!”

“My parents want me fixing the roof again,” Remus said. “The wind blew it in.”

“Sure, make the one with the furry little problem do it,” James said. “That’s rich.”

“My dad’s got a bad back, and neither of them can fix it by magic because it’s not ‘sturdy enough,’ whatever that means.” Remus shrugged. “It’s alright, though, even if it’s just their excuse to avoid having to do any work themselves. They’ve done enough for me, it’s the very least I can do.”

James wondered what that must be like, to grow up feeling as if you owed your parents something for being alive. He knew, had always known, that he was as great a gift to his parents as they were to him, that he was their miracle, the child they’d always wanted.

Sirius remained pointedly silent. The others complaining about their mundane problems was really the only way they knew how to take his mind off of where he was going and what would likely happen there. “I’m not going to fight them this time,” he said, (he said this every time, and never followed through.)

“Alright, good for you, mate,” James said, not looking Sirius in the eye. Even Remus didn’t really
know the extent of what had happened to Sirius behind the brick walls of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Those were secrets reserved for James, and Sirius preferred no one else to know.

“I mean it, though,” Sirius persisted. “I can’t leave, I really am stuck with them, and I don’t want to get trapped as Padfoot again when they’re around.” He took a deep breath and leaned his head back. “Sirius…” Remus said, struck with a horrible idea of what might happen — they wouldn’t kill their own son, but he might kill himself, to prove a point, to ruin their precious reputations. While he’d promised them that nothing of that sort would happen again, and Remus trusted him implicitly…he had seen what being around his parents did to Sirius.

“Hey, I promised, didn’t I?” Sirius said, with an odd, crooked sort of smile. “Let’s talk about something else, alright? How are you lot feeling about exams? I’m aiming for solid T’s, but you never know.”

James scoffed. “You’d have to be dumber than Mulciber to get a T. I’m almost positive you can only get a T if all you do is write your name at the top of the paper.”

They all laughed. “Not even Mulciber’s that thick,” Sirius said.

“I dunno, I’m fairly certain I once saw him try to walk through a wall,” Remus grinned.

“No, that’s right. I think that’s where he got his name,” Sirius said.

“Oi, does the map work outside Hogwarts?” Sirius wondered aloud, leaning his head against the window. He rested his feet on the opposite seat, casually tapping his foot against the side of James’s knee. Perhaps one of the most marvelous things, in Remus’s opinion, about Sirius Black, was his ability to make anything feel casual when it shouldn’t be. He could make dress robes look like pajamas with the amount of nonchalance he applied to everything. Even when he was upset, it never felt as grave as it ought to, and this, perhaps, was the dangerous thing about him.

“Don’t think so,” James frowned. “Wouldn’t be much point in that, would there? I left it in our dormitory anyway, since it’s finished and we won’t need it.”

Sirius shrugged, and looked out the window. “You know who I haven’t seen recently?” he mused, as though just realizing this.

“Severus?” Remus guessed, with no shortage of exasperation. “I wish you’d just leave him alone.”

“We’ll leave him alone when he leaves us alone,” Sirius said. “Perhaps he’s taken ill, or, better yet, died.”

“We’d’ve heard if he was dead,” James said. “Not that there would be any tears shed on my part.”

This was for effect; with all the death James had seen and heard about in the recent months, he couldn’t bring himself to be so uncaring.

Sirius laughed dryly. “Here he comes now.”

Severus stalked down the train corridor, flanked by Mulciber, Avery, Harris, and Lestrange, all four of whom went solely by their last names around the Marauders. Regulus was conspicuously absent.

“What do you think you’re going to do, Snivellus?” Sirius asked lazily, stepping into the corridor, pulling his wand from the pocket of his jeans — he’d changed out of his Hogwarts robes in order to pass as a Muggle in the train station, mostly to annoy his parents. “Duel in the middle of the train?”

Severus looked at him with dark, suffocating hatred. Sirius noticed, with slight discomfort, that he and Severus were a lot alike — raised by families who didn’t care about them, saved by friends better than they’d ever be (for Sirius, the Marauders, and for Severus, Lily.) The difference, though, he thought, the thing that separated them, was that Sirius had chosen to be different, and Severus had fallen into the same pattern as the others like him.

The Slytherins surrounded the Marauders inside the compartment, casting a silencing charm behind the door.

“Well, this is a bit close for comfort, don’t you think?” James asked breezily, his hand clenched tightly around the end of his wand. “Honestly, if you’re trying to flirt, you could’ve gone about it a less threatening way. It’s actually quite rude.”

“We’re not,” Mulciber growled.

“Well,” James said, smirking. “That’s a shame. Are you quite sure?”

“Uh…yeah?” one of the Slytherins said. James thought it might be Harris, but he wasn’t quite sure.

“Aha, I see Mulciber’s stupidity has spread to the rest of you,” James tutted. “As well as Snivellus’s
greasy hair. They look like they could all use a nice shower, don’t they, Sirius?"
“I think so,” Sirius said, and, in unison, both shouted, “Aguamenti!”
Water poured over the Slytherins, drenching the compartment floor. They spluttered and coughed, wiping dripping hair out of their faces.
“I’d watch it if I were you,” Severus said. “It’d be a shame if we’d have to do something we’ll all regret.”
“Really?” Sirius asked, his expression dangerous and unreadable. “Like what?”
Their fight had garnered quite a bit of attention from the rest of the train as water had poured underneath the doorframe and into the corridor. People were gathered on all sides, attempting to witness the fight. It was difficult with so many of them jammed into the same compartment, the end of Severus’s hooked nose nearly touching Sirius’s face. “Just for your information, Snivellus’s breath is as bad you might expect,” Sirius said to the other Marauders, and at this, Peter laughed.
“Also, Mulciber’s not nearly as fat as he looks,” James said. “Only about the size of a brick house.” Mulciber’s face twisted into a snarl. He could’ve been handsome once, in a very square-jawed, strong sort of way, but he looked evil and awful and ready to kill. “You’ve done it now, Potter,” he spat into James’ face. James barely flinched. “Confringo!”
The compartment door exploded into splinters and shards, shattering over all of them. Avery threw a shield charm over the heads of the Slytherins, while the Marauders were less lucky. There was a shriek, likely from Peter, and all of them ducked in unison. Glass landed in their hair, on their clothes, shards and dust coating their faces. James wiped blood off his head and grimaced. “See, I really wish you hadn’t done that,” James said. "You know, this is nothing personal.”
“Oh, wait.” Sirius added. “Actually, it is.”
“Stupefy!” All the Marauders shouted, curses ricocheting off the compartment walls, the shocked faces of other students pressing through the shattered door.
Someone dropped to the ground — A Marauder? A Slytherin? Hard to say, with curses flying everywhere. James and Sirius fought back to back, and doing quite well considering how outnumbered they were.
Lily was standing there, looking like she wanted to say something, but it was M who finally acted. She had been sitting in the next compartment over with a few friends, laughing and smiling, enjoying her last train ride out of school, but her eyes were blazing with fury in a way they all secretly hoped they would never have to see on the face of her aunt. “DO YOU WANT ME TO HAVE TO HEX YOU?” she shouted. James was almost certain he saw one of the Slytherins jump.
This, at least, was loud enough to cause the others to temporarily stop and stare at her. “We’re on a school train, there are kids here, for the love of Merlin, STOP IT!” she yelled again, pointing her wand at them. During her seven years at Hogwarts, she’d gained quite a bit of respect, and no one doubted that she would hex them if they made one more move.
“Sev,” Lily said gently, and stood next to him. The tension instantly drained from his face and shoulders, and he smiled hopefully at her. The other Slytherins were careful to avoid her, almost as if afraid.
“You see what they’re like,” Severus said in outrage. “They don’t listen to reason.”
“The whole lot of you didn’t come over here to be reasonable, you came over here to fight,” M snapped. “Get out, NOW!”
The Slytherins retreated, sneering at the Marauders. Lily was looking at Severus, betrayed. “I told you I don’t want you doing things like this,” she said.
“You can’t tell me what to do.” Severus snapped, full of annoyance with Lily that he wasn’t quite used to. "You hate them as much as I do, right?”
Lily hesitated. “Right, of course,” she said.
Lily Evans had done some things she regretted, but she had never lied to Severus’s face before.
“But,” she continued, her voice shaking. “I don’t want you getting hurt, so please, next time, stay out of it.”
“I’m fine,” Severus said.
“But you’re my best friend. What would happen if you weren’t?” Lily asked.
“I’m sorry,” he said.

Severus Snape had done some things he regretted, but he had never lied to Lily's face before. Everything he knew was fighting within him; Muggles were the enemy, Muggle-borns weren’t really magical...but Lily wasn’t what Muggle-borns were supposed to be. She was quick-tempered but sweet, and she cared and worried about him and she was a talented witch...but his friends didn’t want him around her, and her friends didn’t want her around him. It seemed, although he loved her, that there was just too much of a difference between them.

“Everyone alright?” M demanded.

“Yeah,” James muttered, messing up his hair with his hands.

“I expect better from you, Potter,” M said sternly, looking very much like her aunt.

James flinched slightly. This was worse than being hexed, because at least he didn’t care about the Slytherins, but he did care about M.G. McGonagall.

"And because I expect so much of you, I want you to be Quidditch captain next year." James’ face lit up. “Are you joking?”

She shook her head. “It’s a huge responsibility, and I could easily give it to someone else on the team, but I trust you. I’ve spoken to Dumbledore, and he agrees that it would be good for you. But I don’t ever want to see something like this happen again,” she gestured to the ruined compartment.

"Alright?"

James was speechless, for once, unable to form a sentence.

“Don’t tell anyone, though. It’ll be announced officially over the summer.”

When words failed him, James found that it didn’t matter. He’d always been a firm believer in the mantra that actions spoke louder than words, anyway. He threw his arms around M -- somehow, throughout the year, he'd grown taller than she was, but still, in her eyes, he was the second year who'd tried out for the Quidditch team and showed real talent, talent that couldn't be learned.

“Good luck out there, captain,” he said, a wide, lopsided grin spreading across his face.

“I’ll see you around, Potter.”

“You just might,” he replied, and returned to the destroyed compartment, his shoulders held higher.

“What’d she want?” Peter asked, as if they hadn’t all been listening to his conversation.

“Blimey, mate, that’s —” Sirius jumped from his seat to clap James enthusiastically on the back.

“Fantastic? Amazing?” James guessed, brushing glass out of the compartment with one foot, but not seeming at all committed to the task.

“I was just going to go with ‘nice of her,’” Sirius joked.

James rolled his eyes. “Thanks for your support, mate.”

“I’m only kidding,” Sirius said. “It’s absolutely mad of her, granted, but it’s really great.”

“It’s incredible,” Remus said.

“Thank you,” James said pointedly. “Some people are nice, see that, Padfoot?”

“Not that you’d know much about it,” Sirius replied with a smirk.

The train screeched to a slow stop at King’s Cross Station, and people began shoving their way off the train. It'd always been a bit of a hazard, getting off the train to return home after the school year, and unless one was willing to elbow their way through a crowd, it was nearly impossible “They’ll inspect the train after we leave,” Remus said, looking at the mangled door. “Reparo.”

The pieces flew back together, several dislodging from James’ hair to land in the center of the compartment door.

“Thanks for that,” Sirius said. “Well, I’d best be off. If you don’t hear from me by next week, assume I’m dead.”

“Sirius!” Remus said, alarmed. “That’s an awful thing to say.”

“I’m joking. Merlin,” Sirius said.

He wasn’t.

“Just so you know, the last will and testament of Sirius Orion Black ought to say, ‘fuck the Black family, all my money should be split between the three of you.’” Sirius continued, either not noticing or not caring how uncomfortable this casual statement had made the others.
“Thanks, mate,” James said, eyebrows wrinkled with concern.
“Right, then,” Sirius said. “See you later.”
"Don't be ridiculous, mate," James said, and stood with him. The Marauders walked down the corridor, greeting every student they saw by name. "See you next year, Mona," James said to a first year, who was struggling get her trunk through the doors of her compartment. Before they stepped off the train onto the platform, Sirius stopped and grabbed Remus by the shoulders. Remus shifted uncomfortably for a moment, his eyes fixed on his parents, who weren’t looking at him, before Sirius kissed him.

The thing about kissing Sirius Black was that Sirius was always very invested in the kiss, as if nothing else really mattered. He kissed like the world was ending, every time. and it was, honestly, sort of intoxicating.

“Later,” Sirius said, and stepped off the platform. As his eyes fixed on his parents, who were beaming over Regulus, a painful resignation came over his face. He walked towards them, sighing heavily, and looked back at the others for a moment. James waved.

“I worry about him,” Peter said, standing next to Remus. “Sirius, I mean.” Remus sighed heavily. He wanted to run after Sirius and kiss him again, to be someone who was brave enough to do such a thing, to be like James. “Me too,” he said.

“I’ll write you,” Peter said to Remus, catching his mother’s eye. She smiled (she had his round cheeks and blue eyes, and none of his shyness) and ran towards her son.

“Petey,” she said affectionately, kissing the top of his head. “So good to see you! Look at you, you’ve grown!”

“Hello, Mrs. Pettigrew.” Remus said awkwardly.

“Oh, it's just Patty now,” she said, with an air of someone who had experienced quite enough sadness in her life, and refused to experience any more. “How are you, Remus? Do you need a ride home?”

“No,” Remus said. “My parents are over there.”

“Oh, well, tell them hello for me!” she said brightly, and wrapped one arm around her son. “I want to hear everything. I heard in the Daily Prophet about that horrible affair with that Muggle-born girl…” Peter waved weakly at Remus, with an embarrassed sort of grin.

Remus’s parents hugged him much less enthusiastically than Peter’s mum had. Mrs. Lupin looked ashen, and was coughing into her shirtsleeve. “Are you alright, mum?” Remus asked.

“Oh, yes, don’t worry about me,” she said, not looking him in the eye. “I’m perfectly fine.” Mr. Lupin didn’t say anything, but put a hand on his son’s shoulder. Remus had nearly surpassed his father’s height, but perhaps that was the tired slump of his father’s shoulders playing tricks on his eyes. He wasn’t certain they’d looked so tired the last time he’d seen them; in fact, he was certain they hadn’t.

“We saw you with that boy,” Hope said. Her golden eyes were very much like his, and just as unreadable.

“Oh, er, you mean Sirius? Well —“

“How nice that you’ve found someone you really love,” she said. Remus breathed a slight sigh of relief and smiled at his mother.

“You didn’t tell him about your…problem…did you?” Lyall asked sternly. This, Remus knew, was all Lyall cared about.

“No,” Remus lied, his face pink. “No one but Dumbledore and some of the teachers know about it.”

“That’s how it should be,” Lyall said sternly.

“You don’t care that he’s a Black?” Remus asked. “Or, for that matter, that he’s not…y’know, a girl?”

“Why should we?” Lyall asked. “As long as you know that you can never tell anyone.”

Sometimes they were suffocating. Sometimes they cared about all the wrong things. Sometimes he thought that he never wanted to see them again, because all he ever was to them was something to be hidden, and that wasn’t something he wanted to be. “Right,” he said, instead of telling them any of
this. What would be the point? It wasn’t going to change anything. “Of course.”
The four families went their separate ways; the Potters to a home that felt emptier without Sirius, the Lupins to a house where Remus only ever felt confined, the Pettigrews to a home so quiet it felt like a tomb, and the Blacks to a house where Sirius knew he’d never be wanted.

“Sirius,” Mrs. Black said, putting her hand on her son’s shoulder. Her ring was digging into his skin. “We wanted to tell you how very sorry we are about what happened the last time you were here.”
“Mnn,” Sirius said, fighting to keep his voice down. He didn’t want to give them any reason to hurt him, but every time he was with them he wanted to scream. “Thanks.”
“What do you say, Sirius?” Mr. Black asked.
“I forgive you,” Sirius said, forcing a smile. “Can I go upstairs now?”
“Just one moment,” Mrs. Black said, sitting in her high-backed armchair. She made the antique look more like a throne. “We wanted to talk to you about your cousin Andromeda. She left us this letter for you.”
“Left? What happened to her?” Sirius demanded. Regulus looked uncomfortable and unwilling to speak.
“Read,” Mr. Black ordered.
Sirius did, his blood boiling with fury.

Dear Sirius,
I’m so sorry to leave you alone with your family. I know we used to talk about leaving together when we were kids, but I couldn’t take it another moment. See, I’ve fallen in love with a Muggle-born. His name is Ted, and we’re going to be married. I wish I’d had the courage to tell you this when we were able to see each other face to face, but we have a daughter. Her name is Nymphadora, and she’s absolutely perfect, no matter what my parents and sisters think. At your parents’ last family party, I told everyone, and I’ve been burnt from the family tree.
It doesn’t matter, though. I’m so happy to be out of that house, out of the family. Ted and Dora and I have a new life together, one I hope we’ll be able to share with you someday.
Love,
Andromeda.

“Why would she write this to you, Sirius?” Mrs. Black demanded.
“Probably because I’m not a complete arse, unlike some people,” Sirius said before he could stop himself. He cleared his throat loudly. “Er…well, I think because we were always close.”
“Listen very carefully, both of you,” Mr. Black leaned close to his sons. “If I ever hear you’ve had contact with her, her Muggle husband, or her half-breed child ever again, we’ll burn you from the tapestry along with her. Understand?”
Both Sirius and Regulus nodded, Sirius wanting to argue his parents’ cruelty but lacking the courage. Regulus was silent, as Sirius had known he would be.

Sirius wrote to James that night, and Remus, and Peter, and the three letters were very different. To James, he wrote the truth; what had happened, how he felt, how every moment he spent in his own house made him feel like he was running. To Remus, he wrote a modified version of the same letter, and to Peter, he wrote about mundane things; household chores, Kreacher the house elf, and everything but what had really happened, because he didn’t know that Peter would understand. He received no response to any of these letters. Not within the week, or the next, or the next, or the next. He continued to write them every day, he wrote endlessly to keep himself sane; he lay in his bed, looking at the Muggle posters on the wall and the picture of them, the Marauders, and he wrote about everything. He lost track of everything he’d said, and he sent his owl — a Black family owl, but one which was, for all intents and purposes, his — out to each of the others’ houses. The owl returned without a letter each time.

Sirius took a deep breath as the owl swept in through the window, again with empty talons. They’re busy. They’re not trapped inside, being kept on display like a bloody trophy, he told himself, and leaned his head back against the wall.
“Merlin, I’m bored,” he said; bored was not exactly the right sentiment, but the sound drew Regulus
into his room.
“Me too,” Regulus said, sinking against the wall next to Sirius. “Dull, being trapped in here, isn’t it? Smells like mothballs.”
Sirius smirked, not quite ready to really smile. “I s’pose it does,” he shrugged. “How’s school?”
“Fine,” Regulus replied.
“Still friends with Snape, I’ve gathered.”
“You’re still friends with Potter,” Regulus replied.
“Oh,” Sirius said. “James isn’t like Snivellus.”
“Seems like it to me,” Regulus said. “Congratulations on Quidditch, by the way.”
“Thanks,” Sirius laughed dryly. “Actually,” he looked Regulus in the eye for the first time in what must’ve been months. “I’m going to quit.”
“Why?” Regulus asked. “It’s not because…because of me. is it?”
“It is, actually,” Sirius said. “I just…I love you, Reg, you’re my brother, but…I don’t want to be reminded of this place.” He looked around, feeling that same creeping horrid feeling in his chest, the feeling of being trapped in his own house.
“It’s your home.”
“No it isn’t,” Sirius said, smiling grimly.
“It’s my home,” Regulus said, his words a plea for Sirius to just pretend to agree with his parents, to pretend to belong here, just a few years more.
“Mum and Dad trust you,” Sirius told him.
“They —“
“They don’t trust me. Can you blame them?” he laughed, again; it was the only way to avoid feeling trapped in this house — the house elf heads, the Black family antiques, the dark colors and the pureblood mania.
He picked up a mirror that Kreacher had left in the hallway, and looked into it — in it was not reflected his own face, but the face of his mother, standing in the drawing room with a murderous smile on her face. She didn’t look into the mirror, but it was tilted, almost purposefully, to show a dead gnome on the ground. Through it, he could hear her laughing, as if killing was a sport. To people like them, it almost was. Sirius looked away, wishing he had never picked up the mirror. He suddenly realized something, something both wonderful and awful: the mirror could be used to communicate with anyone so long as they had the other.
“I’ll be right back,” he said to Regulus, sneaking down the stairs, and, upon sneaking into the living room, pocketed the other mirror. He packaged it up in the dead of night, candles on his desk lighting the ink on the parchment.
Prongs — I found this at my parents’ house. It’s a two-way mirror, and we can use it to talk to each other, no matter where we are.
He wanted to add something, something somewhat close to the truth of what he felt, but could only bring himself to simply write his name. "To James, alright?" he asked the owl. He watched it soar off into the distance, and fell asleep looking at the mirror, which showed him only darkness. Until, in the morning, as the red light poured in through the open window, over his tired, shadowed face, it showed James.
“Sirius?” James said into it.
Sirius picked up the mirror, seeing James’ face. “James,” he said, with some relief. “Thank Merlin. I’m going mad in this bloody house.”
James grinned. “Haven’t you been getting my letters?”
“Really?” James frowned. “That’s odd. I was wondering why you hadn’t written me.”
"I did," Sirius said, confused.
"Weird," James glanced over his shoulder. “Did you lose Sirius’s letters, Minnie?”
The owl hooted in response.
“Good,” James warned. “Because if you did, I’ll turn you into owl stew.”
Sirius laughed. “Would you really?”
“Nah,” James rolled his eyes. “Not worth the effort. So, how’s the hell house?”

“As the name implies,” Sirius replied, almost shaking with relief at being able to see James, because without the Marauders, he felt lost, felt as if he was living his life underwater.

“It’ll be over soon,” James said. “Is Regulus alright?”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” Sirius replied. “My cousin Andromeda’s been disowned. And I’m not to speak about her ever again, as is customary in the Evil and Most Awful House of Black.”

James laughed at this. “My parents miss you more than I do, I think. My mum keeps accidentally setting a plate for you at the table.”

Sirius felt as if he’d been kicked in the chest by a Hippogriff, but faked a laugh.

James, apparently, was eating breakfast, and kept dropping crumbs of some unidentifiable pastry on the mirror. “Y’know,” he said. “I’m Quidditch Captain now. So I’ll have to —”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure everyone knows. The entire country must’ve heard you shouting it off the roof of your house.” Sirius joked. It was such a relief to hear James’ voice, to see his face, that he could hardly breathe. The silence in the Black household was suffocating.

“There was no shouting,” James scoffed, although this wasn’t strictly true. “These mirrors are bloody brilliant. Where’d you find them?”

“House elf cleaning out cupboards. Nicked it before anyone noticed.” Sirius said. "Course, once they figure it out, I'll probably regret it."

“SIRIUS!” Walburga hollered up the stairs.

“That would be the banshee, bringing with her the dreaded wail of death,” Sirius deadpanned.

“Right then, I should go.”

“Hey, sweetheart, there’s an owl for you!” Hope Lupin called into the kitchen.

Remus sat at the kitchen table, hoping it was from Sirius — he’d received nothing, not one letter from him, and was beginning to worry.

No, it was a Hogwarts owl, and it dropped a letter on the table in front of him, hooting expectantly.

Remus looked at the wax Hogwarts seal, and the address in dark green ink.

“What’s that, Re?” Hope asked, pointing her wand at the sink. The dishes began to wash themselves, bubbles of soap filling the sink. The tap was running, and from the intermittent scraping sound, it seemed they had another plumbing issue in their house, which, throughout the years, seemed to be falling down around them.

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“Really? Supply lists shouldn’t be here for another week,” Lyall said over his coffee, not really looking. He was reading the Daily Prophet, and from the curl of his lip, it was clear it was more bad news.

Remus carefully unsealed the envelope and held the folded letter in his hands, filled with the bizarre fear that it would be a letter of his expulsion from Hogwarts.

To: Mr. R Lupin
Bedroom on the First Floor
Wareford Street
London
Dear Mr. Lupin,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected as a Prefect for Gryffindor house. Your exemplary skill in academics as well as extraordinary bravery has made you an excellent candidate for the task. Enclosed is your badge, which is to be worn with Hogwarts robes at all times, and a list of duties which you will be required to carry out. We expect your continued responsibility as you take on the task of regulating the behavior of your fellow students. Congratulations!

Sincerely,
“Prongs!” Sirius’s voice echoed from the two-way mirror on James’ desk, and James picked it up.
“Yeah,” he said distractedly, barely glancing at it.
Sirius was somewhere very dark, and he appeared frightened; his hand was shaking as he held the mirror.
“Where are you, mate?” James asked. He, it seemed, was lying on the couch in his parents' house, reading Witch Weekly (which he claimed was an attempt to better understand girls, but actually had some fairly solid advice.)
“Cupboard,” Sirius said.
“Why?” James asked, still seemingly distracted; he wasn’t really looking at the mirror, his eyes were fixed on the living room.
“My…my parents, they…” Sirius closed his eyes.
“They haven’t hurt you?” James demanded, now focused on Sirius. The helplessness in his eyes filled Sirius with guilt.
“No, they’re, er…shouting about something,” Sirius sighed, extremely shaky. “Doesn’t matter.”
“You’re alright, though?”
When Sirius nodded, James breathed a very slight sigh of relief.
“What are they shouting about?” James asked cautiously.
James nodded. He did, vaguely, although he’d never had much to do with either of them when they’d been in school.
“They’ve gotten married, and my parents think it’s an awful waste of blood purity, or something. My uncle, apparently, is also walking on thin ice with this family, for whatever reason.”
“So you’re…hiding in the cupboard.” James guessed, confused, his hand going to his hair as it tended to do. He’d gotten his hair cut, and it seemed significantly less unruly than usual.
“Figure it’s better than being in earshot when they start to say all Muggle-borns deserve to die.”
Sirius said. “And look, here it is,” he peered through the crack between the cupboard door and the wall. “Ah, they want Regulus’s opinion on things — from the looks of it, he’s agreed with them.”
His heart was pounding in his chest. “Merlin, no, they haven’t — they’re — they’re saying I’m a blood traitor for being…friends with you and Moony and Wormtail, and —” he dropped the mirror, and it landed on a pair of Orion’s shoes in the cupboard. “I’ve got to — I’m sorry —” he picked up the mirror again, his eyes desperate, holding it so it showed only the floor.
“Padfoot, it’s not worth it,” James attempted to say, but Sirius was already gone. James heard him shouting at his parents, heard them yell back, saw a flash of light.
“I’m sorry,” Sirius was saying, his voice wavering. “I just…I don’t care what you say about me, but
if you call any of them that word again—"
“The Potters’,” Sirius said hotly. “Where my opinions are actually welcome.”
“No you won’t,” Orion said. “Not with that Ministry decree still in place.”
James could hear Sirius breathing, shaking. “They aren’t…they aren’t mudbloods, they’re people,”
Sirius pleaded.
“That’s where we differ, dear,” Walburga sniffed. “I don’t want to fight with you again, Sirius. It
seems we fight so often.”
“It does, doesn’t it?” Sirius asked bitterly.
James could take no more of listening to this through the mirror, and dropped the mirror on the table.
He buried his head in his hands. “They aren’t…they aren’t mudbloods, they’re people,”
Sirius pleaded.
“Where are you headed in such a hurry?” Fleamont asked after him.
“I need some air,” James said, and slammed the door behind him.
He stalked down the street, not really sure where he was going, crossing without looking until he
reached a crowded road, bustling with people, Muggles. He stopped and leaned against a brick wall,
taking deep breaths. His head was so clouded with worry for Sirius that he could barely think. “Why
doesn’t he just…I don’t know…make them disown him, why won’t he just leave…I can’t stand to see
him like this…” he didn’t mean to speak aloud, but the words sounded more coherent outside his own
head. Some passing people were giving him strange looks, and he hardly cared.
A cloud of smoke blew into his face from the Muggle next to him, who was smoking a cigarette. He
smelled of alcohol and looked like someone who hadn’t slept in several days. “Oi, mate, you look
like you could use one of these,” he said, offering a cigarette to James.
James took it without thinking, and it lit on fire instantly (accidental magic which he could only
assume he’d answer for later.)
“Wanna talk about it, mate?” the Muggle man asked, not at all bothered by the fact that the cigarette
had lit itself.
“Not with you,” James replied, and blew a cloud of grey smoke into the air. He didn’t much like the
taste of tar at the back of his throat, but it had instantly relaxed him, which he liked significantly
more.
He stood there, thinking about Sirius and his parents and full of regret for leaving the mirror behind,
and decided he would buy a pack of cigarettes on his way back home. This was, he decided, the
only rational thing to do at the moment that didn’t involve hitting a random stranger in the face.

At the very end of the summer, the last day before they were to board the train and return to
Hogwarts, Lily Evans and Benjy Fenwick were gloriously in love.
Until they weren’t.
They were walking around the grounds of Benjy’s house, enjoying the garden, their hands entwined,
when Benjy said something that ruined it all, that shattered the wonderfully lazy golden glow around
the entire morning.
“I met someone else,” he said, and stopped walking.
Lily looked up at him. “You…you what?”
“I’ve met another girl.”
“What does that mean, you’ve met another girl?” Lily asked, although she knew what it meant, and
had a horrible moment of comprehension.
“It means,” Benjy sighed, and dropped her hand. She would always remember the moment he’d
dropped her hand as the moment her heart broke, before he’d even had a chance to explain. “That I
cheated on you.”
“You…” Lily frowned, and sat down hard on a stone bench. He stood in front of her, his expression
strangely detached and analytical. “Why?”
“Meredith Errington has been after me for some time, and…right before the last Quidditch game,
“You…you and her?” Lily asked. She would later be glad, if nothing else, that she’d had the dignity not to cry. “Why?”

“I love you, Lily,” Benjy said apologetically, as if this would fix everything.

“No you don’t,” Lily shook her head, her thoughts whirling, a vortex of betrayal. “You wouldn’t have cheated on me if you loved me. And since you lied to me about it, and let me spend the entire summer with you, even though you’d already ruined it all…” she took a deep breath and ran her fingers through her hair. It fell in a dark red curtain over her face, which she was glad of, as she didn’t have to look him in the eye. “You ought to at least tell me why.”

“You’re right, I owe you that.” Benjy took a deep breath.

“No,” Lily said firmly. “No, you should tell me because you’re a decent person. Or at least, I thought you were. You don’t owe me anything at all, because owing someone something implies some sort of relationship. One I would certainly not like to have with you,” she wasn't angry with him, not exactly, not so much angry as wondering what he was going to say, how he was going to justify what he'd done.

“It’s because you’re…well, a bit of a prude, Lily.” Benjy said; a rather unfair statement which was extremely cruel by his usual standards. He wanted to make her understand, wanted to give her a reason to hate him, to feel as ashamed as he did.

“Pardon me?” Lily asked frostily. “I don’t want to have sex with everything that moves, if that’s what you mean. We’re very young, and I’m not ready. I don’t see what the problem is.”

“That is the problem with you,” Benjy said. This was an awful thing to say, especially to a girl like Lily Evans, who took everything directly to heart. “You don’t see it.”

“So you wanted to…to have sex? So you cheated on me with Meredith because you knew she’d let you?” Lily’s voice grew shrill, and she attempted to gather her composure.

“Maybe,” Benjy said. “Or maybe I woke up and realized that it’s not going to work.”

“Why? Why not?” Lily persisted. “And more importantly, why did you cheat on me and lie to me for months instead of just telling me how you really felt?”

“I was scared,” Benjy admitted. "I didn't want to hurt you, Lily.”

“Scared! Better to be scared than to be told the last few months of your life were a lie,” Lily stood, her hair tumbling down her back. It looked like dark blood, pouring down over her shoulders, and Benjy was struck with how beautiful she was, how much he regretted what he'd done, and how he knew that if he could do it again, he wouldn't take it back. “Goodbye, Benjy.”

“Lily, wait —“

“What?” she demanded, eyes wide and furious.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s nice of you to apologize,” she said, with a sort of awful smile. She still wouldn’t cry. “But don’t say you’re sorry if you don’t mean it.”

She ripped off the necklace he’d given her — a small silver pendant, a lily. She’d thought at the time that it wasn’t extremely clever of him. A lily for Lily, as if she’d never heard that joke before. She threw it at him, and watched it bounce off his arm and hit the ground, glinting in the grass. “Give Meredith my best,” she snapped, and stalked away.

“Lily,” he yelled after her. “Lily, please, I don’t want to leave it like this.”

“She should’ve thought of that before you cheated on me,” Lily called back, and once out of earshot, promptly burst into tears. She took off her shoes, light blue sandals which she’d bought because they were Benjy’s favorite color. She threw them into the field stretched in front of her, sobbing, and watched them land in the grass. She ran back home as fast as she could, tears streaming down her face, dripping over her chin, trickling down onto her neck.

“Lily,” Severus said — he’d been waiting for her back at her house, which had been sort of nice, she thought. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head, biting her lip until it turned white. She was shaking, and barefoot, and her knees were scraped from her tripping as she ran. She looked miserable, and lovely in the way that a broken porcelain doll was lovely. “You wouldn’t get it.”
“Tell me, I’m your best friend, please —“
Lily nodded, though she was beginning to question how true that really was. “Benjy and I broke up,” she wiped her eyes.

“Why?” Severus asked, secretly thrilled by the news.
She looked at him, her green eyes shining and bloodshot. “He cheated on me,” she said, a pearly tear rolling down her cheek. “Because…”

“Why?” Severus asked, and put his arm around her. She leaned against his shoulder, her red hair wild around her face.

“Because I didn’t want to…never mind,” she looked up at him, looking more like the girl he’d met years ago than she had in quite a while, and said, “Sev, our being in different houses isn’t important, right? I think Benjy and I never seeing each other made a difference…I don’t want to lose you like I lost him.”

“Of course not,” Severus said, stunned by the idea that Lily might ever look at him the way she’d looked at Benjy.

“And…me being Muggle-born…I don’t want you to be putting yourself in danger for me. I know what it’s like, now, but I…I don’t want you to have to choose between me and your friends, so...if it’s easier for you, just to stop being friends now…I’ll be alright.” She looked very far from alright.

“If I did have to choose, I’d choose you,” Severus said.
Lily smiled and wiped her eyes again.

“And…” Severus hesitated, sure he didn’t want the truth, didn’t want to ask. “If you had to choose between me and your friends, what would you say?”

Lily frowned. “I don’t know. It’s…it’s not the same, as you and your friends. I mean….my friends…they wouldn’t hurt you if you weren’t friends with me, but yours —“ she knew what Severus's friends thought of her, was sure that if Severus were not keeping them away from her they would’ve hurt, maybe even killed her.

“Do you really think that little of them?” Severus asked defensively.

“Can you blame me?” Lily asked. “I’ve seen what they do to people like me.”

“But they wouldn’t do that to you,” Severus insisted. “I swear.”


“Because I wouldn’t let them.”

“That’s the thing, though,” Lily said. “You wouldn’t. But if you weren’t here, what would it be like?”

“I don’t know,” Severus said, and stood, furious. “I don’t want to know! You don’t trust me at all, do you?”

“Maybe not,” Lily said, tears now streaming down her face again.
Severus stormed off, out of the yard.

“Sev! Sev, I didn’t mean it like that, please come back,” she yelled after him, her shoulders trembling. Her chest hurt with the weight of trying to hold in her sobs.

“Why?” Severus asked, standing in the street facing her. He looked broken-hearted, and she wanted to run after him and apologize. At the same time, a very small part of her was rationally telling her that this was probably for the best. “Why should I, when it’s clear what you think of me?”

“I don’t,” Lily said desperately. “I’m so sorry.”
Upon seeing her tear streaked face, Severus walked back over and stood in front of her, gently smoothing a strand of hair out of her eyes. “It’s alright,” he said, but somehow it wasn’t; her words had broken the very last bit of him that was pretending not to be a Slytherin, not to agree with his friends.

“Come with me,” Lily said, and ran over to the tree in her backyard. She climbed onto it, her pale limbs a stark contrast against the bark.
Severus smiled, but it was different, it was all different; some part of him that he had come to hate whispered that Lily was just too scared to stop being his friend, and if she hadn’t been, she would have never spoken to him again.

Lily sat on an outreaching tree branch, legs dangling into the summer air. Severus climbed up after
her and sat beside her. Her hand lay outstretched on the branch beside her, and so Severus reached
over and held it.
He looked at her and thought that he should probably kiss her.
Lily looked at him and was glad that he didn't.

Chapter End Notes

i may not update after this for a while because i'm moving. I always appreciate
comments
As summer drew to an end and the school year of 1975 began, things had been irreversibly changed in the lives of the Marauders, Lily Evans, and Severus Snape.

Sirius Orion Black was beginning to think that life with his parents was tolerable, and for the first time in his life, he really believed that things were going to turn out alright, one way or another.

Peter Pettigrew had a date with a girl named Alberta (a Hufflepuff) and he still didn’t quite know why he’d said yes.

Remus Lupin was a Prefect, something which he’d never even dared to hope for.

James Potter had taken up smoking, much to his mother’s chagrin, and he’d agreed to a date with Gillian Hartly after class one day. These two things were unrelated, but the more he thought about it, one had definitely been the indirect cause of the other.

Lily Evans was single for the first time in a year, and the only person besides Severus who knew was the person who’d broken her heart.

Severus Snape had decided upon something he was sure had been inevitable, but he still didn’t much like the idea of it.

And so, as they all boarded the Hogwarts express, all was silent.

“What’s that? Ah yes, thank you for apologizing, I forgive you,” Sirius snapped, though no one had spoken. He was glaring openly at the Marauders, though it was mostly for show.

“Apoloizing for what?” James asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Prongs exempt from this, I haven’t heard hide nor hair of any of you for three months. Wormtail, I don’t actually care, but Moony, really.”

“I did write to you,” Remus said quickly. “Twice.”

“Two entire letters, how thoughtful of you.” Sirius said sardonically. “It couldn’t’ve killed you to reply to at least one of mine, would it?” He was beginning to understand that if they’d been writing to him and he wasn’t receiving their letters, someone must have been intercepting his mail. Suddenly, he saw the summer differently, saw it the way it really had been; him, hiding behind his parents’ opinions to avoid being hurt again, writing letters and having replies intercepted by -- his parents. His shoulders slumped. How could he have been so stupid, he ought to have known they’d never let him talk to the very people planting their "radical" ideas in his head.

“I would’ve written more, but my parents couldn’t afford extra parchment this year,” Remus said, shifting in his seat. Discussions of money always made him extremely uncomfortable, especially where his parents were concerned.

Sirius noticed this instantly, and dropped the subject without another word, lapsing into somewhat uncomfortable silence.

“Moony, you’re a prefect now,” Peter remembered, seeing the shiny badge pinned to Remus’s robes. “Oughtn’t you to sit in the prefect’s carriage?”

Remus nodded. “I’ll go in a moment. There’s something I’ve got to do first.”

“What?” Sirius asked. He looked, to all of their surprise, almost completely alright, if a bit less carefree than usual. That is, if Sirius had ever been really carefree in his life.

Remus leaned forward and kissed him, leading to exaggerated groaning from both James and Peter.
“Get a room, why don’t you?” James asked, pretending to cover his eyes. Remus went the color of Gillian Hartly’s ruby-painted lips, which she was currently pursing at James across the train in a way she clearly thought was appealing. James appeared not to notice either Gillian or Remus. “You’re not…serious,” Remus said, looking extremely embarrassed. “Actually, I am Sirius, you’d think being my boyfriend that you’d know my name,” Sirius joked. “Every single time, Padfoot,” James groaned, sinking down in his seat. “I’m literally going to drop dead if I hear another joke about your stupid bloody name.” “Love you too, Prongs,” Sirius replied with a cheeky grin. Remus stood. “I’ll be back later,” he said, still quite sweaty and absolutely mortified. “What was that all about?” James asked with some amusement as the compartment door slid shut behind Remus. “No idea,” Sirius replied. “Now, Prongs, let’s hear it. Why do you smell like a sodding ashtray?” James had the grace to at least look embarrassed. “Well, although my mother loathes it, I may have…accidentally smoked…quite a bit.” “Accidentally?” Peter asked. “How d’you accidentally smoke?” James shrugged. “Alright, somewhat on purpose.” “Why?” Sirius asked. Why, with the Marauders, was always much different a question than it seemed. It meant something else, demanded a full explanation, and James was not very much inclined to answer. “I dunno. People do it. Now I do it. Enough questions!” James snapped, and lit another cigarette. Peter coughed. “Look at you, Prongs, you’re going to give Wormtail lung cancer,” Sirius said, with as much mock disapproval as he could muster. Peter coughed again, just for effect. “So,” James said. “Sirius, about your parents — “ “They’re fine,” Sirius snapped. This was a lie that barely even bothered to be a good lie. It was simply an entirely untrue statement that Sirius was desperately hoping James would believe. James, mostly for Peter’s benefit, didn’t ask for any more details. There was a marked difference between this train ride back to school and all of the others; Sirius was making a great effort to hide something, and James was determined to figure out what it was. “So, Peter,” James changed the subject, still focused on Sirius. “Your mother made you clean the house.” Peter nodded. “It was terrible,” he said. “She could’ve just done it by magic, but she decided that I needed to understand how hard Muggles work so I don’t go over to join Voldemort — as if I would,” he said hastily. “After that, I’m a bit scared of Muggles. They have to do everything without magic. Everything! It sounds awful.” At this, the others laughed. “Oi, Prongs,” Sirius glanced across the corridor into the opposite compartment. He gestured to Lily, Marlene, and Mary — Lily lay across one of the benches in the compartment, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. It was clear from the concerned looks on Marlene and Mary’s faces that Lily was upset, and blatantly refusing to talk about it. “Lil, just tell us what happened,” Marlene begged. Lily shook her head. “Won’t you tell anyone?” “Severus knows,” Lily said flatly, closing her eyes. Her eyes were stinging with tears, but she was just so tired of crying -- and now, knowing what she knew, she didn’t want to waste any more tears over Benjy Fenwick. Mary and Marlene exchanged a look. “Excuse us,” they said in unison, and left her alone in the compartment, creeping down the train corridor to find Severus. Severus leaned against a compartment door, trying to steady his shaking hands, trying to forget what he’d just heard from Mulciber. To prove themselves to the Dark Lord, they each had to use all three unforgivable curses on a Muggle-born. All Severus could think was, what if it’s Lily? What if all I
can think about is Lily? What if I can’t…

“Severus,” Marlene said. Behind Severus, Mulciber’s face had twisted into a grin. He was looking at Mary with a hungry expression, and Severus knew who Mulciber had chosen. I’m sorry, Mary, Severus thought, but nodded encouragingly at Mulciber.

“What’s wrong with Lily?” Mary asked.

“Lily?” Severus asked, feeling suddenly awake. “Nothing, she’s fine, she’s going to be…fine.” He wasn’t going to let anyone hurt her, he was going to protect her. He had no choice.

“She won’t tell us anything,” Mary said. “We’re worried for her.”

“She’s fine,” Severus said, as if trying to convince himself.

“Can’t you just tell us what’s going on?” Marlene demanded.

“I’m sorry, I can’t,” Severus said, not looking at either of them, especially not Mary. He wouldn’t look at her again, because he knew that very, very soon, she’d be dead. If she saw the look in his eyes, she might know what he knew. He wasn’t certain, but he thought that sort of thing tended to be very obvious.

“Fine,” Marlene snapped. “I hope for your sake she’s not upset because of you.”

“She isn’t,” Severus replied.

Marlene hated the way he was looking at them, like they were nothing. Come to think of it, he looked at everyone like that. Everyone except for Lily, and maybe even that, finally, had changed.

“Alright, alright, but consider this — flames. Flames make it cooler.” James said, making large hand gestures which were clearly meant to symbolize the previously mentioned flames.

“But not, you know, literally, because…fire,” Remus said.

The context of this brief (but admittedly quite funny) exchange was this: the Marauders were planning a prank. But not just any prank, as James had explained. This was a prank with double the reward — sheer hilarity and the possibility of bringing one Lily Evans out of her depressed state.

“I really don’t see how on earth this is going to work,” Remus complained, knowing full well that with James and Sirius at the helm, their success was not in question. “I’m a prefect, I can’t really —”

“Moony,” James said. “If I hear one more mention of your current prefect status, I may have to hit you.”

“It’s just — I don’t want —“

“Do you trust me?” James asked. He was, at that time, attempting to create a tower of harmless flames using stacked chairs and FakeFire (You Won’t Believe It’s Not Fire!) from Zonko’s.

“Is that meant to be a trick question?” Remus asked with one eyebrow arched, looking doubtfully up at James, who was balanced on one foot atop the pile of chairs.

“Not that I doubt you, Prongs, but how exactly is this going to work?” Peter asked, standing a reasonable distance from the scene.

“Well, as we all know, Evans hates me quite a bit, and hates Moony here significantly less.”

“I’m involved with this?” Remus asked.

“Won’t work without you,” James grinned. “Don’t worry, we’ll tell everyone you had nothing to do with it.”

“Thanks,” Remus said suspiciously.

“Ready to test it out?” Sirius asked, emerging from between one chair and the next with a matchstick between his teeth.

“Think so,” James said.

“We’re going to get expelled, aren’t we?” Peter asked, staring at the wobbling tower.

“Most definitely,” Remus sighed.

“One,” James called.

“Two,” Sirius said, a second afterwards, hanging from the side of the extremely precarious tower of chairs.

“Three!” they said in unison, and the entire pile was ablaze.

James leapt off the tower, followed by Sirius, and both admired their handiwork.

“Yeah, that should definitely work,” Sirius said, satisfied.
“What exactly is the plan here?” Remus asked. “You know Lily’s a prefect, too, and she’ll probably take points off.”

“She is?” James asked. “So…you and her…have you spoken with her?”

“A bit,” Remus said. “We have staircase duties together on Wednesdays.”

“Ever find out what’s wrong?” Sirius asked, sounding quite specifically disinterested in the answer.

“Fenwick broke up with her,” Remus said, mentally apologizing to Lily, who’d sworn him to secrecy.

“Really?” James asked. “What a shame.” He did not seem at all sympathetic.

“D’you think you’ve got a chance now?” Peter asked. He was always rooting for James and Lily, because unlike Sirius and Remus, he tolerated James and his midnight ramblings about Lily, and whether her calling him an “absolute troll” meant that she was even slightly interested.


“You are?” Sirius asked, still admiring the flames shooting towards the ceiling. “Didn’t tell me that.”

“I thought it didn’t matter,” James said. “She was interested, and I was bored. Also, she’s a fantastic kisser.”

“You’re a real romantic, aren’t you, Prongs?” Sirius chuckled.

“I might be,” James replied, lighting a cigarette.

“Potter, you know I’ve got to take off points for that. I really should give you detention for smoking inside.” Remus said, the slump of his shoulders making it clear that he had no intention of doing any such thing.

“The question is, will you?” James asked, blowing a cloud of smoke in Sirius’s direction.

“No,” Remus gave yet another long-suffering sigh.

“Aha, that’s what I thought,” James said, and pointed his wand at the flames to extinguish them.

“Are we ready?”

“Suppose so. Alright, Prongs, you stand there,” Sirius pointed to the stack of chairs. James sat on one of the chairs casually, his arms folded behind his head.

“You think setting yourself on fire will cheer up Lily?”

“I know it will,” James retorted. “By the way, if Gillian shows up, let her know it’s a prank so she doesn’t, y’know, have a heart attack.”

“Pete, you’ll set the thing on fire, right?” Sirius said.

Peter stood behind the tower. “Ready.”

“Right then,” Sirius said.

“What are we doing?” Remus asked.

“You’re going to fetch Lily, under whatever false pretenses your heart desires, and I’m going to stand here and laugh at Prongs playing the damsel in distress.”

Remus thought for a moment. “Alright, I can live with that.”

“Everyone ready?” James asked. He didn’t wait for a response before saying, “GO!”

Remus rolled his eyes and walked in Lily’s general direction, not having quite thought of a lie when he found her patrolling the hallways.

“Remus,” she said, with one of her little curving smiles. They never seemed to reach her eyes anymore, and she’d almost...crumpled, that was the word. She had faded; her quick temper and sharp tongue and overwhelming love for life and everything had faded.

“Lily, thank Merlin I found you. You have to come to the Hog statue, now,” Remus said. His ears were bright pink, as they usually were when he lied.


“Er…well…um…”

“Yes?” she asked, clearly confused.

“Um…you’ll see?” he said hopefully.

“Alright,” Lily said, following him at a bit of a run down the hallway — he’d grown over the summer, and she most definitely had not; one of his steps made up about two or three of hers.

“What’s going on, Remus? Is something wrong?”

“Er…yes…no…maybe?” Remus said.
“You’re sweating,” she told him.
“Am I?” he asked with an awkward, self-conscious laugh. “Well. Must be the, er, well…” he
gestured to the burning chair tower (which was, of course, not actually burning.)
“Is that James Potter?” she asked, squinting.
It was, unmistakeably, James Potter, who was sitting in the very center of the flames and giving a
quite convincing performance of being burnt alive.
Lily, instead of doing any of the things she’d been expected to do, burst out laughing. She laughed
so hard and for so long that tears welled up in her eyes, and her face went brilliant red. “Can’t…
breathe,” she chuckled. This was the first they’d heard her laughter since they’d arrived back at
Hogwarts, and none could deny that it was a very welcome sound.
“C’mon, Evans, aren’t you going to help me? I’m on fire!” James waved his arms through the flames
for effect.
She continued to giggle. “Yes, I see that,” she wheezed.
“Is she drunk?” Sirius whispered to Remus.
“Don’t think so,” Remus replied. “Er…Lily, are you alright?”
“Yeah, I’m fine,” she laughed. “Sorry…it’s just…so obviously fake fire, it’s…sort of…hysterical.
I’m not sure what you were trying to accomplish here —“ she gestured at the crowd which this
bizarre spectacle had gathered. “But it’s all…really quite funny.”
James persisted in acting distressed, which was comical in and of itself, because James could have
been being swallowed by the giant squid and would likely not have panicked. One thing no one
could debate about James Potter was that he rarely cracked under pressure.
“How did you know it was fake?” Peter asked.
“First of all, there’s no smoke,” Lily said, and Sirius slapped his forehead.
“That’s what we forgot,” Lily said, with no signs of ceasing her laughter. “If Potter were really on fire, Black
would’ve jumped in after him, and Remus wouldn’t have been stuttering when he tried to convince
me to come over here. But a very, very fascinating performance, boys. Compelling. If there’s no real
danger here, other than Potter’s enormous ego crushing the entire tower, I think I’ll be going.”
James, despite the fact that she’d seen right through them (which a group of first years had not; they
were staring wide eyed at the fire, and James continued acting for their benefit) was smiling as Lily
turned away.
“What?” Sirius asked.
“She’s back,” James said with a grin.

The sky was a deep blue velvet, sprinkled with glittering stars, and Sirius Black had a wonderful
view of it from the uppermost window of the Astronomy tower. He wasn’t sure what he was doing
there, or really why he’d found himself walking up the staircase, or what’d drawn him to the
window, or why he was seriously contemplating jumping out.
None of these things made much of any sense, but they all started to when Lily Evans walked
through the door.
“Ah,” Sirius said. “Evans.”
“Not here to jump, are you?” Lily asked by way of greeting. A bit of light had come back into her
eyes that day, but she was still not yet herself, and Sirius wondered whether she may have gone to
the tower to do the same.
“I might be,” Sirius said. “What would you care?”
“I might,” Lily said, and blushed as if she’d admitted something highly personal. “Although I think
Filch would care more about having to clean the ground afterwards.”
Sirius chuckled and moved away from the window. “I seem to be getting a sense of deja vu. As I
recall, last time was about your sister. Is it still?”
“No,” Lily said, with half a smile. "I did think I might find you up here, though. It's a very popular
place to walk halfway across the grounds to in the middle of the night." This was said with sarcasm
worthy of Remus Lupin himself.
“Fenwick, then?” Sirius guessed.
“Remus told you,” Lily said. It wasn’t a question.
“We may have forced him to,” Sirius said.
“Unsurprising,” Lily replied, and sat cross-legged on the floor. “Last time was about your brother?”
“It was,” Sirius said. “It isn’t now. I’m not really sure what it’s about.”
“You spent the summer at home, not with Potter, right?” Lily asked.
Sirius nodded.
“How was it?”
“I’m not really certain that’s any of your business,” Sirius said. “And even if it was, I might lie to you.”
“We still have our deal, don’t we?” Lily asked, and when Sirius looked confused, she added, “tell anyone this conversation happened and you’ll be hung upside down from the chandelier in the middle of the Great Hall?”
“Right,” Sirius said. “Although, I remember something about Snivelly’s underwear being involved.”
“Might’ve had something to do with it,” Lily said. That smile made a brief appearance, and Sirius was at least able to admit that it made him feel slightly better. “Say what’s on your mind, then?”
“You first,” Sirius said dryly, feet dangling out the open window. One centimeter forward and he could fall into oblivion, and while he had so many things to live for, more things than there were stars in the sky, it seemed as if it might be easier that way.
“Alright,” Lily said; she’d never been one to back down from a challenge, especially when said challenge came from the mouth of Sirius Black. “Benjy broke up with me after we spent nearly the whole summer together, because he was too scared to tell me he’d cheated on me with Meredith Errington.” Lily said, all in a rush. It was a relief to finally admit this; she’d only told half of this truth to Mary and Marlene, because she didn’t want to be pitied, didn’t want to play the victim in all this when she should’ve known, deep down, that it wasn’t going to work. While Sirius was a lot of things, he’d never been one for pity.
“Meredith Errington’s a tart,” Sirius said, and Lily laughed.
“No, it wasn’t her fault,” Lily said. “She just took advantage of…”
“Fenwick?” Sirius asked with a smirk.
“The situation,” Lily said.
“Is that what you’re so upset about? Fenwick?” Sirius asked derisively. “I’m sorry, Evans, but compared to you, Fenwick is a soggy pile of potatoes.”
Again, she smiled. “He didn’t seem to think so. He said that…that me not understanding why he cheated was the reason he did it.”
“That doesn’t even make sense,” Sirius said. Somehow, while she’d been talking, he’d summoned a bottle of firewhiskey, and was now drinking it. He offered her the bottle, but she shook her head.
“In a way, it sort of does,” Lily replied. “We didn’t work; I loved him, but I knew it wouldn’t work. I was just…hopeful, I suppose. Stupid.”
“Well, I won’t argue the stupid part,” Sirius said; he was just drunk enough to be brutally honest. “I don’t think you’re so upset over some idiot bloke. I know you, Evans, well enough to know that it’s not very like you.”
“I found out my mum’s sick,” Lily confessed. Other than when she and Petunia had cried together when their mother had told them, she hadn’t allowed herself to think about it. Still, it was always there, this horrible thought that she might one day get a letter from her father telling her that the worst had happened. “She has cancer. I haven’t…told anyone, because if I tell someone, it’ll be saying it’s really happening.” She buried her head in her arms and let out one gasping sob. “I can’t lose her, I just…I can’t.”
Sirius didn’t try to comfort her. “I’m someone. You’re telling me,” he said, and summoned another bottle of firewhiskey.
“You don’t count,” Lily said. “It’s not the same. You can’t tell anyone.”
“I know.”
“And I might be…a little better…maybe if Benjy was talking to me or if Severus wasn’t…Severus, I
guess…it’s just a lot,” she said. She was slightly hysterical, tears streaming down her face. “It’s too much, and with the war…I can’t do it anymore.”

“Do what?” Sirius asked, taking another long sip of firewhiskey.

“This,” Lily said, gesturing to her tear streaked face. “Everything.”

“I understand,” Sirius nodded. His words had begun to slur together slightly.

“So,” she sniffed. “What about you? No one comes here in the middle of the night for no reason.”

“I told James everything’s fine with my parents,” he said. “Which is…y’know, technically true, except…”

“It isn’t,” Lily said.

“They…they told me that all my friends are Mudbloods…and that if I do one more thing they disapprove of, they’ll disown me…I have nowhere to go,” he closed his eyes. “Where am I going to go?”

“Potter’s?”

“I don’t want to impose on them, y’know? There’s a difference between staying with them and really being their son.”

“I don’t think they’d mind,” Lily said.

“They wouldn’t, but…I don’t want to owe them that, I don’t want to owe James that.” He sighed.

“Can I ask you something?” Lily asked.

“Just did,” Sirius replied, but nodded.

“Last year, the day they found Belinda…you were in the hospital wing, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Sirius said, and gulped down the rest of his firewhiskey.

“There were rumors,”

“There usually are.”

“People were saying you’d…you’d tried to kill yourself, and Peter had found you. Is that true?” Sirius felt tears welling in his eyes. “No,” he said aloud, voice ringing through the tower. “No, it’s not.”

“Are you sure?” Lily asked.

“Yes,” Sirius snapped. “I’m sure. Leave me alone, alright?” He jumped to his feet, knocking over the now empty bottle of fire whiskey, and stormed out.

October 20th, 1975 was the day of the last spell. It was a rather complicated spell, rather impossible in Peter’s opinion, but it was, inarguably, the last, the spell that would finalize their Animagus transformations.

“Alright, we’ve spent years working on this, and we know, almost certainly, that it works.” James said. He stood, wand at the ready, a piece of parchment with the extremely long spell written on it in his hand. “And by almost certainly, I mean almost certainly not.”

“And if it doesn’t…?” Peter asked nervously. He sat on his bed, tapping his feet rapidly against the floor.

“We die,” Sirius said. “Horrifically.” This idea did not seem to have much of an effect on him.

“Moony would tell us this is a bad idea,” Peter said.

“You can’t have doubts now, Peter, it’s a bit late for that,” James said. This was true, although Peter wished it wasn’t. The sun was setting outside, sinking low over the hills. The chill of winter had only just begun to blow in, and this only during the night; days were long and sunlight rippled through the trees still. “We’ve got less than an hour until the moon comes out.”

The idea of Remus turning into a monster, alone, again, was enough to persuade Peter that it was too late to be concerned.

“We die,” Sirius said, and all three looked at each other. “For Moony?”

“For Moony,” the others said in unison, and began the spell.

As the full moon climbed into view, shining over the quiet Hogwarts grounds, Remus Lupin was alone. He felt it, the first twinges of the werewolf, the pain, and sank slowly to the ground, his knees giving out. He looked around, taking in the last moments of his humanity, and saw three figures
standing in the corner.  
“James,” he choked, head pounding.  “Sirius, Peter, you can’t be here, it’s — it’s dangerous, I’m —”  
he howled as his fingers elongated into claws.  
“We’re safe, Moons,” Sirius said.  
“Get out, you have to go, it’s dangerous!” Remus wasn’t even sure if they were really in front of him, if they were even there at all, but he had to warn them, couldn’t let them see what he really was.  
“I mean it, GO!”  
“No,” James said, and the three of them began to change.  Peter shrunk, his nose elongating, whiskers sprouting from his face; James grew, antlers stretching up, nearly touching the ceiling of the Shrieking Shack.  Sirius sprouted black fur, descending onto four legs, and all of a sudden, Wormtail, Prongs, and Padfoot stood in front of him.  
“You did it,” Remus said.  “You’re…not stuck like that, you…did this for me?”  
James nodded.  
“Thank you,” Remus said, his vision going blurry and out of focus; he was sure he was screaming, had to be screaming.  How could someone withstand so much pain and be silent?  He was still somewhat aware of who he was, and for a few, precious seconds, he knew he was safe.  
Even when Remus ceased to be Remus, when he was just a wolf and nothing more, all he could think was,  
Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.  

The Marauders awoke in a pile on the splintering floor of the Shrieking Shack, all human once more.  James and Sirius’s eyes met, and Sirius grinned; he had a purple bruise on his lip that he didn’t really remember getting.  
“We really did it, this time,” Peter said, rolling over on the floor.  Remus lay there, asleep, looking significantly better than usual.  Peter could feel it, feel that it was over, that they’d done it, that he was an Animagus and he really could transform now, it would never be accidental again.  It raced through his veins, nearly brought him to tears.  Never in his life had he thought he’d have the ability to do anything so complicated; he was so unmagical his father had thought he was a Squib.  He wished his dad could’ve seen him, an Animagus at age fifteen, capable of what neither of his parents had ever been able to do.  
“Yes,” James said.  “We did.”  
He shook Remus awake; Remus opened his eyes slowly, as if he thought it would hurt, and was surprised to find that it didn’t.  He focused on the others and smiled.  “Bloody hell,” he managed.  James laughed, discovering instantly that his ribs felt as if they were caving in.  He knew this was only a fraction as bad as Remus felt every month, and was filled with pride for his friend, who handled such immense pain so often, and had borne it with hardly a complaint for most of his life.  “Blimey, Moons,” he said, unsure what else to say.  
Remus was filled with unspeakable fear that his friends had now seen him, seen him for what he really was.  Would they regret everything they’d done for him?  They’d seen the monster, and now they knew what he was, really knew.  “I’m so sorry,” he said, his voice breaking.  “I’m so sorry I didn’t try to stop you from doing this.  I knew it was a mistake, I knew it was wrong…”  
“Will you shut up?” James asked.  
Remus’s eyes went wide.  “I — what?”  
“Shut up,” James repeated.  “Mate, really.  What d’you think, we’re just going to decide we hate you?”  
“Er…well…”  
“That was bloody amazing,” James said, and looked pointedly at Peter and Sirius, who immediately nodded, perhaps with a bit too much enthusiasm on Peter’s part.  Remus could hardly believe it.  “Really?”  
“Really,” Sirius said.  
“I…I can’t believe you did this for me,” Remus said, and though he was looking only at Sirius (he was always looking at Sirius) he addressed this statement to all of them.
“S’nothing,” Sirius said, and this made the others laugh, filling the Shack with joy, a sensation entirely new to this place of horrors.
At the start of their fifth year, the Marauders were closer than ever. Perhaps, in the case of the couple which their friends had bitterly dubbed Moonfoot, too close. Still, there was something holding them back, something making it difficult to breathe when they were alone together.

The fact of the matter was, Remus was afraid. This, in and of itself, was not an uncommon emotion for him to feel, but this fear was more self-consciousness than the pure terror he felt every time he saw the full moon shining over the castle grounds. So, as he and Sirius sat in an empty classroom in the dead of night, he blurted out something perhaps best kept to himself, “I won’t do it!”

“Do what?” Sirius asked, his hand brushing the floor next to Remus. His thumb just barely touched Remus’s knee, and Remus shivered.

“Er…well…” Remus said, instantly going a spectacular shade of red. He didn’t know, actually, what he meant; or perhaps he did, and was too mortified even to admit to himself what he was thinking. “Spit it out, will you, your face is turning purple,” Sirius said, not without amusement.

“I don’t, erm…well…I don’t want to…that is, I won’t…” Remus regretted speaking at all. “Never mind.”

“What is it? You all but shouted at me, might as well tell me why,” Sirius said.

“I…” Remus had never been much good at such conversations when they involved him. He was resigned to talking with James about the “phenomenal” things Gillian Hartly could do with those ruby-colored lips of hers, and didn’t even mind Peter asking him advice about asking people on dates. (He was aware that Peter didn’t really want to, but it was something people did, so Peter had been trying, with minimal success.) However, where anything to do with him was involved, he drew a line. “I don’t…”

Sirius leaned over and kissed him, which made him instantly forget whatever he’d been trying to say, because Sirius’s hands were moving down his back and it was really, truly wonderful.

“This, I don’t…I don’t want to do this,” Remus said, because Sirius’s hand had dropped a bit lower and it was making Remus’s heart race.

“Kiss?” Sirius asked, with a bit of a smile. He withdrew his hand.

“No, not…” Remus shook his head. “Y’know.” He didn’t, not really. Remus didn’t know what he was thinking, or what he was saying, just that he had to say it.

“I know what?” Sirius asked, with a glimmering amusement in his eyes that told Remus he did know, and found the entire notion extremely entertaining.

“Padfoot,” Remus sighed.

Sirius kissed him again, deeper than before, and Remus relaxed into it, his arms around Sirius’s waist, his earlier worries vanished from his mind.

Suddenly, there were voices outside the door, blue light bleeding underneath the doorframe.

“Damn,” Sirius muttered, his voice hoarse. He wiped his mouth hastily and jumped to his feet.

“C’mon.”

“Oi, think there’s someone in here?” Mulciber’s venomous growl echoed from the hall, and Remus’s eyes went wide with fear.

Sirius shushed him with one finger against his lips, and snuck towards the back of the room, gesturing for Remus to follow.

Remus cast a quick Vanishing charm over both of them just as the door was busted in, Slytherins pouring into the room. “So,” Mulciber’s voice said. “Has everyone made a decision?”

“Who put you in charge of these meetings?” Avery asked in a whining voice.

“Me,” Mulciber said. “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Avery sneered.

“And who’ve you chosen?” Mulciber asked, thinking of Mary MacDonald, her wide blue eyes and cropped blonde hair, the sweet smile that he would wipe from her face as soon as he could. He didn’t
say her name, because everyone already knew the deep hatred he’d harbored for her since they’d met; there was no reason for it, but something about her made him angry, filled him with a burning desire to kill.

“Lily Evans,” Avery said, with a dangerous look at Snape. The moment that followed was cold, breathless. Severus leapt to his feet and had crossed the room in an instant, shadowed eyes flashing with murder, and his wand was at Avery’s throat.

“NO!” Severus roared; and he did not often raise his voice to this extent, but he wouldn’t let them touch Lily, would never let them hurt her.

“Shut up, mate,” Rabastan Lestrange said. “Alright. Severus’s mudblood is off limits, then.”

Once, Severus would have demanded them to apologize for calling Lily that, but now he was silent.

“Who’ve you chosen, Sev?” Avery asked.

Severus didn’t answer.

“Holy shit,” Sirius whispered to Remus, who nodded slowly, shocked. “They’re talking about killing people, aren’t they? Really —”

He scanned the room, searching for Regulus, and found him huddled in a corner.

“Merlin,” Sirius said, and Remus grabbed his arm to keep him from charging forward, out of the safety of the shadows.

“Sirius, we have to get out of here,” Remus whispered.

“We have to stop them,” Sirius said desperately; he wouldn’t take his eyes off Regulus, who was listening intently. “I can’t let him do this, I —”

“If they see us, we’re dead,” Remus said, so rational in the face of all this that Sirius was almost surprised. “If you want to talk to Regulus, now isn’t the right time.”

“They’re going to kill people to prove themselves to…to Voldemort,” Sirius said.

The true meaning of the name rippled through the room, and heads turned to the corner where they stood. Perhaps no one had heard them, but Voldemort’s name had an effect, some subconscious prickling upon hearing it, especially in his followers.

“The hell was that?” Mulciber growled.

“Nothing,” Regulus said quickly. He knew, somehow, that Sirius was in the room, he felt the cold prickle of his brother’s hatred on his spine. “I think there’s rats in the walls or something.”

Sirius breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“C’mon,” Remus whispered. They snuck around the edges of the room as the future Death Eaters (not Slytherins, all of them — there were Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs and even some Gryffindors) discussed the actions they would have to take in order to prove themselves to the Dark Lord. Severus had left without a word, leaving the door slightly open behind him, and the empty, pitch black corridor stretched out in front of Remus and Sirius where they stood.

“I can’t believe they —” Sirius whispered. There were tears in his eyes.

“I know, I know,” Remus said, and they snuck from the room, the door clicking shut behind them.

The darkness enveloped them, left them standing near each other, not knowing how close or far apart they really were.

Sirius collided with something in the dark, and shot his arms out defensively, hands balled into fists.

“Oi, relax, mate, it’s only me,” the reassuring voice of James said into the dark. “You lot’d been gone for a while and I heard the Slytherins in the corridor, so I followed them.”

“It’s not only Slytherins now,” Remus said. “It’s loads of people. Too many.”

“What did they say?” Peter asked. His quiet voice was somehow even more muted in the night, the blackness pressing in on him from all sides, making him nearly disappear.

“They —” Remus met Sirius’s eyes. “We didn’t hear much, but there’s…”

Sirius shook his head slightly.

“They’re not going to do anything. They were just talking,” Remus said unconvincingly, with a questioning look at Sirius.

“Right,” James said, not quite believing him, but he didn’t question further. He’d never had a reason e to mistrust Remus and Sirius; he would’ve told them the truth without even considering, and he knew, or thought he knew, that they’d do the same for him.
“Why didn’t we tell them?” Remus whispered in Sirius’s ear, trailing slightly behind James and Remus.

“Because… I don’t want them to worry. They —” he gestured back to the classroom where the future Death Eaters were gathered. “They can’t do anything, they can talk, but… it won’t happen. They can’t, not after Belinda, the security’s… they won’t.” He was just rambling now, incapable of thinking or speaking clearly. How could one think in such circumstances, knowing that people might die?

“Wouldn’t it be better to tell the truth? Maybe we could tell Dumbledore —” Remus said.

“Are you joking? That’s my brother, in there, and he may be an idiot, but I’m not going to let him get expelled.”

“So you’re going to let him kill people?” Remus demanded, still trying to be quiet enough that James and Peter wouldn’t overhear.

“I — just let me talk to him,” Sirius pleaded.

“Fine,” Remus said, walking ahead of him. “But don’t blame me when it all goes to hell and you’re the only one who could’ve done anything.”

Sirius stared helplessly after him.

They didn’t touch again that night, not even accidental hand brushing or the occasional shoulder touch or anything, anything at all. It seemed wrong, knowing what they knew.

The next day, Sirius could take it no longer. He pushed Remus up against a wall in an empty corridor and kissed him so hard he was certain he was going to shatter into pieces.

He didn’t.

They didn’t —

Never mind.

Remus was shaken by it all, shaken by his fear that despite everything he was certain of, all that the Marauders knew, they were going to decide to leave. If the people in that classroom followed through on what they’d been planning, and Sirius and Remus could’ve prevented it, Remus knew what would happen. The school board would have him expelled, because it was always the werewolf to blame.

Except this time it would be his fault, and he would deserve whatever he got.

“Padfoot, are you sure we can’t just…?” Remus asked.

“I told you I’d deal with it and I’m dealing with it,” Sirius said. He couldn’t bear to look Remus in the eye. He faced the choice, the decision between his brother and Remus, and what sort of a choice was that? If he told, it was all over for Regulus, and if he didn’t, people would die.

It might’ve seemed simple; to Remus, it certainly was.

Remus didn’t quite know what to say, but all he could think was, what if Sirius chooses Regulus over us, what if he goes back to his family forever? It wasn’t so much that Remus feared losing Sirius (of course he did, this was what he spent about half his time worrying about) it was more that Remus knew what one mistake would do to Sirius, what Sirius might become if he were trapped like that again.

He’d once expressed this irrational fear to James — James, the one person who knew how to comfort him, no matter what. James was always very good with words; the entire English language seemed to belong to him, he was constantly plucking just the right word or phrase out of thin air — and James had replied with a little laugh and a,

“You’re bonkers,” which in turn made Remus laugh, and then they were both laughing. (Laughter, it was becoming clear, was not a renewable resource in those times. You either had it or you didn’t.) Sirius, Remus knew, did not have the same fears, or Remus might’ve told him. What Sirius feared was being trapped, trapped anywhere, and unlike with Remus, a few words from James couldn’t soothe these fears. James had never been able to comfort Sirius because he’d always cared far too much. Sirius’s worries were deeper and darker and sometimes James didn’t know what to say.

It was easy with Remus and Peter, less personal. Maybe Remus should’ve resented that, like he had when he was younger, but he didn’t now. There were some things you couldn’t force, and how much you cared about a person was one of them.
James cared about Sirius more than anyone else; he and Remus had this in common.

“Regulus,” Sirius said, stopping his brother in the hallway. Remus stood against the wall, fighting to look as effortlessly casual as Sirius usually did when standing in the exact same place. He tried to pretend that he wasn’t straining his ears to overhear their conversation.

Regulus faced Sirius with a resigned sigh, as passing people gave them strange looks; it was, after all, quite uncommon to see the Black brothers together. “I was wondering when you’d want to talk to me.”

“You saw —?”

“I’m your brother, you think I didn’t know you were listening in?” Regulus demanded. Somehow, without Sirius noticing, he’d grown to almost exactly Sirius’s height, and his eyes had become so cold that Sirius barely recognized them. “Listen, I’m handling it, okay?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sirius asked. “I can get you out of this, Reg, you don’t have to —”

“I want to,” Regulus said, and Sirius fought not to show how this had affected him.

“Fine. Fine, I’m done protecting you. You’ll get whatever’s coming to you, and I’m not going to try to help. See you, Regulus.”

Sirius stalked away, and didn’t wait for Regulus to call after him. He was already gone, and he found, somehow, as he walked away, that the only person he wanted to see was James.

As it usually went, James was standing just in front of him, and wordlessly slung an arm around his shoulder, walking with him back to the common room. This was all it took, this knowledge that James was his brother, that James would never do what Regulus had done, renounce everything they’d been. It was all, in that moment, at least, going to be alright.

The next day, James, newly captain of the Quidditch team, held tryouts. People flooded the pitch (including a few first years, who he had sent on their way before one of them accidentally poked their own eye out with a broom or something.)

“It looks grim, Prongs,” Sirius said, his dark hair tousled by the wind, effortless. James had convinced him, just barely, to stay on the team for one more year. “Very grim. In fact I’m certain that I saw Gillian Hartly trade out her red lipstick for Quidditch robes — and yes, there she is.”

Gillian waved at James, who waved reluctantly back.

“She can’t fly. Merlin, she’ll fall right off her broom.” James groaned.

“At least the…y’know,” Sirius gestured at Gillian’s voluptuous chest, “will cushion her fall.”

James smacked him in the ear.

“RIGHT,” James shouted, silencing the crowd. “MacDonald, in the air, please.”

Mary rose above him, glaring all the while.

“If you’re trying out for Keeper, fly into one of those hoops over there,” James pointed. “We’ll do a few practice shots for you, and may the best Keeper win.”

“You’re not going to tell them I’m still Keeper?” Sirius asked.

“They’d still be playing more than you plan to. What would be the point in putting a damper on all this…” he looked skeptically at Gillian, who was blowing kisses at him from one of the hoops as if this might sway his judgement. “Enthusiasm. Now, MacDonald, if you don’t mind — “

“Way ahead of you,” Mary grumbled, and tossed the Quaffle at Gillian. Gillian, instead of keeping the Quaffle away from the hoop, flew about halfway down the pitch in fright.

“Er…” James cleared his throat, with a dull look at Sirius, “RIGHT, ER, GOOD JOB, GILL, BUT REMEMBER THE OBJECTIVE IS TO STOP THE QUAFFLE, NOT FLY AWAY FROM IT!”

Gillian gave him a thumbs up, and he sighed.

“Got a cigarette?” he asked Sirius.

“Really, mate, on the Quidditch pitch?” Sirius asked.

“Right,” James sighed. “Er…NEXT UP, FELICIA WILLIAMSON…”

“It’s all girls this year, I s’pose,” Sirius said.

“Hey, M’s a girl, and she was the best Chaser we had — “

“You’re a Chaser, mate,” Sirius reminded him.

“And I am,” James said. “At that.”
He watched Felicia tip forwards off her broom, land inside the hoop, and hang there screaming bloody murder.

“Are you gonna —“ Arnold Pierce asked, watching Felicia struggle with some amusement.

“Noo,” James replied curtly. “A good Keeper knows how to get back on a bloody broomstick.”

To his shock, she climbed back up and leapt onto her broom, saving the next pass with a swift kick. James whistled. “Alright, Felicia, looks like you’re in.” By about a hundred saves, he thought, looking at Gillian, who seemed unburdened by her own complete lack of skill.

“Right, so, now we’ve got a proper team,” James said, looking around. Pierce had made Seeker yet again, and Mary and James were still Chasers, with their newest Chaser being Sebastian Lechyn. Felicia Williamson was substitute Keeper for Sirius, the two Beaters were large, broad shouldered, blonde-haired sisters Cail and Francisca Monkbane.

James thought, overall, that it had been quite the success. “M was a great captain. Those of you who were on the team last year know that, and the rest of you I’m sure must’ve seen a match at some point, so you know just as well.”

“Now she’s not here, can you tell us her real name?” Cail asked.

“No,” James said, his voice full of authority. “As I was saying, M was a great captain, but we didn’t win the House Cup until last year. And the main reason for that was we weren’t a good enough team. We all had the skill, but our teamwork just wasn’t where it ought to’ve been. So this year, we’re really going to try to make a better team.” James said. “I’ve got a five-step plan for this Quidditch season. First: earlier, longer practices.”

“That’s what every captain says,” Mary commented.

James silenced her with a look. “Second, team building exercises. Third, flying technique lessons. Fourth, concentration, and fifth, game awareness and strategy. Got it?”

A few people nodded, and James’ face broke into a smile.

“Excellent. See you all at four o’clock tomorrow.”

“In the morning?” Arnold said despairingly.

James nodded. “Bright and early. Best time to practice.”

“What’s bright?” Sirius asked. “It’s bloody freezing.”

“Did I ask for your opinion, Padfoot?” James asked, entirely without the strictness he’d been applying to the others.

“Why d’you have such weird names for your friends, Potter?” Mary asked. She knew half the answer, (not the real reason, of course) but had heard someone ask it to the person next to them.

“Because we’re better than everyone else,” James said, with a fair amount of conviction. “Enough questions. We’ve got to be committed, and I swear to Merlin, I’ll bring this team to victory if it kills me.”

This earned a slight laugh, but the problem was this: death was no longer a joke to any of them. It was real, and it was horrifying, and something that they were all afraid to think about but knew better than to pretend it wasn’t happening.

Peter was on another date, and was getting rather tired of dates. This one’s name was Elizabeth. She only liked him because she liked Sirius, but everyone liked Sirius. The problem was that the other Marauders were all in relationships (some of them with one another) so desperate, besotted girls had been settling for the, in his own words, “far less interesting” Peter Pettigrew.

Peter was sure he was meant to appreciate this fact, but he was getting sick of the dates and paying for everything — why didn’t girls ever pay for anything? They were always waiting for the bloke to do it, and Peter found it insulting to him and agonizing to his already meager Gringotts account.

“So, Peter,” Elizabeth said, her chin resting lightly on her laced fingers. It was a very practiced pose, one that looked mildly uncomfortable. “What exactly does a Marauder do?”

Peter had, by Halloween of his fifth year, been on twenty dates that year, and there had not been a second date to follow the first for any one of them. Elizabeth’s coyly posed question was always the first to be asked, the first sign that the girl across the table from him wasn’t interested in Peter, she
was interested in the Marauders as a whole. He knew what James would’ve done—a long, ranting, inspired discussion on the meaning of the word and how it came to be and what it had come to represent for all of them—or Sirius—a casual description of pranks and hexes and friendship—or Remus—a flustered, “Oh, y’know, loads of things,” with no further elaboration. He decided that, in order to hold the girl’s interest, he would go with his own approach. “Er…we make awful decisions that sort of always end up being alright, I guess. People think we’re funny—I sort of do too, actually.”

At this, Elizabeth laughed. “You are funny,” she said, batting her eyelashes at him. It sort of looked as if she had something in her eye, but he opted not to comment.

That’s right, Peter thought grimly. There’s Sirius, James, and Remus, and then there’s me…the funny one.

The thing was, Peter wasn’t really so funny, not the way the others were with sarcastic remarks or puns or jokes. Peter said things that made people laugh, said things for the express purpose of making people laugh, but ‘funny’ wasn’t really the proper term to describe him. He was like the others: remarkably complex. He just didn’t see this in himself, or, really, in anyone else. Peter didn’t spend a lot of time thinking, like the others, perceiving and analyzing and endlessly creating. He spent more of his time trying to understand quick jokes and dry humor and laughter at his own expense.

“Are you alright?” Elizabeth asked. “Your face went a bit…odd there, for a second.”

“Yes,” Peter tried to convince himself. “Yes, I’m just…absolutely brilliant, yeah, great.”

It was Halloween—a Marauder’s holiday if there ever was one—and he wanted to be a Marauder, not just that fat lump Peter Pettigrew who was always trailing after James, Sirius, and Remus. And dating girls who weren’t really interested in him suddenly didn’t feel as if it was the correct way to go about doing that.

“Sorry,” Peter said quickly. “Sorry, I’ve got to go. See you later.”

“Er, alright…” Elizabeth said. She did not request a second date, nor did Peter offer one. He simply departed, and that was that.

Their Halloween prank, as it stood in the brief moments before the feast at which it happened, was this: Every pumpkin adorning the Great Hall (there must’ve been hundreds) had been charmed to explode, splattering pumpkin innards and seeds over everyone.

“Ten seconds,” James whispered, drumming his fingers loudly against the edge of the table. The sound made Remus’s ears hurt.

“Five seconds,” Sirius said. His eyes were fixed on the row of pumpkins just beyond Regulus’s head. He didn’t want to know when Regulus was going to pledge his allegiance to the Dark Lord, only knew that when Regulus did, it would be the end of any remaining family bonds between the two of them.

At the start of the year, Sirius had believed that maybe he was a Black, after all. Almost two months in, he was certain that he wasn’t. The only thing he wasn’t certain of was why.

“Are we sure this is such a—“ Remus began to say, looking away as if he didn’t know exactly what was about to happen.

“Three,” Peter said, a grin spreading across his face.

“Two,” James added, his own smile matching Peter’s exactly.

“One,” Sirius said wickedly, and there was a loud crashing sound as orange exploded over all of them. Several people shrieked and covered their heads with their arms, and as loud chattering ensued, Dumbledore boomed,

“SILENCE!”

At this, he promptly broke into laughter, chuckling, pumpkin slime dripping down his hat and landing in his sweeping grey beard. At this, Hagrid began to laugh as well, a sound that shook the tables in the Great Hall, and soon they all began to cackle hysterically, the Marauders the loudest among them.
Peter added it to the list of best feelings in the world: hearing the entire school laugh because of them. *This is what it means to be one of us,* he thought. *We get involved in dangerous things, but sometimes — the best times — we just laugh.*

The beginning of the end, people say, starts with a sign. A symbol of future disaster, the moment everyone could look back on with the realization that they should’ve known instantly what was coming.

Almost no one ever did.

“Today feels like something, doesn’t it?” Lily asked Marlene. Mary was off doing who-knew-what. Quidditch, Lily assumed, though she hadn’t seen Mary take her Quidditch robes.

“Feels like what?” Marlene asked distractedly. As her younger brother, Andrew, walked through the common room, she reached over to bump fists with him.

“Something,” Lily said.

“You’re doing it again, Lils,” Marlene informed her, with the expression of one very much annoyed. “Something doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Alright, it feels like the start of something, don’t you think?”

“Why do you always ask me that?” Marlene demanded. “It feels like every other day, in my personal opinion.”

Lily strongly believed in feelings. Ever since Benjy had broken up with her, she’d been trusting only in her gut feelings. She’d thought that Benjy might be cheating on her but she’d ignored it, and she’d thought that her mother might be sick but she hadn’t asked, and this, she’d decided, had been the trouble of it all.

Lily was, additionally, a great believer in the beginnings of things, like seasons, holiday breaks, and weekends, relationships and friendships. And along with this, unfortunately, came ends. Sometimes she thought they were all the same. Perhaps the beginnings and ends of everything were a circle, and when one thing began, another ended. Maybe it was perfectly balanced by the grand scheme of the universe, or maybe there was nothing controlling everything, a long chain of cause and effect rather than a higher power.

“It doesn’t,” Lily said at length, searching for the words to describe what she felt. She’d been using logic her whole life, and sometimes her logic got so illogical that she found it best to abandon it altogether. “It feels like something’s going to start today.”

James, as he’d awoken that morning, had the same thought, but, unlike Lily, shook it off. The start of another prank war, perhaps. The start of O.W.Ls training, more likely. If he ever had the thought that it was the start of the end, he dismissed it as an absurd notion. In James’ life, so far, very few things had an end.

“Quidditch,” he’d reminded himself, and walked down to the pitch, dragging a half-asleep Sirius behind him.

There was no reason for James to think that Mary MacDonald wasn’t going to be at practice. There was no reason for him to assume that the first of all the Unforgivable Curses that would be used would be the Imperius Curse, and that it was going to be used on Mary. There was no reason for him to even worry, later on, when no one had seen her. He assumed she was sick, or had overslept, or something.

*Why worry?*

Mary was just rounding a corner on the first floor when Mulciber stepped in front of her — he was about twice her height, and his broad chest blocked her view of the corridor in front of her.

“Excuse me,” she said. “D’you mind?”

When he didn’t move, she looked up into his square-jawed face and glared.

“Excuse me,” she repeated, this time with a hard edge to her voice which implied that the next time she would ask it would be not at all polite.

He grabbed her wrist, feeling thin bones shifting beneath his fingers.

“Let go of me,” she said, glancing over her shoulder to find the corridors empty, everyone still
asleep. She realized, as his grip tightened and his other hand found the back of her neck, where it squeezed, forcing her head back, that this was more than a chance encounter. This was preplanned, and it was dangerous.

“I don’t know what you want, but leave me ALONE,” the last word ended in a shriek as she fought to pull away from him.

“Imperil,” Mulciber said coldly, and Mary’s mind went curiously blank. Walk to the nearest corridor with nothing on the walls. His voice said in her mind, and she found herself walking, fighting it every step of the way. She couldn’t; he was much stronger, and she wandered until she found a stretch of empty corridor — but it wasn’t. There was a large, dark door before her, and against her will, she was forced to step in. Mulciber closed the door behind them. She broke his hold on her long enough to shout in her mind, WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS? His mouth curled into the slightest of smiles. I can. I chose you. Now, he told her. Take out your wand.

She did. He screamed a murderous word into her mind, burnt it, blocked out all other thoughts and ended her protests permanently. MUDBLOOD. In a moment, she was stripped of her robes and had begun carving the word, the awful word, the word that had already killed Muggles and Muggle-borns, into her exposed skin. She began with the M, a long gash appearing in her thigh, and in that first moment, she began to scream. Her pained shrieks went unanswered for three hours: the first, most of the castle were asleep. The second, everyone was at breakfast. At the very end of the third hour, someone found her, and by this time, the Imperius curse had been lifted, Mary’s wounds had been covered by her robes, and Mulciber was long gone, leaving only a warning to Mary that if she told a single soul, he would be back with another curse, and this would leave more than a few nasty cuts. Mary had been thrown from the magical room which had appeared all of a sudden, and now lay slumped against a wall, where Marlene McKinnon found her.

“There you are,” Marlene said, with a little smirk, and shook Mary awake. Mary stood, looking disoriented, remembering only Mulciber’s echoing warning in her mind. “Sorry, I — er, I slept-walked here,” Mary said faintly, though Marlene hadn’t asked. Marlene slung an arm around Mary’s shoulder to hold her up, and walked her up the staircase. She didn’t ask — with the two of them and Lily, there were no questions, just answers that were waiting to be told. Mary fought not to cry, because if she cried, she would tell Marlene everything, and all that could ever be was disaster. So she pulled down her sleeves and sucked in a breath, then walked on her own.

A day passed, and she began to heal, reading every healing spell she knew over her scarred body. The awful words had faded into thin white lines all over her skin; she wanted to cry every time she saw herself in a mirror. She never undressed in front of the others, nor bathed in the Prefect’s bathroom as she was allowed, following her newly appointed Prefect status. She snuck around corners and wore gloves and socks. It was all working, really, the entire charade, especially as winter drew nearer, until everything was ruined by Severus Snape approaching her in the corridors. This alone drew a crowd. Severus did not associate himself with Muggle-borns, save for Lily, and his facing Mary and looking her in the eyes with such pity and sorrow was a phenomenon. He touched her arm gently and watched her flinch away, then moved on without a word. As people began to surround her with questions, she felt the sting of tears in her eyes, a lump growing in her throat.

“How do you know Severus?”

“Why did he look at you like that?”

“What’s going on, Mary?”

“What’s wrong?”
Mary could no longer take it, and burst into tears, sobbing into her hands. She gave no one time to react before running into the abandoned first floor girl’s bathroom. She slammed the door behind her and locked it, her fingers shaking. She hated to cry, hated to feel this way; if there was anything most people knew about her, it was that she rarely ever cried.

She gripped the edges of the sink, staring into the dusty mirror. Her eyes were barely recognizable as her own, they were full of grief that she could barely contain. Behind her, Moaning Myrtle rose up from a drainpipe.

"No one ever comes in here,” she said.

Mary didn’t look up, and continued to cry all the louder.

“You can tell me, you know. I can keep a secret.”

“Really?” Mary asked, glaring at Myrtle. “Seems I can’t.”

“Everything will be okay, you know,” Myrtle said. “They always say, ‘this will be the end of Hogwarts’ and it never is.”

“I think they might be right this time,” Mary gasped, tears pouring down her face.

“They aren’t,” Myrtle said, and made a long, drawn out sound, a mournful shriek. “They always think they know what’s going to happen. No one ever listens to what I think. Who cares about MOANING MYRTLE?” she shrieked in Mary’s face.

This only made Mary cry harder, her shoulders shaking. “I can’t t-t-tell anyone, b-be-cause if I d-do he’ll k-k-ill me.”

“If he does, I’ll let you share my toilet,” Myrtle said, as if she’d given this a lot of consideration. Mary sort of laughed, a little smile that faded before it reached her eyes. She took a deep breath and rolled up one sleeve, showing Myrtle the scars from Mulciber’s torture. "He...he made me," she sobbed, and Myrtle was silent for a moment before she flew up towards the ceiling, settling in the window.

“Well,” she said at last, peering down at Mary though the thick lenses of her glasses. "Aren't you going to tell someone?”

Mary slammed the door open and stormed out, sobbing all the way.
It was November when Mary MacDonald saw that her roommate Isabelle Risenfield had begun dressing and undressing behind the curtains of her bed, the way Mary did. The way Mary had to. It was November when Mary was finally able to fake a convincing smile and walk past Mulciber without flinching, and November when Mary found the strength to walk into the Prefect's bathroom and ask Isabelle the question that had been plaguing her for weeks.

“Hey, Isabelle,” Mary caught her as Isabelle was walking to the Prefect’s bathroom.

“Pine fresh,” Isabelle said to the door, and it swung open, allowing both girls to enter. Mary looked around to confirm that the space was abandoned.

Isabelle appeared slightly surprised to see Mary address her. The four of them (and their other roommate, Cindy Birdburrow) had always got on well, but almost never had individual conversations. “Mary?” she said, not unpleasanly, moving towards the sink to wash her face. “I, er…I wanted to ask you if…have you been to the room with the disappearing door?”

Isabelle’s brown eyes went double their usual size. She, like Mary and Lily, was Muggle-born, and a prime target of the traditional Slytherin harassment and bullying. “The Room of Requirement, you mean?” she asked. Her skin had gone grey.

“I…I s’pose,” Mary said. “Did…did someone make you —“

She had to take the risk, had to make sure Isabelle wasn’t alone in it all, like she’d been. She lifted up her sleeve and showed Isabelle the puckered white scars along her arm, spelling out the word, the word she now shivered at the thought of. Mudblood.

Mary waited for Isabelle’s response, and to her surprise, Isabelle turned her back to Mary, her expression, in the mirror, unreadable. “I don’t know what you think I’m going to say,” Isabelle said, in a very small and unconvincing voice. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Isabelle, if you just tell me, we can be in this together. We can fight back,” Mary said desperately. She had shrunken into herself since it had happened. Her mind no longer felt like her own; she could still hear him, hear his slippery voice sliding over her thoughts, blocking out everything.

“Leave me alone,” Isabelle said, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks. “Leave me alone, please, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Everything alright in here?” Lily asked as she walked in, robes sliding off her shoulders as she stepped into the bathtub and turned on the tap. The roommates had never been shy about modesty around each other; Mary, Marlene, and Lily were like sisters, and while not being great friends with Isabelle and Cindy, they were all at least comfortable around each other, if not best friends.

“She looked mad,” Lily commented at Mary, who stood, arms hanging at her sides, unsure what to say or do next.

“Nah,” Mary said, with very little persuasion. “Everything’s perfect. Don’t worry.”

“I won’t,” Lily said, and sunk up to her neck in bubbles, the ends of her shoulder-length red hair swirling around her in the water like seaweed.

“See you later,” Mary said over her shoulder. As she passed Mulciber in the hall, he smirked at her, and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

“Feeling alright, MacDonald?” Avery chuckled.

Mary lowered her head and ran back to the common room, her eyes blurred with unshed tears. It seemed all she did was cry, these days.

The full moon had begun to approach once again, and as the moon grew larger, the Marauders were overwhelmed with excitement. To be in their Animagus forms was to be free, and for once, Remus did not dread the moon. Yes, the pain still ached in his shifting bones, but he was no longer in danger, he had the others, and they were safe.

James had an idea, and Sirius was thinking the same, and Peter didn’t really know what it was, but
had the slightest inkling that a plan was being put into motion, and that there was a reason it had not yet been addressed in the presence of Remus.

“Oi, Moons,” Sirius said, rifling through his trunk in search of the mirror he’d used to talk to James. “Why d’you think the Shrieking Shack’s got all that furniture in it? I mean, it’s a bloody werewolf room, it’s not exactly my family’s parlor.”

*Probably*, he thought, before Remus answered, *the latter’s seen more violence.*

“Dumbledore built it for me,” Remus looked down at his hands. He loathed the thought that Dumbledore had gone to all that trouble just so Remus could be safe at Hogwarts, and yet, found it strangely comforting. “I guess he thought it’d look better with furniture in it.”

“It’s just so impractical, all you do is tear it up anyways,” James said.

“You’re one to talk about impractical, aren’t you, Prongs? Aren’t you dating the very same girl who’s taking Divination, Astronomy, and Care of Magical Creatures at O.W.L level instead of anything that might do some good in the world?” Sirius asked; he wasn’t fond of Gillian, mainly because he wasn’t fond of almost anyone.

“Gillian’s going to be a prophetess,” James said, with mock grandeur, and then burst out laughing. “I can’t even say it with a bloody straight face! She’s going to be unemployed and running through Hogsmeade telling everyone she sees that their death is imminent or something.”

“Ah,” Sirius said, as if this was exactly what’d been expected. “See?”

“I think it’s for the aesthetic appeal,” Remus said, as an answer to James’s earlier question.

“Hard to see Dumbledore as an interior decorator,” Sirius commented, the very thought bringing a smirk to his face.

“Albus Dumbledore, best sorcerer in the world, master of wizardry — marvelous taste in upholstery?” James asked, and his subsequent guffawing shook the bedframe.

Remus chuckled. “I wouldn’t say marvelous. You’ve seen the fabric on those chairs, it looks like a centaur trampled it through the mud.”

At this, the others laughed even harder.

It was wonderful, really, wonderful, his condition being part of a joke they were all laughing at, not something to be pitied. The others didn’t envy what he went through, of course they didn’t, but they were no longer fearful of him, no longer edging around what he was, what they knew he was but didn’t fully understand.

Through their laughter, Sirius remembered what he hadn’t told the others, the secret he’d forced Remus to keep, and he caught Remus’s eye, the smile fading from his face. “Listen, Prongs,” Remus began, sitting on the end of his bed. His spine was bent at an angle which looked and felt extremely uncomfortable, but was the only way to prevent the waves of spasming pain throughout his back. “There’s something we haven’t told you, and it’s not —”

“Severus’s friends are planning on killing Muggle-borns to prove their loyalty to You-Know-Who,” Sirius said bluntly. There was something in the way in which he’d said it, something which implied that he was not to be blamed for the withholding of this information. He’d always been good at that, slithering away from scrutiny from the others where it wasn’t wanted. He never got flustered and embarrassed like Remus tended to.

James froze for a moment, his tapping fingers going still on the edge of the bed, his breath caught in his chest. “You — you what?”

“We were, well…” Remus trailed off meaningfully, his cheeks going a deep red. “They met in a classroom and they were choosing Muggle-borns like they were classes, or something. Like they weren’t even people, like…”

James nodded. “Right. So how come you didn’t say anything?”

“I told him not to,” Sirius said, his face like stone. “I wanted a chance to talk to Regulus before we said anything.”

“Regulus was —?” James didn’t need to finish his sentence. It was clear from the grave look in Sirius’s eyes what was happening, what Sirius had lost. “Pads, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Sirius said; it so obviously wasn’t that James wondered why Sirius had bothered to lie in the first place. “He’s made his choice.”
Remus looked at him, then at James. It was clear that both of them knew that Sirius would never give up on Regulus, never — some things just worked that way.

Peter absorbed this all with silence, and took a deep breath, asking the only question that seemed to matter. “Are we going to tell anyone?”

“We are, aren’t we? We’ve got to,” it was never a question with James, what the right thing to do was. It was always more about timing than anything else.

Sirius looked as if he wanted to argue, but he recognized the determined clench of James’ jaw, and nodded. “Right.”

They found McGonagall exactly where they’d suspected she would be, and she stiffened at the sight of them. “If this is about your Animagus transformations, I simply cannot —“

“No, Professor,” James began respectfully. She arched a single eyebrow in response. “In the hypothetical circumstance in which we’ve been practicing these transformations, it may have hypothetically worked. But that’s not what we’re here to say, actually…”

The corners of her lips twitched upwards, and she almost found herself in a full smile before she regained her composure. “In this hypothetical circumstance, I would tell you how impressed I am by both your talent and your devotion to your friend.” She said this so matter-of-factly that they barely had time to register what it really meant. “Would you care to enlighten me as to what your purpose here is, if not that?”

“We think the Slytherins are planning on killing people,” Peter blurted before the others had time to gather their thoughts in a more diplomatic manner.

McGonagall absorbed this with hardly any reaction. “The entirety of the Slytherin house?” she asked, with an edge to her voice that clearly stated that she didn’t believe what she’d heard.

“No,” Sirius said. “Some people from other houses as well.”

“Snape was there,” James added unnecessarily (he had only assumed this, but the expressions on Sirius’s and Remus’s faces proved his suspicions.) The idea of Severus Snape taking the blame for this was, despite the circumstances, a very pleasant one.

“And how, might I ask, did you come across this information?”

Sirius glanced at Remus before continuing. “We happened to overhear a conversation. They were choosing victims to prove themselves to You-Know-Who.”

“Mr. Black, much as I loathe to disagree with you, I seriously doubt that we have budding Death Eaters in our midst.”

“You don’t believe us?” Sirius demanded, suddenly furious with her.

“I believe that the four of you and Mr. Snape have had a rivalry for some time now, and the fear that anyone may turn out to be a Death Eater makes it all too easy for you to place the blame where it is undue.”

“Snape left,” Remus said, and McGonagall turned her sharp eye on him. “I don’t think he’s going to go through with it.”

“Well,” McGonagall said. “Mr. Lupin, were you present at the time of this incident?”

“I — yes,” Remus said.

“And were you aware that as a Prefect, you are required to put a stop to any disorderly conduct or behavior?”

Remus’s face went hot with shame, and fear shot through him.

“Snape’s a Prefect too, though,” James said in Remus’s defense. “If Snape wasn’t stopping it, how could Remus be expected to?”

“Mr. Snape is not under my jurisdiction,” McGonagall said. “Mr. Lupin inarguably is. But, Mr. Lupin, because it is your first and hopefully only offense, I will forgive it.”

Remus allowed his shoulders to slump, only slightly, in relief.

“I will speak to Professor Slughorn and Professor Dumbledore about this,” she said. “But for now, I hope that you will let the issue rest.”

“What if they kill people?” Peter asked in a very small voice. McGonagall’s piercing eyes trained only on him, and her expression softened a bit.

“I highly doubt that such a thing is possible with our increased security measures,” McGonagall said.
“It was possible with Belinda Jody,” Sirius said.
McGonagall’s eyes narrowed. “Miss Jody’s death was unfortunate.”
“No one ever caught Rosier, though, right? He’s still on the run,” James persisted. “How d’you
know more people won’t follow in his footsteps?”
“Enough,” McGonagall said curtly. “This issue will be discussed at length, and I promise you, if I
find any truth in it, I will not rest until Hogwarts is safe once more.”
James nodded, his mouth held in a stiff line. “Fine,” he said.
“Mr. Potter?” she said as he followed the others out the door.
“What?”
She ignored his rudeness. “Despite what you may think, you and your friends are not single-
handledly responsible for saving the Wizarding World.”
Of course, James thought. She’s seen my O.W.L courses, she knows what I’m planning to do.
“Right, Professor,” he said stiffly, and closed the door behind him.

Remus had to patrol the hallways with Mary that evening, and he remarked right away that she was
looking very pale, more so even than he was, so close to the full moon. “Say, Mary, are you alright?” he asked.
She’d slipped off into daydreams, staring at paintings on the wall. Her face was very still, and she
barely seemed to breathe or blink. “What? Oh, yes, fine, thanks,” she said quickly.
“You seem a bit…distracted,” Remus told her as a group of giggling Hufflepuffs walked by.
“Oh?” Mary asked. Her blue eyes were darting back and forth; this, more than anything else, gave
her away.
“You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong, Mary,” Remus said, his voice so full of caring that she
wanted to cry. “But you really ought to tell someone. Don’t you think Lily, or Marlene, or —“
“No,” Mary snapped. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m tired, that’s all. Captain Wanker —” this had to be
James, and the new nickname made Remus laugh, “— is working the entire team to death.”
This, Remus could believe. James was never as invested in anything as he was in Quidditch. “I’ll tell
him to go easier on you,” Remus said.
This, apparently, had been the wrong choice of words. “No, don’t,” Mary said, her voice so harsh
and raw it barely sounded like her anymore. “It’s fine. Y’know, O.W.L.s and things, on top of
Quidditch…”
“I know,” Remus said, although he was sure that wasn’t it. “Really, Mary, if you need anything, you
can always ask me.”
For a moment she contemplated telling him, but telling one Marauder something meant telling all of
them, and while she knew Remus would take her secret and lock it away, never acting on any
righteous anger it might cause him, she couldn’t trust James and Sirius to do the same.
As it happened, Gillian Hartly was making her way down the corridor at that moment. She smiled
pleasantly at Remus, and less so at Mary. “Hullo, Remus. Have you seen James?”
“No, I haven’t,” Remus said. “I think he’s outside smoking.”
He had no idea, but this was usually a fair assumption.
“Right,” Gillian said with a little smile. “See you.”
The two of them watched her walk away.
“You hate her, don’t you?” Mary asked.
Remus grinned — one side of his mouth first, then the other, like he wasn’t used to smiling yet. Even
after so many years with the Marauders, he thought he might never get used to being happy. “I don’t
hate her,” he said, somewhat unconvincingly.
Mary smiled slightly. Her eyes were so hollow that watching her smile was like watching something
die. “Sometimes I think Potter might.”
Remus chuckled. “James just doesn’t know what to say around her. Neither does anyone, she’s
so…”
Mary nodded. Gillian had a way of filling up a room, and not the same way James did. It was more
garish and obvious, with her. She drew attention on purpose, because she liked to, because she
wanted to; this was the difference, and the very reason why all James and Gillian ever did was kiss.
“Loud,” Mary said. The word meant something more when she said it. It sounded more like, “help.”
Remus nodded, glancing over at the clock on the wall by the staircase. “I’ll see you around,” he said.
“I’ve got to go.”
“Remus,” Mary said as he walked away. “Remus, if something were to happen to me, I need you to
make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to Lily, alright?”
Questions flashed in his eyes as she waited for the answer. It seemed, for a second, that he might ask
her for an explanation. “Alright,” Remus said. He looked so worried, it was difficult to stand there
and pretend everything was going to be fine. “I promise. Mary, why…?” He waited, gathering his
thoughts. “Why would something happen to you?”
“I’ve been asking the same question,” Mary said grimly.

“Happy Christmas,” Peter said to Madam Pince as she left the library for the night on the last day
before the winter holidays. She looked at him suspiciously.
“Library’s closed,” she said stiffly. Her shoes clicked on the floors as she stalked past him, robes
weeping out behind her.
Peter wiped sweat off his forehead. “Merlin,” he said, sinking against the wall. “That was close.”
“Sh... She didn’t notice anything,” Remus said. “Relax.”
“Remind me again why we’re listening to him?” James said.
Sirius arched a single eyebrow.
“Because I come up with pranks that are actually harmless, and don’t kill people,” Remus answered.
“Which is why we never listen to you,” Sirius said. “If there’s no danger, it’s boring.”
“Oi,” Remus said. “This is dangerous. See, I’m walking into the library after Madam Pince has left,
which is directly against the rules. And what I plan to do in the library is also strictly prohibited, and
as a Prefect —“
“What did we say about using that word?” James asked.
“Prefect?”
James waited.
“That it has no place in civilized conversation?” Remus said resignedly.
The satisfied grin on James’ face told him he’d guessed correctly.
“Right, anyway, I’m breaking rules —“
“Arbitrary rules,” Sirius said, pointing his wand at the lock on the library door.
Remus rolled his eyes and led the others into the library.
“Padfoot, if you’re really going to go back to your family for Christmas, I think I speak for all of us
when I say we’ll be bored to death.”
“I really am,” Sirius replied.
This was a bad idea, and Sirius was known for his bad ideas.
Remus pointed his wand at a bookshelf and watched all the books fly off the shelves, rearranging.
He grinned — he was most wonderful like this, golden eyes full of mischief, a smile on his face,
wand in hand, surrounded by the three people he loved most in the world.
“I see it now,” James said, satisfied. “How Madam Pince is going to drop dead when she realizes
what we’ve done.”
“Did you ever doubt me?” Remus asked.
“Slightly,” Sirius replied. “Only for a moment, though.”
“Never,” Peter said.
“Right,” Remus examined his work. “Perfect.”
“Not quite,” James frowned at the Marauder’s Map in his hand. “Slughorn in the corridor.”
“Damn it. Nox,” Sirius said, and his wand was extinguished, leaving them in the dark.
“Hello?” Slughorn said, peering through the doorway. “Is anyone there? Mr. Filch? Peeves?”
“As if Peeves would go into the library,” James rolled his eyes.
“I’ll bet Peeves is afraid of books,” Sirius said. “That’d explain why he never goes anywhere near
Evans. Because she’s always reading.”
“Is she?” James asked distractedly.
“Oh, I dunno, you’re the one who claims to have been in love with her for the past three years, you’d think you’d notice how many times she walks into walls because she forgets to look up from her books.”
“She does?” James asked; somehow he found this fact so endearing that he forgot that he was meant to be forgetting about her. “That’s adorable.”
“You fancy her. Again!” Peter said wondrously.
“What are you, a first year?” James demanded. “Relax.”
“You’re the one who just used the word ‘adorable’ to describe a girl who is most definitely not your girlfriend,” Remus said with a grin.
“You’re both impossible,” James sighed. “Slughorn’s gone. Let’s go.”
“What was he doing in the corridor this late?” Remus asked.
“Clipping his toenails,” Sirius replied. “I don’t care. Plotting the deaths of everyone in the castle. Sneaking off for a midnight rendezvous with his lover, the great wizard Albus Dumbledore.”
“Padfoot,” James said. “Really. If Slughorn’s secretly meeting anyone in the middle of the night, it’s obviously Jefferson.”
“Defense teacher?” Sirius asked, as if he didn’t know. “Why?”
“Because he’s got a fantastic mustache, like Slughorn. Great mustaches are drawn together,” James said sagely.
Sirius burst out laughing, not really caring if anyone heard. The term was over, he was going home, it was alright, it was all going to be alright.
He packed his trunk later that night, carefully wrapping the two-way mirror.
“I don’t think you should leave,” Peter said gently behind him. Peter had a way of showing up without anyone noticing; it wasn’t so much that he wasn’t wanted, more that he was quiet about his presence. “Wouldn’t you be better off here?”
“Too late,” Sirius said bluntly, shoving clothes into his trunk. “Letter sent. Trunk packed. Train ticket purchased. Going home.” He savagely slammed the trunk shut, which shook the entire bed.
“Hogwarts is your home,” Peter said softly.
“It might be yours,” Sirius said. “But it isn’t mine.”
“Why are you doing this?”
“Why do you ask so many stupid questions?” Sirius asked, knowing this would keep Peter quiet for at least another minute.
Unusually, Peter was not at all deterred by Sirius’s rudeness. “It’s because Regulus is going to be a Death Eater, isn’t it?”
“Did I say anything?” Sirius asked. “I don’t recall speaking.”
“You don’t have to — “
“No, I don’t,” Sirius said. “I want to.”
Peter crept away. He’d never felt more like a rat when he wasn’t one; unwanted and small and useless. He crawled into bed and buried himself under blankets.
Sirius stood up and walked out of the room, unable to bear it any longer, the suffocating closeness of being friends with them, of them knowing how he felt better than he did. Being loved so much felt like drowning, and he couldn’t stand it anymore. He stepped out into the wintery cold of the corridor, standing in the dark, and began to walk.
He walked up a staircase and down a corridor, running his hands along the stone walls. Somewhere along the line, he thought he might have gotten lost, might have forgotten where he was. He had never felt less alive in his life, and he thought this must be what it was like to be a ghost.
He sunk to the floor against a wall and sat, thinking that being drunk might’ve been better than thinking, and dying might be better than being alive.
“I always feel like this,” he whispered to the sleeping castle, the shifting lights and shadows. “When I think about going back to them. But I still go back, because sometimes it’s different.”
There was a soft creaking of a doorway, the howl of the wind outside.
“What if it is?” Sirius asked. “I know I can get him to hear me, I swear I can, and if I can’t…” he ran a hand through his hair, letting pieces of it fall back over his face.
He stood and walked back, struck by how little he really wanted to go back, how little he wanted to see the others, how much he wanted to…
He closed his eyes. *I promised, I promised, I promised.*
As he turned a corner to see the familiar white tile of the bathroom, he saw a little orange flame emerge in the darkness. “Want a cigarette?”
“James,” Sirius breathed, his shoulders slumping. He was struck by the ridiculousness of it all, standing in the corridor in the middle of the night, in front of someone who knew him better than anyone else, already prepared to lie.
James blew smoke in Sirius’s direction. “Well?”
Sirius accepted one and lit it with the end of his wand. His hand was shaking.
“Wanna explain?” James asked. “Or are we just going to stand here smoking?”
“Second one,” Sirius replied.
“Padfoot,” James arched an eyebrow. “Really.”
“Really,” Sirius let out another puff of smoke (he looked inhuman like this, and yet more himself than he’d looked in forever.) His dark eyes were lit the orange red of the embers, and his smile was a crooked slash in his face.
“You don’t have to go back. We won’t let you get on the train.” James said.
“I want to,” Sirius said. “I have to make sure Regulus won’t…listen, my entire family’s coming for Christmas, I’m just…”
“Taking precautions,” James guessed.
“Something like that,” Sirius said. The problem was this: he wasn’t afraid. Not at all. “Nice of you to be concerned, though.”
James snorted, then coughed.
“You’re not very well suited to the rebel life, are you, Prongs?” Sirius asked.
“No better than you.”
“Cheers to that,” Sirius raised his cigarette in the air like one would raise a glass of champagne. His eyes were half closed in exhaustion.
“For the love of Merlin,” James said. “If I have to carry you back to the dormitory, I’ll never forgive you.”
“Right,” Sirius yawned. “Going.”

“Going home for Christmas, Evans?” Sirius asked as he boarded the Hogwarts express, conspicuously alone. James had snuck in one of the carriages under the invisibility cloak, and was now sticking his tongue out at Sirius.
“Yes. Surprised to see you are,” Lily said, linked arm in arm with Marlene, who was flirting incessantly with Charlie Boylers, twirling a strand of pitch black hair around her finger.
“Yeah, well,” Sirius said with his trademark lazy smirk.
“Sirius,” Regulus said. “Want to sit with us?”
Sirius glanced at the people in Regulus’s compartment: Demetrius Avery, Rabastan Lestrange, and Jefferson Wilkes. “Thanks,” Sirius said bluntly. “But I’d literally rather snog Slughorn than go anywhere near the lot of you.”
“Right,” Regulus said, looking crestfallen. “Right, see you at home, then.”
“Fine,” Sirius turned and sat in an empty compartment, looking extremely dangerous and handsome. A few girls stood outside the door like they were thinking about talking to him, but something about his posture suggested that anyone who dared to enter the compartment would find themselves hanging upside down from the ceiling.
“Oi, Black,” Arnold said, in blatant violation of the rules Sirius had silently established. “Quidditch team’s sitting in the fourth compartment, wanna join us?”
“Whatever,” Sirius said.
“Black,” Sebastian said. “Are you really going home for Christmas?”
“I’m on the train, aren’t I?” Sirius asked with an eyebrow raised.
“No, it’s just….surprising, considering…”
“Considering what?”
“Can we talk about Potter?” Felicia interrupted.
“If you say you’ve fallen in bloody love with him, I’ll push you out the train window,” Sirius warned her.
“Who said anything about love?” Felicia demanded. She had white blonde hair pulled back from her face, and was probably about half Sirius’s height, but she had a way of making herself appear taller.
“If he keeps letting practice run late so we miss breakfast, he’ll be lucky if I speak to him ever again.”
“I’ll talk to him,” Sirius said dryly. “But I wouldn’t hold your breath. He wants us to win.”
“So do I, but you don’t see me forgetting to change out of my Quidditch robes one practice to the next,” Arnold said.

It was a commonly known fact that James cared about very little save for Quidditch, so Sirius only shrugged.
“I think it’d be easier to practice if his girlfriend wasn’t always watching us and shrieking.” Cail made a face. “Does she have to be so bloody loud?”
“Oh, Hartly’s the witch equivalent of a bucket of blast-ended screwts,” Sirius said. “Really, she never shuts up, and she’s got the worst temper of anyone I’ve ever met. I don’t know what he sees in her.”
“I think it’s more what he sees on her,” Arnold said sardonically.
Sirius burst out laughing. “The very idea that you would…suggest James could be so shallow as to — yeah, alright, that’s definitely it.”
“You haven’t got a girlfriend, have you, Sirius?” Sebastian asked.
“Nah,” Sirius said casually, leaning against the compartment door. A girl standing in the corridor behind him was very obviously trying to eavesdrop.
“I heard you’re dating Remus Lupin,” Felicia said, with an annoyed look at the eavesdroppers.
“You heard correctly,” Sirius said, oblivious to what was going on just behind his head.
“Really?” Felicia asked. “You are?”
“Merlin, don’t act as if I told you I kill people for sport.”
“I’m not, I’m not,” Felicia said. “I just…you and Lupin, really? I just don’t see you two together.”
“Yet, luckily for me, whether or not you see us together has absolutely no affect on our relationship.” Sirius said. “Are we going to talk about something other than my quite plainly uninteresting love life?”
“Actually, Black, I have a question,” Arnold said.
Sirius narrowed his eyes. “I recommend you choose your next words carefully. Just because you’re on the Quidditch team doesn’t mean I won’t hex you.”
“No, actually, I was about to ask about Evans.”
“Evans?” Sirius asked. “Lily Evans?”
Arnold nodded earnestly. “D’you think she’d go out with me?”
Sirius looked at Lily, sitting with Marlene in her compartment and laughing. She had changed into Muggle clothes, unlike Sirius, and the sleeves of her pink sweater were pulled down over her wrists. Sirius thought of James and shook his head. “Nah, don’t think so. Sorry, mate.”
“Y’know pretty much every bloke is interested in Lily, right?” Felicia asked. “Her, or Marlene.”
“Not every bloke. Everyone knows it’s Cindy Birdburrow you’ve got to watch out for,” Sebastian said.
“Really?” Arnold asked. He pushed his curly hair off his forehead, glancing across the corridor where Cindy sat, reading a book. Her brown hair curled around her face, and something about this made Arnold’s eyes soften. “Yeah,” he said. “I see it.”

As Sirius Black stepped off the train at King’s Cross Station, the wintry air blowing in as a train passed, he caught sight of his parents standing there.
“Sirius,” Walburga said, clamping a hand onto his shoulder. “How wonderful to see you, dear. And
Regulus,” she smiled and embraced her younger son. “You look so very well. Come along, Sirius, let’s let your brother tell us about school.”
“I go to school too, y’know,” Sirius muttered.
“What was that?” she asked.
“Nothing,” Sirius buried his hands in his pockets and loped along a considerable distance behind them, a picture of forced casualness.
“Oh, hurry up, Sirius,” Walburga said quickly.
She grabbed each of her sons by the shoulder, and with a swirl of light and color, they were gone. This was hardly Sirius’s first experience with side-along Apparition, and by now it barely made him dizzy. It was disorienting, though, to blink one moment and be at the train station, and at the next moment be in front of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. It was like something out of one of Sirius’s nightmares, the stormy grey of the sky, the way the house rose from the street, his mother’s hand on his shoulder — and worst of all, Regulus’s face, cold and impassive.
“Mistress has returned,” Kreacher said as he opened the door, groveling by her feet. “Accompanied by Master Regulus.”
“Hello, Kreacher,” Regulus said fondly.
“And…” Kreacher sniffed disdainfully. “Master Sirius. Mistress is so gracious to allow you to cross the threshold of this home.”
“Horrible to see you, as per usual,” Sirius said, pushing past the house elf.
“Ah, boys,” Orion said from the chair, not looking at his sons as they entered the room. He was reading the Daily Prophet, his face crinkled in a frown. ”Good to see you.”
This was the Black family equivalent of admitting his affection for his sons, so both Sirius and Regulus smiled.
"Your cousins Bellatrix and Narcissa are coming to stay with us tomorrow. Bellatrix is going to announce her engagement." Walburga said.
Sirius nodded. “Right. I’ll be upstairs, then.”
“Don’t you want to hear who she’s getting married to?”
“Not in the slightest.”
Sirius walked up the staircase just as James’ voice echoed from the mirror in his pocket.
“I imagine you already miss me to death,” James said. “Can’t blame you.”
Sirius flopped onto his bed and threw an arm across his face. “This entire bloody house gives me a headache, Prongs.”
“You’ve been there five minutes,” James said.
“Your point?”
James smirked. “Hogwarts is dead quiet this year. Almost everyone went home.”
“Did Hartly?”
“You mean Gillian?” James asked. “Nah, she’s here.”
“Hi, Sirius,” Gillian yelled across the room at the mirror.
“I practically heard Moony roll his eyes just then,” Sirius said. “Has she been in your dormitory all day?”
“She won’t leave,” James said in a stage whisper.
“Shut up,” Gillian said, planting a very red kiss on James’ cheek. “He asked me here, I’ll have you know,” she told the mirror.
Sirius raised his eyebrows. “Did he? That seems like a stupid idea. You never invite a Dementor into your home.”
“Gillian’s not a Dementor,” James defended her.
“Sucks all the joy from everywhere she goes, kisses your soul out…” said Sirius.
James sighed. “Are we done having this conversation?”
“Sure,” Sirius said. “Are you done seeing her?”
“Sod off,” James said, not without a degree of laughter in his voice.
“Master Sirius is wanted for dinner,” Kreacher said.
“Blimey, Kreacher, don’t you know how to knock?” Sirius asked.
“Kreacher apologizes,” Kreacher said, backing out of the doorway. “Filthy blood traitor, shame of my mistres’s family…” he muttered.

“Heard that,” Sirius called after him. “Er, Prongs, I’ve got to go.”

“Right,” James said. “Listen, Sirius, if you need me to —”

“I’m fine,” Sirius said quickly. “Everything’s fine.” He dropped the mirror face down on his bed and walked, straight-backed, fists clenched, down the stairs.

“Sirius,” Orion said. “Your cousin Bellatrix is here.”


Bellatrix waved, curling each finger one at a time. Her nails were painted black and filed to points, like claws. “Hello, my darling cousin,” she said, standing to pull Sirius into an uncomfortable embrace. She smelled like snake venom and dead flowers. “And Regulus!” this was said with significantly more excitement; Regulus had always been her favorite cousin. “How nice to see you, darling. I thought I’d pop in early before Cissy and Lucius get here, not to mention Rodolphus.”

“Rodolphus Lestrange?” Sirius asked.

“Yes, we’re engaged,” Bellatrix’s thin arm snaked across the table as she showed the family her ring. It sparkled on her finger, sharp and deadly looking. If she were to hit someone, it would leave a scar.

“His brother’s in your year, Sirius, do you know each other?”

“We don’t really…er…get along,” Sirius said, his mouth curling in distaste at the thought that he was going to be related to the same person who’d once hexed a crying Muggle-born and stolen her voice for half the year. She’d had to write on a chalkboard; the spell had been so powerful that none of the teachers could reverse it. Of course, Rabastan had never been caught, but the entire affair had reeked of Lestrange.

“He’s my friend,” Regulus said.

“Oh, how nice. You both know Rodolphus though, he was in seventh year when Sirius was in second and Regulus was in first, don’t you remember?”

“Vaguely,” Sirius said. “Didn’t he call me a filthy blood traitor and try to hex my tie green — with surprisingly mediocre results?”

Bellatrix paled. “Well, er…I suppose you must be thinking of someone else.”

“No, I’m quite certain it was him, and you were there as well,” Sirius said.

“Regulus stared at him defiantly. “You must be misremembering.” She folded her hands over the table. “I see you haven’t been made a prefect this year.”

“No,” Sirius said. “Reckon the fact that I’ve received about fifty detentions in five years has something to do with that.”

Bellatrix sniffed. “Regulus, what about you? Do you think you’ll be a prefect?”

“I certainly hope so,” Regulus said.

“Sirius, you haven’t congratulated your brother,” Walburga said, smiling at Regulus. Her entire face was different when she smiled; all the cold planes and angles rearranged into some semblance of warmth.

“Haven’t I?” Sirius asked dully. He sat, glaring across the table at Regulus.

“He’s top of his year in Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, isn’t that wonderful?”


Regulus smiled at his parents and Bellatrix. “Sirius is top of his year at loads of things, you know,” he said.

“Yes, but we aren’t talking about Sirius right now, dear,” Walburga said. Her voice was so gentle when she spoke to Regulus that Sirius might not have recognized it.

“Regulus, why don’t you tell us about Quidditch?” Bellatrix asked.

“James is Quidditch captain for Gryffindor,” Sirius said before his brother could answer. “He’s working us all half to death.”

“Be quiet, Sirius, your brother’s talking,” Orion said.

Sirius leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. This was a new development in their relationship, this so obviously forced disinterest in everything he had to say.

“Er, well, Quidditch is great,” Regulus said. “Almost all my friends are on the team. We lost to
Gryffindor last year, but this year I think we’ve got a chance.”
“Ha,” Sirius said dryly, picking at the steak on his plate. “You wish.”
“Been going to practices lately, Sirius?” Regulus asked. “Because I’ve been watching, and your
Seeker’s technique is abysmal.”
“Interesting word choice, Regulus, but I’d think you might be better off directing your attention
towards catching the Snitch.”
“Boys, don’t bicker at the dinner table,” Walburga chastised, and Sirius almost laughed. How
ridiculous it was to be worrying about his brother trying to prove himself to the Death Eaters and
being scolded for arguing. “It isn’t polite.”
Sirius held his tongue, for once, but silently seethed at his parents.
“So, Mum, Dad, I wanted to tell you I’ve got a girlfriend,” Regulus said.
“How’s her blood?” Orion asked. He asked it as casually as if he was asking her name, but clearly
this was the only matter he cared about.
“Pureblood,” Regulus said. “Emma Vanity. She’s Quidditch captain.”
“She’s two years older than you,” Sirius said.
“Well, your boyfriend’s not even pureblood, so I hardly think —“ Regulus’s silvery eyes went very
wide.
“What’s this about a boyfriend, Sirius?” Bellatrix asked, as if they were old friends. “Do tell.”
“Right, well, I didn’t particularly want to have this conversation,” Sirius said. “But yes, I’ve got a
boyfriend, his name is Remus Lupin.”
“Lupin?” Orion spluttered. “Son of Lyall Lupin?”
“That’s him,” Sirius said, his eyes dark. He braced his feet against the floor, ready to spring from his
chair and run. He felt a black dog stirring within him, the desire to run and keep running, but he
swallowed it and smiled.
“He’s half-blood, then,” Walburga said. “Sirius, you have to watch your associations with people,
this could affect your father’s work…”
“If only I gave a rat’s arse,” Sirius said unforgivingly. “Unfortunately, I don’t.”
Bellatrix smirked; her mouth was like a snake, wide, uncurling, ready to strike. “On the contrary,
Aunt Walburga, I think it’s wonderful. It’s always nice to let people experience life with the lesser
wizards. All I see here is a bit of healthy rebellion.”
“I wouldn’t call it that, Bella,” Orion said. “You may not be aware that Sirius has been actively
rejecting his blood status for years now.”
“I know I’m a pureblood, Dad, I’m not denying that. I just don’t approve of the way you think of
things.” Sirius said, trying to remain calm.
“I think we should have dessert,” Bellatrix said, in a half-hearted attempt to change the subject.
“Sirius, why don’t you come help me serve the Treacle Tart?”
“Oh, Bella, Kreacher will do that,” Walburga said.
“I don’t want house elf hands touching my food,” Bellatrix said, with a blood-curdling glare at
Kreacher. “Come along, Sirius.”
Sirius followed her into the kitchen, and as the door closed behind her.
“I didn’t want to make a scene in front of your parents,” Bellatrix said. “But you’re dating a Muggle,
aren’t you?”
“He’s a wizard, Bellatrix, he goes to Hogwarts,” Sirius snapped, shoveling Treacle Tart out of a pan
and onto plates.
Bellatrix scoffed.
“He’s third in our year,” Sirius said.
One perfectly arched eyebrow twitched. “So, you’re into blokes, I take it. Mudblood blokes. As if
you weren’t enough of a disgrace.”
“I’m not a disgrace!” Sirius hissed between clenched teeth.
She grabbed his arm, sharp nails digging into his skin. “Everyone’s heard how you won’t join the
Dark Lord. It’s disgusting, Sirius, and I want to know why you’re betraying your family like this. Is
it Lupin? Pettigrew? Potter?”
“It’s not because of any of them,” Sirius replied. “It’s because of me. If you’ll excuse me.” He pushed past her and back into the dining room. “Treacle Tart’s ready.”

Bellatrix levitated the plates over to the table and sat, now looking at Sirius with open contempt. She took an enormous bite of Treacle Tart and glared at him as she chewed. Sirius retaliated with a cold stare.

“So, Bellatrix, when’s the wedding?” Regulus asked.

“September,” Bellatrix said, her face twisting into a grin. Her smile was vicious and horrible, the sort that would look better with blood dripping from it. “We’re getting married in the mountains. We’ll release the invitations next month.”

“How lovely,” Walburga said with an equally awful smile. Bellatrix and her aunt shared no blood, but they shared this: a smile so cruel and terrible that it hurt to look at.

“I’m tired,” Sirius said abruptly. “See you all in the morning.”

He stormed upstairs, not to his own room, but to Regulus’s. On the door, it read, “R.A.B.” Sirius, without a second thought, stepped in.

On Regulus’s desk was a letter, crinkled and tattered at the edges. Sirius noticed, grimly, that Regulus had the same habit of tearing paper that he did.

Reg —

_I hope you’re reconsidering. I heard from Malfoy and he said the Dark Lord is very interested in having us as recruits once we’re of age, but we have to prove we’re loyal to him by the end of the year. Don’t let one mistake ruin your future, Reg. Make the right choice._

_Cheers,_

_Mulciber_

“Cheers?” Sirius asked the paper with raised eyebrows. Mulciber’s handwriting very much reflected his personality; it was all sharp edges and big letters.

“What are you doing in here?” Regulus asked. He had opened and closed the door behind him without Sirius hearing, and something about this silent act struck Sirius as unnerving.

“Reading,” Sirius said, holding up the letter. “The Dark Lord, then?”

“You had no right to —”

“Actually, I did, seeing as I’m your brother and, like Mulciber said, you’re ruining your future.”

“That’s not what he was —“

“I know,” Sirius snapped. He locked the door and leaned his back against it. “I know who you hang around with, and I don’t want you doing the sort of thing they do.”

“Yeah, alright, fine,” Regulus said. His silver eyes were full of shadows and fury. “Fine, alright, you want to know what I think?”

“Not really, but I have a feeling you’re going to tell me anyway,” Sirius replied.

“I think you don’t know anything about me,” Regulus began fiercely. His hair was much shorter than Sirius’s, but it had fallen over his eyes, and he blew it away from his face with a single hissing breath. “I think you’re being selfish acting like we’re not your family, I think you’re a bloody hypocrite for telling me I can’t do what I want when that’s all you ever do.”

“Is that all?” Sirius asked dryly.

“Yeah, think so,” Regulus snapped. “Oh, one more thing, I think you’re only dating Lupin to piss off Mum and Dad, and I think you’re upset that they hardly even care!”

Sirius’s eyes narrowed.

“And you know why they don’t care, Sirius — it’s not because they don’t care about you, it’s because they know you’re just trying to prove you’re not like them, but all this shit you’re doing only proves that you are! You’re just like Mum, Sirius, you’re manipulative and you don’t care about anyone but yourself and the people you think are your family.”

“I’m nothing like that hag,” Sirius spat; his trembling hands were clenched into fists.

Regulus laughed in Sirius’s face. Something in his expression had closed off. “No, you’re right, you’re worse. At least Mum never questioned her responsibility to her family.”

“Responsibility to —“
“Yeah, responsibility. Not that you’d know anything about that, because you’re hardly ever around.”
“I’m not wanted here,” Sirius said.
“You’ve made it that way. You’ve got no one to blame for this but yourself, and all the time I’ve spent feeling sorry for you is time I’m never getting back. You know why?”
Sirius didn’t answer.
Regulus leaned close to Sirius’s face, meeting his brother’s eyes. “Because you deserved it.”
Sirius could bear it no longer; he swung his fist back and punched Regulus in the face.
On Christmas Eve in 1975, Sirius Black was at home, surrounded by his cousins. His mother was glowering at him, her hand on Regulus's shoulder, which she hadn't let go of since she'd seen the spectacular black eye Sirius had given him.

Sirius was making faces at James through the two way mirror, and James was doing a very convincing interpretation of Lucius Malfoy’s haughty glare. Lucius, Narcissa’s boyfriend, was standing behind Sirius and telling the story of the Muggle-borns he’d taken to the Ministry because their blood status had been unregistered, and appeared not to notice.

“Regulus, my darling, your eye is looking much better,” Walburga said, patting her son’s cheek. The purple bruise on Regulus’s eye where Sirius had hit him was beginning to turn a mottled yellow, and Sirius wasn’t sure if “better” was the term he would’ve used to describe it.

Regulus smiled at his mother, but his eyes were fixed on Sirius.

Sirius acted the part of the perfect son; he smiled at his cousins and laughed at their jokes, he sang Christmas carols with Regulus like they had when they were children, and the entire time all he could imagine was burning this house to the ground, watching all those unhappy memories go up in flames.

On Christmas Eve in 1975, James Potter was at Hogwarts. The curtains were drawn around his bed, and Gillian lay with her head on his bare chest. Her chestnut brown hair was splayed around her face, and she was wrapped in nothing but a bedsheet, her eyes closed peacefully, pitch black lashes casting long shadows on her slightly flushed cheeks. She was lovely, no doubt about that, despite her unfortunately large, hooked nose, and the fact that her personality had all the depth of a shallow puddle. However, James did think, even if he wasn't quite aware of it, that she was beautiful.

But as she woke, James looked at her and realized something awful.

“I don’t love her.”

Gillian Hartly looked at James Potter and realized something wonderful.

“I love him.”

The problem with these sorts of situations was that someone always ended up hurt, and James feared that this time he would be the one who had to break her heart.

On Christmas Eve in 1975, Peter Pettigrew was standing alone. The last hour of his life replayed through his mind, and he sank to the ground, shaking.

“Peter,” Mary said. She stood in the doorway of that abandoned girl’s bathroom, where Peter had found Sirius many months before. The bloodstains were gone from the floor now, but Peter could still see them every time he closed his eyes, even after all this time. “Oi, you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m great,” Peter said. He felt sick and dizzy and broken, wrong. “I’m fine, I just…” to his own horror, he began to cry, warm tears spilling down his face.

“Don’t cry,” Mary said, her voice somewhat stilted. She felt as if she was watching her own life from the outside, watching someone comfort someone else. They were strangers; she was a stranger in own body.

“S-s-sorry,” Peter whimpered.

“Don’t apologize, either. It’s almost Christmas, you shouldn’t be sad,” she sat next to him, quietly, and stretched her legs out. The tips of her shiny black shoes almost brushed the drain inset in the floor.

“S-s-sorry,” Peter repeated, covering his face with his hands.

“It was Snape, wasn’t it?” Mary asked. “What did he do?”

Peter looked at her with bloodshot eyes and nodded. He couldn't stop himself from remembering it all, and it flashed through his mind before he could stop it.

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“Oi, look who it is,” Mulciber’s growl of a voice echoed as Peter rounded the corner.
“Pettigrew,” Snape said coldly. “Where’s Potter?”
“None of your business,” Peter squeaked.
“Probably off somewhere, being the mudblood lover he is,” Mulciber said, then laughed as if this had been exceptionally clever.
“What about Lupin, then? Or is he ill? Shame, that. He’s sick so often…actually, the lot of you are, now. Whatever he’s got, I hope it’s contagious,” Severus said coldly.
“He’s got a meeting with Dumbledore, actually,” Peter said, attempting to edge around the two of them, who were blocking the corridor.
“Pity,” Mulciber said.
Peter wished he was anyone else — James might’ve said something clever, and Sirius might have hexed both of them, and Remus might have been diplomatic enough to talk them out of whatever it was they planned to do.
“Leave me alone,” Peter said bravely.
Severus laughed, and one arm shot out, shoving Peter to the ground.
“’C’mon,” Peter said, drawing his wand.
“Expelliarmus,” Severus said, and Peter’s wand flew out of his hand.
Peter scrambled to his feet.
“ Aren’t you going to ask us not to do this?” Severus asked unfeelingly, with a slight smirk.
“No,” Peter said clearly, glaring at both of them. This was the bravest he’d felt in his life, and he felt a flickering moment of pride before Mulciber’s hand clamped over his mouth and Severus said, “Crucio.”
Peter wasn’t even aware of the pain until he’d already sunk to his knees. It was the sort of agony you couldn’t think about, it was just blinding and not being aware of anything.
“STOP!” Peter screamed, writhing on the ground. “PLEASE, STOP, PLEASE!” His voice was ripped from his throat. “PLEASE!” he screamed again, but it was as if they couldn’t hear him. Their impassive faces swam above him. “WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?”
“Are you happy now, Mulciber?” Snape asked; his voice sounded like it was coming from very far away.
“Very,” Mulciber said with a grim smile. “You’re one of us, now, Severus.”
Severus nodded and watched Peter for a few more moments.
“PLEASE!” Peter sobbed. “WHY?”
No answer came, and when it was over, and they were gone, he lay in the empty hallway sobbing. He transformed into a rat so no one would see him, scurrying down the corridors. His heart was beating so fast he could hear it in his ears.
When he reached the abandoned girls’ bathroom, he transformed back. Being a rat was usually somewhat calming, but it had only made him feel smaller, and he already felt so small, powerless.
“He used the Crucius Curse on you?” Mary asked, gently touching his arm. “Why?”
“I dunno, probably…” Peter’s face crumpled. “Probably because of James and Sirius.”
“I’ll get James.”
“I’m not telling him,” Peter said, getting to his feet. He turned one of the taps and splashed cold water onto his face. Mary stood behind him, a hand on his shoulder, and her sleeve fell back slightly, revealing the words scarred all over her arm. Peter’s eyes went round.
“Oh my Merlin, Mary,” he said. “Did…”
“Mulciber,” Mary answered, tears shining in her eyes.
Peter looked at her. “Why?”
“I don’t know,” Mary said softly.
Peter leaned in and kissed her, because there was really nothing else to do -- wasn’t this what people were supposed to do? It seemed like it must have been.
Her lips were soft and somewhat cold when she kissed him back, and her hand was clenched in the fabric of his sweater.
Both were crying, tears mixing together on their faces. It was not at all romantic and was extremely
On Christmas Eve in 1975, Remus Lupin sat across from Dumbledore and listened to an extremely long monologue about the opportunities for werewolves in the changing wizarding society.

“You see, Remus, there are many options you can —“

“Sorry, Professor,” Remus interrupted. “Er, you can stop there. I’m not going to pretend, I know that it’s hopeless.”

“No, my dear boy, it —“ Dumbledore began calmly, pity briefly apparent in his lined face.

“Everyone thinks that werewolves are for You-Know-Who, sir. No one’s going to hire me, especially not now. I won’t delude myself into thinking I have any real opportunities.” Remus said, as if it was a fact, and it was. He’d long ago accepted that he would always have to try much harder than anyone else to get half as much credit, and that he’d be lucky if he ever found a job at all.

Dumbledore’s eyes softened behind his half-moon spectacles. “You will always be welcome at Hogwarts, Remus. There may even be a job here for you in the future.”

“I won’t hold you to that, Professor,” Remus said. “I don’t want you to put your job on the line for me —“

“The very fact that you are sitting here in my office is a product of the fact that I put my job on the line for you,” Dumbledore said kindly. “Later this year, Professor McGonagall will talk to you all about your future careers, and I just want you to have a bit more time to consider it.”

“Consider what, sir?”

“I won’t lie to you, Remus, it isn’t going to be easy. But you’re a prefect, your grades are exemplary, and your magical talent is exceptional.”

Remus must have looked confused, because Dumbledore continued.

“What I’m saying is,” he said, standing and crossing the room to the birdcage where a magnificent phoenix perched. “Don’t give up hope.”

“I won’t. Thank you, Sir.”

“Happy Christmas, Remus.”

“Happy Christmas, Professor.”

On Christmas Eve in 1975, Lily Evans was at home in England, sitting on the couch watching Muggle television and eating popcorn. The news was on, and someone was talking about the deaths of seven Muggles in a 'freak train accident.' Lily did not mention that it had been death eaters, because it seemed the sort of thing her family was better off not knowing. Petunia was curled up on the couch next to her, blonde hair done up in curlers around her face and wearing a floral bathrobe. She was staring expectantly at the phone as if waiting for it to ring, but it never did.

Her mother was asleep in the other room, and her father had fallen asleep in a chair, the newspaper folded over his lap. Over the last few months, the lines in his face had grown deeper, and the red in his hair had given way to grey. This made Lily feel less connected to him, somehow.

She stood and turned the television off, and gently took her father’s spectacles off the end of his nose and placed them on the table beside him. She laid a blanket over him, switched off the light, and picked up their family dog, Regina, who was small and scruffy and exceptionally spoiled.

“Aren’t you going to bed, Tuney?” she asked.

“No,” Petunia answered, still staring at the phone, now in the dark.

“It’s Christmas tomorrow,” Lily said. “Don’t you want to wake up early?”

“Oh, grow up, Lily,” Petunia said irritably. The entire time, her eyes never left the phone.

“Okay,” Lily said softly. “Goodnight, then.”
“Goodnight.”
Lily scratched Regina’s ears gently and walked to her bed, flopping down next to all her childhood stuffed toys. This room barely looked like her anymore; it was the room that belonged to an eleven year old Lily Evans who didn’t know what magic really was, other than something she wished she had.
Lily sprawled out on her bed; she’d grown slightly too tall for the child-sized bed, and her socked feet dangled off the end. Regina jumped up and bit at one of her socks, and Lily pulled her feet back, feeling hopelessly restless and restlessly hopeless.
She sorted through letters from Mary and Marlene, watched her owl fly in through the window with a letter tied to his talons.
“Thanks, Archibald,” she said to the owl, who did not respond.
As a cold winter breeze blew through the open window, Lily wrapped herself in the soft blankets from her bed and sat, watching the snow fall outside. It dusted the bushes outside, covering the now-empty flower bed that Lily’s mother had worked so hard on. Now she was too sick to tend the flowers, but whenever Lily was home, she would tap the dead leaves and watch them sprout up, little blooms of color appearing before Lily let them fade again.

When Sirius got back from Christmas, the others stowed away at the bottom of a carriage. As Sirius got into the conspicuously empty carriage, James grabbed his ankle.
“Prongs, I know that’s you,” Sirius told the empty space next to his feet, looked entirely unamused. James sat up laughing.
“How was Christmas, mate?” James asked, sliding into the seat next to Sirius and slinging an arm around his shoulder.
“Dismal, as usual,” Sirius replied, helping Remus and Peter to their feet. James picked up the cloak and shoved it in his pocket. “My entire extended family came to visit. As you can imagine, it was just fantastic. Also, I punched Regulus in the face, but that’s a story for another time. What about you?” It was explicitly clear that he had no desire whatsoever to elaborate, and the others kept quiet, exchanging looks between the three of them.
“I’ll tell you what he did for Christmas,” Peter said mischievously, and James kicked him in the shin.
“What me and Gillian do in our free time is none of your —”
“It is when you forget to cast a bloody silencing charm and it’s two in the morning,” Remus grumbled; he did look exhausted.
“Shut up,” James said lightly. He had a purple bruise on the side of his neck that looked extremely suspicious, but Sirius didn’t ask.
“Moons? You?” Sirius wanted to know.
“Ah, it was fine. I missed you,” Remus said honestly.
“Me too,” Sirius said, reaching across the carriage to hold Remus’s hand.
“Blegh,” James shuddered. “You two are disgusting.”
“Well, I think you and Gillian are disgusting, but you don’t see me complaining about it.” Remus said; not a single one of the Marauders had any affection for Gillian Hartly. As a matter of fact, they found her quite annoying and less than appealing company. However, Remus trusted James’ taste, because he trusted James in most other things.
“Except I do, actually,” James said. “Constantly.”
“Wormy, you’ve been very quiet. How was your Christmas?” Sirius asked.
Peter decided to reply with the safest answer he could think of. “It was alright.”
“Some more details would be nice,” said Sirius, not really appearing to care one way or the other. He let his feet dangle outside of the carriage, his hair blowing wild around his face.
Peter thought for a moment. “I kissed Mary MacDonald.”
“What?” James spluttered. “From Quidditch?” he said this as if it was a serious accusation.
Peter nodded.
“Congratulations, mate,” Sirius said, giving Peter a high five.
“What was it like?” James wanted to know. “I mean, I kissed her once at a party, but I was sloshed,
and I don’t remember it at all.”
“Er…sad? Wet?” Peter said. “We were both sort of…crying…”
Sirius made a face. “Crying?”
“It was…a very emotional moment, and I sort of thought it was the only thing to do, so we kissed.”
James groaned loudly. “Disgusting, Wormtail. She’s on the Quidditch team, for GODRIC’s sake.”
“Listen, you can’t tell anyone,” Peter pleaded. “It’s never going to happen again, anyway.”
“I’m sure not. I’ve seen you cry, you look like an extremely sad marshmallow,” James said. “No one wants to snog that.”
Peter laughed, his cheeks going red. “Thanks, mate.”
“No problem.”
As they rode back to the castle, pulled by the thestrals they couldn’t see (not yet, at least. They would, eventually — it seemed so strange that they couldn’t, with all that had happened) the Marauders laughed and shared a bottle of butterbeer, grinning into the winter night. There were flashes of white teeth and bright eyes and sloppy kisses on cheeks courtesy of Remus and Sirius, and it was only a few minutes of this youthful freedom, but it was the best few minutes any of them had had in a long time.
“To a better bloody year than 1975,” Sirius declared, holding his butterbeer high in the air, though New Year’s Eve had passed nearly a week before.
“Cheers,” James said, lighting a cigarette. They walked into the castle, the dark shadows of Hogwarts at night looming over their heads, lovely and dangerous all at once.
“Careful,” Sirius warned. “Firsties on their way.”
There was a large group of first years shrieking through the castle, enjoying their last night before spring term started. They were small and innocent and they reminded the Marauders of themselves at that age, though maybe that was just what the Marauders wanted to see.
“Oh, Hannah, Michael, Geraldine, and is that Joe I see? It is?” James ruffled Joe’s hair. “You’ve grown, Joey. Soon you’ll be taller than Peter.”
James made a point to know almost everyone’s names; people seemed to like him much better that way.
“It’s true,” Peter said. “But that’s a low bar, I’m quite short.”
Joe giggled. “Did you have a nice Christmas, James?”
“I did,” James said. “You went home, isn’t that right?”
Joe nodded. “It wasn’t any fun at all,” he disparaged. “Mum and Dad were talking about the Ministry the whole time.”
“Shame,” James said.
“Well, we’d best be off. See you around, you lot,” Sirius said, and the Marauders were off the opposite direction, smirking at the whispering of the first years.
“They spoke to me. He knew my name!” Joe marveled.
“We’ve got to tell Martha,” the one who Sirius thought might be called Geraldine said. “C’mon, let’s go!”
Sirius rolled his eyes. “First years.”
“They’re cute,” James said.
“Sure, like a hippogriff is cute,” Remus said; he’d never been fond of children, not even when he was a child, because they usually looked at him like he was something behind glass, a creature to be gawked at.
“Hippogriffs are cute,” Peter said. “Y’know, if you’re Hagrid.”
James found this ridiculously funny, and burst out laughing, which made Peter blush.
Benjy stopped Lily as she was walking back to Gryffindor tower. “Hey, sweetheart.”
“Excuse me?” Lily asked coolly.
“Look, Lily, I wanted to say — “
“That you broke my heart and proceeded to spread the rumor that you broke up with me because I cheated on you, when it was, in fact, the other way around?” Lily asked, her green eyes welling with tears. She blinked hard, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. “I thought you
were a really nice bloke, Benjy, I trusted you.”
“Cheating on you was the biggest mistake of my life. Will you please forgive me?” He asked, grey-blue eyes round and anxious. He seemed sincere, and rather worried about the answer she might give.
“I do forgive you,” Lily said calmly, brushing dark red hair out of her eyes. She’d cut a fringe across her forehead and was beginning to regret it. “But nothing else.”
“Will you at least go to Hogsmeade with me next weekend?” Benjy asked. “I want to make it up to you.”
Lily considered. “Can I have until tomorrow to think about it?”
“Of course,” Benjy said graciously. He fell into stride next to her, and Lily remarked that it didn't feel half as natural as it once had. “Take as long as you need. Did you have a nice holiday?”
“It was alright,” she replied. She wouldn't meet his eyes. “How was yours?”
“Fine,” he said, with a slight smile at her. There was nothing wrong with Benjy's smile; his teeth were even and white, his smile had none of James' lopsided quirkiness, or Severus's shy happiness -- and why was she thinking about either of them at a time like this? “Lonely.”
“I'm sure you could find something to occupy your time with,” Lily said. “Goodnight.”
She caught a glimpse of Severus across the hall. “Sev!” she yelled, a smile spreading across her face. He looked at her, dark shadows ringing his eyes, and walked away.

“Welcome back to Defense Against the Dark Arts,” Professor Jefferson said, his dark mustache twitching as he smiled at his class. “Today, we’re going to be focusing on the Patronus.”
“Great,” Sirius said, with an exaggerated yawn. “Time to take a nap.”
“I’m sorry, Black, I wasn’t aware that you were teaching today’s class.” Jefferson snapped, and Sirius smirked in response.
“By the end of this month, each and every one of you should be able to cast a corporeal patronus.”
“Already can,” James said proudly.
Remus raised an eyebrow. “When’d you learn to do that?”
“Er…never mind,” James ruffled his hair with one hand — the back stuck straight up in the air, even worse than usual. “It was a long time ago.”
“Can Padfoot and Wormtail do it too?”
“Er…yeah,” James said.
“What aren’t you telling me?”
“Nothing,” James didn’t want to embarrass Remus by telling him what they’d done for him, before they’d told him they were going to become Animagi. It would only make Remus uncomfortable.
“Fine,” Remus said. “I’ll have to find out some other way.”
“Don’t manipulate poor Wormtail into telling you, Moony. It’s cruel.”
“I was going to ask Sirius, actually,” Remus said, with a little smirk.
“Sirius will never —” James’ eyes narrowed. “You’re downright evil, y’know?”
“I know,” Remus said with a slight smile.
“Are we done talking?” Jefferson asked impatiently. “Or are you ready to pay attention?”
“Sorry, sir,” Remus said.
Jefferson relaxed slightly. He was quite fond of Remus, as most teachers were. “Right, so, if everyone will please take out their books and turn to page 214.”

The first time Lily Evans attempted a Patronus, only a few blue wisps floated into the air. Within a few weeks, she’d made very little progress. She was having a lot of trouble trying to think of things to be happy about, until she remembered Christmas in her first year.

She and Severus were running through the snow; Severus had said he would go home to his parents because he didn’t want to be at Hogwarts without her. It was their first year, they’d never fought, and had never been apart. They were best friends.
They’d been laughing about something Lily had just said, a particularly less-than-stellar joke about James and his arrogance.
Severus put his arm out to stop her, but she’d fallen into the snow. She lay in the snow and began making snow angels — her red hair had been long back then, and it had fallen in the snow under her back.

Severus looked confused for a moment, then lay down next to her. “Is this something Muggles do?” “What, wizards don’t make snow angels?” Lily had asked. Severus shook his head.

“See, it’s like this,” Lily said indulgently, throwing her arms out wide in the snow. Severus copied her, looking confused.

“You just move your arms and legs, and then you stand up.” Both of them stood, grinning, and Lily pointed. “See? Snow angels.” Severus had smiled, warm and bright, his black eyes tinged with gold from the weak winter sun.

“Hey,” Lily had said, and proceeded to tell a stupid joke about a Quidditch player, one she couldn’t even remember now. She just remembered being happy, in the snow in the neighborhood park, making snow angels and telling jokes with Severus, and smiling until her face hurt, and the two of them stomping home and her mum making them two large mugs of hot cocoa with extra marshmallows.

“Excellent work, Miss Evans,” Jefferson said, and Lily looked at her wand, surprised to see the steady blue light emitting from it.

“Lily, how’d you do that?” Mary asked, staring at her wand in despair. “I can’t get anything to happen.” Lily smiled up at the light; just its presence made her feel safe, happy. “I don’t know,” she said slowly, her voice full of awe.

She glanced around the room and saw that some other people were having similar success, the Marauders among them.

As Jefferson had predicted, by the end of the month, each and every student in the fifth year Defense Against the Dark Arts class could cast a corporeal patronus.

James had easily cast his, a full sized stag that galloped through the air. It approached Lily with large eyes and looked at her for a moment before continuing, running around James, who looked smug.

“Told you I can still do it,” he told Sirius. “Your turn.” Remus shook his head. “Are you still not going to tell me when you lot learned to --” he pointed his wand into the air and said the incantation, clearly, loudly. It rang through the room like a bell, and then there was a silver wolf next to him. Sirius, James, and Peter took one look at it and burst out laughing, as the rest of the class stared in awe. "Is something funny?" Jefferson asked suspiciously. Remus looked at the wolf with despair in his eyes. "No," he said, with a murderous look at the others, who were hysterically laughing and pointing at his patronus, unable to form proper sentences. "Nothing." "Moony," Sirius wheezed. "So sorry." Remus looked at his patronus. How strange it was that it was a wolf, and yet, it sort of made sense. A sick sort of sense, a cosmic joke, like everything else in his life. He couldn't feel any resentment towards it, though. It was beautiful. "Now that you've had your fun," Remus said. He only sounded slightly cross. "Tell me how you learned this." He looked every bit the prefect he was, and might've passed for a normal wizard in that moment. His scars were hidden in the shadows of the room, and there was a slight, shocked smile on his face, like he couldn't believe he'd summoned the happiness to cast a patronus in the first place. “Er…magic?” Peter asked, with a slight glance at James. A wispy, insubstantial rat emerged from his wand, and skittered in the air around him.


“Expecto Patronum,” Sirius said, and a large, shaggy dog was bounding around him, leaving light blue trails in its wake.

The room was filled with people and corporeal patronuses. Marlene McKinnon’s was a hawk, sharp, deadly, and it perched on her arm for a moment before swooping around the room. Mary
MacDonald’s was a rabbit, and it leapt from place to place, floating delicately in the air.
At last, Lily managed hers, and a shining white doe shimmered into existence, brighter than almost anyone else’s.
James looked at her in slack-jawed surprise. “Evans,” he said in surprise.
“Look at that,” someone crowed (James made a mental note to hex whoever it had been.) “Evans and Potter are soulmates.”
James rolled his eyes. “It’s a coincidence, Sprat.”
“Yeah,” Lily said unconvincingly, guiding the doe away from James. James’ stag followed it blindly, and the two walked together around the room, their steps synchronized. It was lovely and captivating to watch, the two patronuses which very plainly belonged together.
“Professor,” James said, trying his best to look nothing more than mildly irritated.
“This is,” Jefferson looked between James and Lily, both of whom were blushing furiously. “Highly unusual, to say the very least…corresponding patronuses are exceptionally rare…”
“Look at that, mate, Gillian’s going to be livid,” Sirius chuckled.
“Shut up,” James snapped. “Evans,” he said, with considerably more kindness, and the trademark James Potter smirk on his face. “Looks like it’s meant to be.”
Lily blushed, her pale face bright red. “I…er…” She looked down. “It’s just a coincidence, right?”
“Absolutely correct, as per usual?” James asked casually, scratching the back of his neck.
“That is, actually,” James said with a grin, taking Lily’s hand. She pulled away without thinking. “Lilian Probably-has-a-great-middle-name Evans, it appears we’re destined to be together.”
She shook her head vehemently. “It’s a coincidence, nothing more, don’t be —”
“Absolutely correct, as per usual?” James asked casually, scratching the back of his neck.
“Not entirely,” Lily said, regaining her composure. “My full name is Lilian Sod-off Evans.”
Sirius whistled, and James smacked him with a book.
“Excuse me,” Lily said, shoving her wand into her pocket. The silver doe faded, leaving James’ patronus alone.
“Great middle name, Evans,” James said after her, but she was already gone.

Peter woke up crying in the middle of the night, shaking from head to toe, sweating at the memory of being under the Cruciatus Curse, of not being able to breathe or think through the pain.
“Wormtail,” James said, crawling out of bed and finding his way across the room. “Are you alright?”
Peter managed to shake his head, tears pouring down his face.
“Here, c’mon,” James said, taking Peter’s hand and pulling him downstairs to the empty common room. “Talk to me.”
“I can’t,” Peter whispered.
“Will you talk to Remus if I go wake him?”
“No, it’s almost the full moon, let him sleep,” Peter said in a voice hoarse from crying.
“Tell me what’s wrong.”
“I c-c-can’t,” Peter said, shutting his eyes tightly. “I can’t, I can’t, I’m sorry.”
“Why not?” James asked, kneeling in front of Peter. Peter couldn’t remember James being this kind to him in years, and in an awful way it was sort of nice to know that James really did care.
“You’ll kill him,” Peter whispered.
“I won’t kill anyone, I swear. Really. I swear it on the map.”
Peter nodded, wiping tears off his face. “Snape —”
“What did he do?” James growled harshly.
Peter shook his head.
“Sorry, sorry,” James apologized. “Tell me what he did, alright? It’s going to be okay, I promise.”
Peter took a deep, shaking breath, balling his hands into fists. “He used the Cruciatus Curse on me.”
“What?” James demanded, furious in an instant.
“James,” Peter begged.
“Sorry,” James said again. “Are you alright?”

Peter thought for a moment, then nodded. “I think Mulciber made him do it, though, I don’t think he really wanted to.”

“Peter,” James said, patting Peter’s shoulder.
“You have to promise you won’t tell.”

“Pete, you have to know how wrong it was that they did that to you,” James said. “They should be in Azkaban.”

“No,” Peter insisted. “Promise you won’t tell anyone. Not even Sirius, alright? You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“James. I’m alright. Just leave it.”

“They could’ve killed you —“

“JAMES,” Peter yelled, tears dripping down over his round cheeks. “You’re not listening to me! I don’t WANT you to tell anyone! I’m going to be fine.”

“You should go to the hospital wing, they could’ve…”

“It’s over.”

“Where was I? Why were you alone?” James asked.

“With Gillian,” Peter said, sounding slightly bitter.

“Oh,” James said dismally. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“We should tell someone — Peter, you can say you don’t know who did it, you can —“

“LISTEN TO ME!” Peter yelled; almost screamed, really. His voice rang around the dark room.

“LISTEN, I DON’T WANT ANYONE TO KNOW! IT’S BAD ENOUGH IT HAPPENED, IT’S BAD ENOUGH THAT —“ he broke down sobbing, burying his face in his hands.

“Wormtail,” James said softly. “Please. Let me help you.”

Peter shook his head. “Prongs, I’m alright, I swear, I’m going to be fine.”

“Do you want to stay here?” James asked.

Peter nodded shakily, and James summoned a blanket from their dormitory and wrapped it around Peter. “Go to sleep, alright? I’ll stay here.”

“You should sleep, too,” Peter protested, but his voice was already clouded with exhaustion.

“Nah,” James said calmly. “I’m good.”

Peter looked at him as if he wanted to say something more, but instead fell asleep almost instantly, tears still drying on his face.

“Potter!” someone yelled as James started down the hallway in search of Snape. He’d left the dormitory before Quidditch practice, before the sun was even up, and he planned to get to Snape before anyone else could, no matter what Peter wanted. “Heard you and Evans are soulmates or something.”

James turned. The someone, as it happened, was Benjy Fenwick.

“We might be,” James replied coldly. “What’s it to you?”

“She’s my ex girlfriend.”

“The optimal word there being ‘ex,'” James said wryly. “So I repeat, what’s it to you?”

“I want her back.”

“Based on the fact that she very clearly hates you, I sort of doubt that’s going to happen. If you’ll excuse me,” James said, shoving past Benjy.

“She hates you too, y’know,” Benjy called after him. “No matter what people think, Lily’s never going to fall in love with you, or anything!”

“I’ll take my bloody chances,” James grumbled, and started down the hall in pursuit of Snape.

When he found Snape, he was out of breath and exhausted. Severus regarded him with unfeeling curiosity, his eyes cold and black to their very depths.

“Petrificus totalus,” James said, pressing his wand against Severus’s throat. “You listen to me,” he growled in a voice that was quite dangerous and quite unlike him. James did not make threats for the
sake of making threats, he made jokes or he made promises, but nothing in between. Severus’s eyes darted back and forth, his mouth petrified shut. “I’m not going to say anything to anyone about what you did, but I know, and you know I know — and you should know,” he added, jaw clenched. “That if you lay one sodding finger on any of my friends again, I am not joking when I say I will kill you.” He turned, not reversing the spell until he was well out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

as always i appreciate comments very much!
Placing Bets

The morning after James found out what had happened to Peter, he walked down to the Quidditch pitch, positively shaking with anger. He glanced around at the empty stretch of green; no one else had arrived, not yet, anyway.

James kicked the grass with one foot, watching small chunks fly into the air, and when this made him feel slightly better, he scooped up a handful of dirt and threw it as far as he could. Throughout his Quidditch training during the summer and over Christmas holidays, he’d gotten quite strong, and the clump of dirt sailed halfway across the pitch before it landed.

“Alright, Potter?” Mary MacDonald asked, with a grim little smile, the only sort she allowed herself these days.

“Fine, MacDonald,” James said. It was bitterly cold outside, the sort of cold that blew ice over your skin and into your bones. Mary already found herself so cold that it barely made a difference; she was cold in an entirely separate way, cold deep inside her soul.

“Do we have to practice today?” Sebastian complained as he walked down to the pitch. “It’s freezing.”

“Should’ve thought of that before you joined the team, then,” James said. His jaw was still held at a stiff angle, angry. It would take him days to relax, a week to be able to look Peter in the eye. “Ah, Padfoot, there you are.”

Sirius nodded. Somehow, even with dark circles under his eyes and his black hair unbrushed, he managed to look exceptionally handsome. Perhaps it was the fact that he didn’t care, so obviously didn’t care about much of anything that it was almost impressive. “Ready for practice, Prongs?” he asked with a smirk.

“Always,” James said, summoning his broomstick from the castle. He mounted it and rose into the hair, black hair tousled by the winter wind. There were red spots of color in his face, his cheeks bitten by the wind, and as he flew high above the others, yelling commands at them from the air, he saw Arnold stop, suddenly, and begin to fall freely through the air, one hand clinging to the broomstick which was rapidly hurtling towards the ground.

“Oi, Pierce,” James yelled, voice tinged with concern. “You alright?”

“WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?” Arnold yelled.

He was still falling towards the ground, closer and closer every moment. His broomstick had hurtled into the soft sand by the edges of the pitch and now lay there, twitching, like something dead or dying.

“Right,” James said. “Oi, Gill,” he yelled down at his girlfriend, who was sitting in the stands, and, as usual, making a fool out of herself by cheering at every opportunity. James couldn’t bring himself to be embarrassed or annoyed by her unfailing enthusiasm.

“Right,” she said, with what was clearly supposed to be a winning smile. “Er…Arresto Momentum!” Arnold stopped, just centimeters above the ground.

“Cutting it a little close, there, Potter,” he gasped, voice hoarse. His eyes were wild, and his hair slicked to his forehead with sweat.

James and Sirius looked at each other, and almost simultaneously, both of them remembered that Arnold Pierce was Muggleborn.

In unison, they glanced behind them to see the sweeping black trail of Hogwarts robes as Arnold’s attacker slipped behind the spectator tower and disappeared.

“Bloody hell,” James said.

There was silence, for a moment, as there seldom was during these practices. Everyone was gathered around Arnold, who lay on the ground, breathing heavily. He scrambled to his feet with humiliation burning his face, and to save him any more embarrassment, James shouted,

“Right, okay, everyone back in the air!”

“Do we have to?” Sebastian complained.
“Certainly. Up! We have five more drills to get through today,” James said, playing the role of the Quidditch captain quite convincingly. But he was shaken by it, they could all see, that something like that could’ve happened on the pitch. The Quidditch pitch, to James Potter, was the safest place in the world, and this, he decided almost instantly, would not stand.

So, at the end of practice, he went directly to Dumbledore’s office without invitation. “Er…pumpkin pasty,” he told the statue outside the door. “Lemon drop! Licorice snap — sugar quill?”

The statue remained motionless, its blank, carved eyes staring him down. “Cockroach cluster! Chocolate frog!” It swept aside with a loud scraping sound, revealing a spiral staircase. “Chocolate frog, then,” James said, spiking up his hair subconsciously. “Fine.”

“Ah, Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said without looking up, as James entered the room. James thought it best not to question Dumbledore’s knowledge of his presence. “I wanted to talk to you about something that happened on the Quidditch pitch,” he said, sitting without being asked. “I really hope you’re going to do something about it, Professor.”

“I daresay I may require some details, first,” Dumbledore replied; as usual, he was entirely calm and collected, which made James all the more frustrated. “Listen, I don’t know if you’ve noticed — I’m sort of beginning to think you haven’t, actually — but people are being attacked at school, and you’re not doing anything about it. And of course I care, but it didn’t really have much of an affect on me until —” he found himself briefly, strangely drawn to the idea of throwing Severus to the wolves, so to speak, of telling Dumbledore what Snape had done to Peter. After a few moments of deliberation, the words frozen on his tongue, James’ loyalty to Peter won out, and he was silent. “Until a member of my Quidditch team was attacked on the pitch!” he said passionately.

It felt so odd to say it; his Quidditch team. He wondered if this had been what Alix had felt like when he died (and he’d been so young, he’d died for nothing — a stupid Quidditch accident) and if this was what it was like to have people depending on you.

It was almost the most wonderful thing in the world.

Almost.

“Attacked?” Dumbledore asked.

“I don’t know!” James exclaimed. “I don’t bloody know, do I, but you’re the headmaster and you’re — you’re just supposed to.”

“James,” Dumbledore said. James wasn’t quite certain when he’d gotten on a first name basis with the headmaster, but he didn’t really mind. “I know you’re aware, as much as I am, that the war is drawing nearer to Hogwarts. I assure you the highest of security measures have been taking —” “I don’t think Lord Voldemort walked into Hogwarts to hex one of my players!” James seethed. “I think the threat’s already inside the school, as a matter of fact I know it is — and I can give you names of people who I know are — “

“I resent the accusation that you think I’m not aware of what goes on at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said, infuriatingly tranquil. He blinked a few times at James with intensity in his gaze. “I assure you, I am handling it.”

“Handle it faster,” James snapped, and added, with some consideration, “sir.”

“I shall do my best,” Dumbledore said.

“Right,” James said. “Er, thanks.” He left without a goodbye, and took his time walking back to the pitch, where the team was lying on the grass in the cold. At breakfast, Sirius and Remus sat, leaning against each other. Sirius had toast in one hand, and with the other was absentmindedly stroking Remus’s arm. They were a small oasis of calm in the busy hall. Behind them, Benjy Fenwick was writing a letter to Lily, and was busy enchanting it to turn into flowers once she’d read it. Doesn’t he know she’s allergic to flowers?

The other Marauders heard James’ voice as if it had come from right next to them, but he wasn’t there. Perhaps it was just the sort of thing he would’ve said, the sort of thing he had said on so many occasions that, simultaneously, they all thought it. Perhaps it was this: on some subconscious level,
they all knew what James did not. Dating Gillian Hartly was a waste of time, because as long as James had known Lily, he’d known that there was never going to be anyone else. It was stupid, of course it was stupid. There was no reason for him to know this; she despised him, and he could barely stand to be around her, but still there was something between them. There was a reason their patronuses fit together so well, and it wasn’t a coincidence, no matter what either believed.

“Honestly,” Lily said. “If he thinks that — after everything, I’d just —” she lowered her gaze to the eggs on her plate. At first, it was unclear to those sitting near her whether she was talking about, but then she looked over at Benjy. “Do you want to know what I think?” Marlene asked, a piece of egg dangling precariously from her fork as she pointed it at Lily. Lily nodded, and smiled encouragingly at a first year girl who was gazing up at her in admiration.

“I think you ought to give him a chance,” Marlene said. “Mary, what d’you think?”

“Yeah,” Mary said unconvincingly.

“He cheated on me,” Lily said, almost unfeelingly. It was impossible not to feel, though, not to remember what she’d felt when she’d heard. She’d felt the entire world go out from underneath her, felt everything she’d known dissolve and disappear. “Am I supposed to forget that?”

“He said it was the biggest mistake he’d ever made,” Marlene said, with her dark eyes wide and sparkling, batting her thick eyelashes dramatically at Lily. “And that he still loves you.”

“If there’s one thing my mum taught me,” Lily said, her voice shaking slightly when she mentioned her mother. “It’s that you don’t forgive people who cheat on you, because no matter what they say, they don’t love you.”

“Did your dad ever…?” Mary asked.

“Oh, Merlin, no. My mum’s first husband Jonathan cheated on her with my aunt Victoria.” Lily said. It felt so odd to talk about her mother, to know that in less than a year her mother might be gone. Because death existed in the wizarding world, but it wasn’t quite the same. It was murder of people who Lily had never met, not the slow, agonizing death of her mother and by extension, her family. Sometimes it felt like her family had been falling apart since the day she got her Hogwarts letter. Maybe it was true.

“I don’t want to trust him again,” Lily said, finishing off her breakfast with an enormous bite of toast. “I can’t. Now, I’ve got Arithmancy, I’ve got to go.”

“Lily,” Benjy said, grabbing her arm. She looked at the gleaming silver Prefect’s badge on his chest so she wouldn’t have to look him in the eye.

“I’m sorry,” Lily said desperately, and started off alone down the hall.

“I dare you,” James said, with total authority in his voice as he spoke to a group of third years who were clearly meant to be in class and were also, obviously, not. “To jump in the Black Lake.” There was a series of murmurs from the third years of the series three. All the Marauders except for Remus, who was in the hospital wing in the night leading up to the full moon, stood around the edges of the lake. It was ringed with frost and still completely iced over in places, and swimming in it seemed like a dreadful idea, and yet the third years seemed to be considering it.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Peter asked distrustfully, remembering the last time he had been in the Black Lake and had nearly been disemboweled by a merperson of indeterminate gender.

“Undoubtedly,” Sirius said. “C’mom, you lot, are you in or out?”

Additional muttering ensued, and then silence.

“Suit yourselves,” Sirius shrugged. He tore off his Hogwarts robes, looped his tie around a hanging tree branch, and sprinted down the hill at full speed before leaping from the shore towards the freezing, dark center of the lake. James and Peter followed suit, all three of them whooping and yelling until they hit the water.

“Fucking freezing,” Sirius exclaimed as he came up for air, skin pale and lips blue.

“So c-cold,” Peter shivered, teeth chattering. “S-s-so c-cold.”

“Merlin’s ARSE,” James spluttered, starting for shore. The third year girls blushed as he emerged,
dripping wet, shirt clinging to his chest and stomach. “Honestly,” he said, as one of the girls handed him his glasses (she had polished them on the hem of her shirt.) “A horrible idea. Now, Irene, why on earth would you let me do that?”

“It’s Iris,” the girl said, a bright blush spreading across her face. “And you insisted.”

“Bullshit,” Sirius declared, and the girl’s blush intensified.

“It — it’s true,” she stammered.

Sirius shrugged. He had an effortless way of doing this: one shoulder first, then the other, then an exaggerated sigh that seemed to relax his entire frame, if only temporarily. He had shaken many of his pureblood habits, but it was this graceful movement he found near impossible to be rid of.

Peter scrambled from the lake, blonde hair slicked to his scalp, trembling head to foot.

“Anyone else up for it?” James asked the third years, who very clearly had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

He, Sirius, and Peter exchanged a quick look and shouted, “Levicorpus!”

The three third year boys standing closest to the lake were swept upside down over the cold water.

“Shall we let them go, Prongs?” Sirius asked, dark eyes dancing with amusement.

“Certainly,” James said with a little curving smirk, his very best, the trademark Marauder’s smirk.

There was no malice in it now, only genuine amusement.

All three dropped their wands, and the boys plummeted headfirst into the icy water as the Marauders, standing on the shore, dripping wet, laughed hysterically.

“And just what,” Lily said, standing behind them. “Do you think you’re doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Evans?” James asked, his voice instantly dropping at least three octaves. “We’re taking a dip.”

“It is,” Lily said, crossing her arms. “The question is, why are you doing it during Arithmancy?”

“I could ask you why you’re out of class,” Sirius said. “But I expect the answer may bore me to tears.”

“Professor Ivanhart sent me to look for you. And you know I’ve got to dock points for this.” Lily said.

“Yes,” she said at length. “We are, for now.”

“What’s it to you?” Lily asked, but a vein was jumping in James’ cheek, and it was exceptionally clear that whatever it was, it was something. “Yes,” she said at length. “We are, for now.”

“Didn’t he cheat on you with Meredith Errington?” Peter asked, and Lily flinched.

“We’re moving past that,” Lily said. “If you aren’t in Arithmancy in five minutes, I’ll tell McGonagall you were ditching class again.”

“Good,” Lily looked at the three of them, dripping wet, and then at the third years, girls giggling by the water, boys treading water in the lake. “Get out of the lake before the giant squid gets you,” she warned, a touch of humor in her formerly cold tone.

“Giant squid?” one of the boys asked.

“Ooh, haven’t you heard?” Lily asked, a smile spreading across her face. “A giant squid lives in the lake. I reckon it’s just waking up now, since it’s almost spring.”

“I thought that was just a myth,” a girl said slowly.

“Oh, no,” Lily said brightly. “Peter’s seen it. Haven’t you, Peter?”
“What — er, um, yes?” Peter said. “Yes, it was really quite extraordinary. It tried to kill me.”

“There, you see?” Lily asked, smiling quite broadly now. She had a Gryffindor scarf wrapped twice around her neck, and a few strands of her red hair were caught in it. This, somehow, was what James could not drag his eyes away from. As Lily walked away, a slight bounce in her step, he felt he wanted more than anything to be tangled in those strands of blood-red hair.

He shook himself from this strange thought and put his robes back on, tying his tie with quick precision before helping Peter’s fumbling fingers with his own.

This, he thought, was definitely not how one was meant to feel about a girl with a boyfriend, especially not when he himself had a girlfriend.

“Tomorrow night,” Sirius reminded James, and for a moment James couldn’t recall what they were talking about. “Moony. We were saying that we’re going to check on him after class.”

James’s eyes went wide behind his glasses. “Oh, right.”

“Did that water scramble your brains?” Sirius called, already halfway back towards the castle.

“Hurry up!”

“Ah, Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, Mr. Pettigrew,” Professor Ivanhart said as they entered the room. “How kind of you to join us halfway through class.”

“He’s lucky we showed up at all,” Sirius muttered under his breath.

“Stay after class, please, boys,” Ivanhart said briskly, and turned back the the chalkboard, upon which was appearing a long series of equations.

“Where’s Lupin?” Snape hissed across the room.

“Well, you see, he thought of your hideous face and was so violently ill he couldn’t come to class,” James said with casual indifference. “Can hardly blame him, y’know.”

“Flattering as that may be, I know exactly where he is,” Severus sneered. “I’m not an idiot, I — “

“Well, that’s quite debatable,” Sirius muttered.

“The same time of month, every month, he disappears, and I know you go with him.” Severus persisted in a sharp whisper. “I know what he is, and I’ll make sure everyone else knows, too.”

“Yeah?” James asked. “Really, Snape, really, you think that’s how it’s going to work? You think we’ll just lie down and let you — “

“You don’t have to let me,” Severus hissed, with cold indifference in his eyes. “Dumbledore’s letting a monster run loose in the school, and everyone’s going to find out about it, whether you like it or not.”

“Remus is not a monster,” James said, his voice rising. Occasionally, he found it difficult not to shout in these situations. This was one of those occasions, and the warning look Ivanhart was currently shooting him ought to have been enough to keep him quiet.

“Right,” Severus said sardonically. He was not, as he’d once been, just a schoolyard bully, as cruel to the Marauders as they were to him. He was something dangerous and dark, he was no longer quite himself. Perhaps they’d never noticed it before, but it was evident in the way Lily was looking at Severus with a silent plea on her face and he was refusing to look back at her, that he had changed, and not for the better.

“Honestly, Moons, don’t be stupid,” James said. His hair, after his dip in the lake, was still nowhere close to dry, and he sat next to Remus’s hospital bed throwing darts across the room at the dartboard Peter was holding in the air. “Snape doesn’t know, he’s not that smart.”

“You figured it out,” Remus pointed out irritably. There were dark purple bags underneath his eyes, and he seemed shaky and frail with exhaustion. “When we were twelve.”

“Yes, well, we are extraordinarily intelligent,” Sirius said, and James punched him in the shoulder with hardly any aggression.

“Remember how you tried to convince us you’d fallen off the roof?” Peter asked mischievously, and a small smile cracked across Remus’s face in response. It was so hard to make Remus smile when the moon was so close to full that Peter felt a flickering sense of pride.

“I’m very clumsy. I could’ve, for all you knew,” Remus defended, lying back on his pillow. He didn’t always go to the hospital wing the day before the full moon, but this was one of the worse
“You’re still the worst liar out of the lot of us. And that includes Wormtail, who sweats buckets when he lies.” Sirius said.

“Look at the bright side, at least Moony will never cheat on you,” James said with a lazy grin.

“What, what?” Peter asked, clearly not understanding the joke.

“Never mind. Oi, so Evans is back together with Fenwick. How long d’you think that’ll last?” James asked. “I’m now accepting bets.”

“Next week he’ll cheat on her again,” Sirius said.

“Er…in two days, she’ll realize she was meant to be with James and leave Benjy,” Peter said optimistically.

“Ha! Not bloody likely,” Sirius said, and James grinned ruefully.

“By Valentine’s day,” Remus said, with a faint, squirming sensation of guilt for placing bets on Lily’s love life. “They’ll break up.”

James nodded. “Right, right, interesting. Ten galleons?”

Both Peter and Remus groaned. “I’m broke as it is,” Peter complained, and Remus nodded fervently.

“Fine, one galleon.” James said. “Not that it’s any fun that way.”

And so the bet stood, buried at the back of James’ mind. In the moment, it was unclear which of them would turn out to be right. How could one guess such things, things that were up to fate and chance and maybe sometimes just sheer luck?

As it turned out, Remus Lupin was an exceptionally good guesser.

Being a Marauder on the night of the full moon was everything. It was breathing in cold moonlit air and the soft sounds of the earth and quiet and calm as James, Sirius, and Peter approached the Whomping Willow. It was Peter, running up towards the tree and freezing it in place, and the gentle quiet between the three of them. It was never so quiet, for them, three boys who were rarely ever silent. These moments were few and far between, but wonderful all the same.

They crept down into the tunnel and walked together to the shrieking shack. Light filtered through the tunnel behind them, briefly shining before it went dark again.

Do you ever think that we could get killed doing this? Peter asked, scurrying along in front of James and Sirius. Somehow, as a rat, all his human anxiety was compressed, and he was only fear, instinct, nervousness.

As the full moon rose outside, they could hear Remus whimpering, transforming.

Nah, Sirius replied, shaking out his black fur. He didn't know if it was true, but what would be the point in saying yes, in contributing to Peter's fear?

They saw Remus — the werewolf — he was so clearly not Remus anymore, it was impossible that their mild-mannered, soft-spoken best friend could be this monster, and yet somehow it always seemed to make everything about him make sense.

Nights like these always faded into memory, into blurry hazes of pain and joy, into hours of their lives they’d never forget but never really remember, either.

As the sun rose the next morning, James Potter was human. He stood slowly, examining his skin for injuries. A purple bruise was blossoming across his ribcage, and he winced as he pressed two fingers against it.

Peter rolled out from under the table, looking, bleary-eyed up at James.

Sirius lay asleep on the floor next to Remus. His head rested on Remus’s shoulder, and as the world woke up around them, both were still.

“Padfoot,” James said softly.

Sirius opened his eyes and looked around at the Shrieking Shack the same way he always did; as if he’d never seen it before. He awoke like this every day of his life, struggling to remember who he was and where he was. He felt, strangely, that in these moments he was more than everything he felt. He was alive.

Remus opened his eyes slowly, painfully. “Morning,” he said, his voice raw from the previous night’s screaming.
Sirius wrapped a blanket around him as he started to shake — he usually did, almost immediately after he woke up.

When they were here, Remus never allowed himself to cry, though his bones ached to their marrow. He allowed James to help him to his feet, and he did his best to walk as they carried him back to the castle.

“How is he?” Madam Pomfrey asked, already having a hospital bed prepared. She helped them set him in the bed and she smoothed the covers over his trembling shoulders.

“He’s had worse,” James replied. They said this almost every time, and it seemed absurd to say such a thing. Of course he’d had worse, much worse, and there was no doubt that he’d healed much faster since the others had started accompanying him on those agonizing full moon nights.

“And you’re alright?” She had long harbored a suspicion that more went on than just them carrying Remus to the hospital wing every month, but further suspected that the truth was something she was better off not knowing.

“Fine,” Sirius answered.


“No, they can…” Remus lacked the strength to carry on speaking, so he fell silent, with an apologetic glance at the others.

“They can come back later. Mr. Lupin needs his rest,” she said, in an extremely strict tone. “Run along. He’s in perfectly capable hands.”

When they didn’t move, she softened slightly.

“I understand your worry,” she said. “It must be difficult to see him like this.”

It was. For all of them, but especially for Sirius, the morning after a full moon was hell. It was shaking hands and aching bruises and knowing that however tired they were, it was so much worse for Remus. It was worry that something would go wrong, that they would be found out — that Remus would be found out. It was knowing that Remus was struggling not to tell them just how much pain he was really in, and knowing that though they could help him, they could never cure him.

Two days passed, and Lily and Benjy did not break up. It had been rather an optimistic guess, anyway, Peter supposed, but that was besides the point. James had groaned loudly, although he was still with Gillian. It was clear, it was always clear, that he didn’t love Gillian, not half as much as she loved him. It wasn’t that there was anything unloveable about her. She was lovely and she loved him, and there was no reason he shouldn’t love her back, not in his eyes, anyway. He just didn’t.

A week passed, and Remus walked in on the two of them snogging in a broom cupboard during his Prefect patrols. Lily apologized so hastily she was nearly unintelligible, while Benjy did not appear the least bit sorry.

“Er, sorry,” Remus said, going very red. “Sorry, I just — well, you know, Prefect rules and regulations, I have to tell you to leave — but er, you’re both prefects yourselves, you ought to know…I mean, obviously you do know, well, actually…I’ll just leave.” He practically tripped over his own feet trying to leave the suffocating awkwardness of the broom cupboard encounter.

“Well,” he announced to Sirius as he entered the common room, still sweating and nervous, with his face bright red. “Looks like you’ve lost the bet as well.”

“Which bet?” Sirius asked disinterestedly. He was practicing a combustion spell on a pile of Peter’s neatly folded socks, and did not look at Remus as the other boy sat down on his bed.

“Lily and Benjy.” Remus said.

“Ah, right,” Sirius said. “Didn’t have much hope for that one, anyway. How do you know?”

Remus’s blush, spotted from the corner of Sirius’s eye, told Sirius the answer.

Sirius chuckled. “Did you go all blotchy like you always do?”

Remus made a faint noise of dissent but didn’t speak.

“You did, probably. And stammered, and rambled. Merlin, it’s brilliant when you do that.”

“Brilliant?” Remus asked.
“Yeah,” Sirius abandoned his merciless attack on Peter’s sock drawer to stand across from Remus. “It’s bloody amazing, really, that one bloke can go that many shades of red all at once.”
“Right,” Remus said. “Amazing. What spell was that?”
“*Reducto*,” Sirius replied. “You missed a lesson on offensive spells in Defense the other day.”
Remus nodded, guilt rising within his chest. “Sorry.”
Sirius sat down next to him. “Hey, don’t be,” he put his arm around Remus’s shoulder. “Full moons are bloody brilliant.”
Remus grinned slowly. “Yeah?”
“Yeah,” Sirius replied, and kissed Remus full on the mouth.
Remus wasn’t sure how to react, but kissed him back. It was so simple, kissing him, but at the same time it was like he hadn’t been breathing before and only when he was kissing Sirius could he take a deep breath.
“So,” Sirius panted in between kisses, his hands sliding up Remus’s back. “Looks like I’m going to owe you a galleon.”
“For what?” Remus asked, briefly forgetting about the bet. A bet made in the hospital wing to distract Remus from how horrible he felt, a bet that didn’t mean anything at all. How stupid it had been; how important it would eventually be.
“You bet Valentine’s day,” Sirius reminded him, trailing kisses down the edge of Remus’s jaw.
“Right,” Remus could barely think, not when Sirius’s lips were pressed against his skin, not when his hand was resting on Sirius’s thigh and he was thinking things that weren’t strictly in the realm of propriety. “Right, yeah.”
On February 14, all of Hogwarts slowly began to wake to see snow coating the ground outside. The Forbidden Forest was dusted white and gilded by the weak sun. People dressed as cupid were delivering singing valentines, mostly as jokes, and always in exceptionally public spaces. Couples, some of whom seemed to have sprung up overnight, were kissing, and someone had charmed all the lanterns along the wall to send smoke rings in the shape of hearts out into the air.

It was a fairly normal Valentine’s day at Hogwarts, and yet, somehow, it was different. It was different not just because it was uncommonly warm, with snow melting over the Quidditch pitch and off the turrets of the castle, and not just because a swirl of gossip was spiraling around the school, most of it to do with the three fifth year “power couples” made up of James Potter and Gillian Hartly, Lily Evans and Benjy Fenwick, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black. Most of the things people were saying were entirely untrue, such as,

“Did you hear that James Potter has a third nipple?” or “Do you think Benjy Fenwick is secretly half mermaid?”

Some other things had a ring of truth to them, if some of the details were slightly inaccurate, for example,

“Do you think Remus Lupin and Sirius Black are shagging?” (they sort of were)

“I try to stay unconcerned with the uncomplicated and rather pointless love lives of others,” James said haughtily, in a low drone somewhat reminiscent of Severus.

Peter giggled, then glanced over at Marlene. She was laughing and trying to restrain her younger brother, David, who had thought it would be an excellent idea to send a Valentine’s day Howler to a girl, who, to Peter’s great amusement, he recognized as Mafalda Hopkirk, whom Remus had been on one ill-fated date with in third year. The girl looked mortified.

“Davey, honestly, just relax, she might not even know it’s from you,” Marlene told him.

“I could die of embarrassment,” David groaned.

“Maybe she’ll think it’s nice,” Lily said optimistically. “I would. Wouldn’t you, Mary?”

“Hm? Yes, of course,” Mary said.

“Ugh,” David buried his head in his hands. “I am an idiot. The world’s biggest prat.”

“Now, David, that title belongs to Potter over there.” Marlene said with a little smirk.

“I heard that,” James said, and then, as if attempting to prove Mary’s point, whispered to Sirius, “any moment now, y’know.”

Sirius grinned. “Excellent.”

“Do I want to know?” Remus inquired.

“Didn’t we tell you?” James asked. “Evans, pass the milk, please.”

Lily handed him the milk with a smile, which he suspected was more due to the enormous box of chocolates Benjy had gotten her than the prospect of passing James Potter a jug of milk.

“Snivellus is about to receive a less than polite singing valentine,” Sirius informed Remus, his eyes dancing with mischief.

“Have you never considered that this feud is ridiculous and immature?” Remus asked.

James looked at Peter nervously. Nervousness was an emotion James so rarely experienced that the other Marauders noticed immediately.

“Fuck,” Sirius declared. “Let’s hear it, then.”

“What’s happened?” Remus asked, looking, not at James, but at Peter.

“Nothing,” Peter said. “It’s nothing.”
“I’ll only ask once,” Sirius said.
“There’s nothing to ask,” James said, not taking his eyes off Peter. “Nothing happened.”
“They’re hiding something. Don’t you think they’re hiding something, Moony?” Sirius asked.
For once, Remus had the time to reply to this, rather than being interrupted or not listened to at all. “I do, actually,” he said.
“Exactly. Now, will they tell us, or will we have to torture it out of them,” Sirius said, draining the pumpkin juice in front of him in one enormous gulp.
“Later,” James warned. “Operation Valentine is a go.”
A very small, disgruntled looking dwarf approached the Slytherin table, and tapped Severus aggressively on the shoulder.
“Go away,” Severus said, drawing his wand as if to curse the dwarf.
“I have a message for you, from a young man calling himself ‘Snivelly’s worst nightmare.’” The dwarf said.
“Clever,” Remus deadpanned in James’ direction, and James grinned.
“Ahem,” the dwarf said, and Severus looked as if he wanted to melt into a rather large and greasy puddle on the floor.
“His hair is as greasy as a fried egg,
His nose is as large as the giant squid’s leg,
He makes me want to die, he’s really a swine
The git who wouldn’t shut up if you begged.”
“Honestly,” Lily said, with a scathing glance at the Marauders. “You think you’re so clever.” The valentine had achieved the desired affect; Severus looked humiliated.
“We do,” James said, with one eyebrow raised, entertained by Lily’s obvious anger.
“We actually know we’re clever, but it’s kind of you to point it out,” Sirius said.
Lily huffed and turned away, as the Marauders laughed.
“Squid don’t have legs,” Remus said, in between gasping peals of laughter. “They have tentacles.”
“I needed something to rhyme with ‘egg,’” James said. “It was —“ “Peter’s idea?” Sirius and Remus asked in unison.
“No, actually, I yelled ‘what rhymes with egg’ at three in the morning and was met with many responses,” James replied. “Oi, Shacklebolt, ‘go the fuck to sleep’ actually does not rhyme, shocking as it may be.”
“Doesn’t it?” Kingsley Shacklebolt asked. He was a year older than the Marauders, a Ravenclaw, about three times Peter’s height, and, inarguably terrifying.
“It was three in the morning,” Sirius said diplomatically, or as diplomatically as he ever said anything. “I think we can forgive Shack for not being at his best.”
“Well, then, Big K,” James said. “I apologize.”
“Hang on a moment, Prongs, where exactly were you at three in the morning that Kingsley heard you?” Remus asked, already anticipating that the answer would prove unpleasant at best.
“Second floor,” James said.
“Should I ask why?” Remus asked Peter. “I feel like I don’t want to know why.”
“I was searching for inspiration,” James said. “I took a walk. Also, in this case, inspiration goes by the name of Peeves the Poltergeist.”
Remus gave a heaving sigh. “Absurd,” he said. “Absolutely absurd.”

Benjy and Lily sat outside in the snow, fingers intertwined. “I’m so glad you decided to give me a second chance,” he said, kissing her on the cheek.
“Me too,” Lily replied, and she was, really. He was handsome, and a very good kisser, and kind and smart and really, really much better than any bloke who’d ever been interested in her before, but there was still a nagging voice in her mind that whispered, he’s lying. He cheated once, and he’d do it again.
She glanced across the snow-covered grounds at Severus, who was practicing one of his spells on a first year and roaring with laughter. The sight turned her stomach, and she looked back at Benjy, leaning her head against his shoulder. Her dark red hair spilled down over his chest.

Severus watched her, a familiar, angry twisting sensation in his chest. “Lily,” he yelled, almost unaware of what he was saying. She looked over, disentangled herself from Benjy, and stood, looking at Severus with confusion on her face. “Sev?”

“Can…” he felt it all, suddenly, the humiliation — Benjy was watching him with something like pity, and his friends were behind him, laughing, muttering rude things about him and Lily. “Can we talk?”

“Absolutely,” Lily said, holding up a hand to signal to Benjy that she’d be right back.

“Er… I wanted to say… happy Valentine’s day.” Severus came to a conclusion, quickly, not taking time to think about rules or standards or consequences. “And I wanted to tell you that I love you.”

“That’s nice,” Lily said, a pleasant little smile spreading across her face. At once, it was like old times, like running through snow and falling and laughing, and him looking at her and thinking this, this is what I want. “I love you too, Sev.”

When Severus Snape said I love you, he meant this: I want you.

When Lily Evans said I love you, she meant this: I’m sorry.

“No,” Severus persisted. “No, I mean I love you, like… I love you, I want to be with you, and I know this is an awful time but I just… I can’t pretend. Not anymore.”

She looked at him, her face falling somewhere between confused and horrified. Nowhere in her expression was there a sign of mutual romantic feelings. “Sev…” she said, and his face twisted into a sneer. “No, no,” she said, reaching out one hand to touch his shoulder. “No, don’t misunderstand me, I… I just don’t know what to say. I… I have a boyfriend, Sev, I’m not just going to…”

Severus took this to mean “yes,” and kissed her. It was by no means a romantic kiss — Lily was attempting to pull away, and Severus had no idea what to do, really. In Severus’s dreams, it had been lovely, warm, sunlit, but instead it was full of fear and fighting.

Lily pushed him away from her, wiping her mouth. Tears were gathered in her eyes. “I wish you hadn’t done that,” she said softly. Her voice was like mourning, like sadness, like rain. It was not what it was supposed to be, not even close. “Sev, you’re my best mate…” was that really true, anymore, though? He cared for her, of course, but they barely spoke, and when they did it was stilted, awkward. There were no easy conversations or inside jokes or notes passed in class, no exchanged smiles. “But I don’t feel that way about you. I’m really, really sorry,” she said, and this sounded heartbreakingly sincere.

“But… Lily…” Severus protested. He felt as if the world was crumbling around him.

“I’m sorry, Sev, I’m really, really, sorry,” she said, shaking her head as if to clear it. “I love you, Severus, I do, I really… I just don’t…”

Severus nodded, his mouth drawn into a line that spoke of fury, of violence, of every last part of him that was still soft and trusting suddenly snapping.

“Sev,” Lily pleaded. He can’t… he can’t be angry with me, I haven’t — I didn’t — she protested in her mind. She wished she loved him the way he loved her, wished it with every fibre of her being, but she didn’t. Some things you couldn’t fake; things like being in love and like not being in love. Not at all.

“Can you just… do me a favor?” Severus asked, and Lily nodded, mortified. A crowd had gathered around them, and Severus’s friends yelled something that sounded like, “Mudblood!” at Lily. She clenched her fists.

“Break up with Fenwick.”

“What?” Lily spluttered. “No!”

“Why not?” Severus persisted, highly irrational and shaking with anger.

“Because — because — “

“Don’t say you love him,” Severus said, and the way in which he said it was like a warning.

“So what if I did? Would it be your business?” Lily asked peevishly. Her face was burning with
embarrassment, and tears were welling in her green eyes. “It’s my business, because you didn’t even tell me you and Fenwick were back together!” Severus snapped at her.

“What does that have to do with—“

“If we were really friends, you ought to have told me.”

“We are,” Lily said. “We are, really, we are, I swear! I just didn’t know how to say it—“

“You should’ve figured it out,” Severus said. “You should’ve, you were just being selfish, stringing me along—“

“I was NOT stringing you along,” Lily protested. “I had no idea that you—“

“Save it,” he persisted. “You knew, all along, you knew, and you let me believe that you—“

“No,” Lily said, a tear trembling at the corner of her eye and rolling, slowly, down her cheek. This brought Severus, suddenly, back to himself, and he took her hands in his.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and at once it was clear to Lily that he wasn’t. Not at all. He was sorry that he’d hurt her feelings, but not for what he’d done and not for what he was very obviously planning on becoming.

Lily took a deep, shaking breath. “I would never, ever string you along, Severus. If I’d known you felt that way about me, I would’ve…”

Severus didn’t want to hear it. “Would it have changed your mind about Fenwick?” he asked. Lily glanced over at her boyfriend, affection and anger blending in her chest. “I don’t think so,” she said, her gaze drifting back to Severus. “No, it wouldn’t have. I’m so sorry.”

“I won’t believe that,” Severus said.

She closed her eyes. Tears gathered in her eyelashes, rolled down her face. “If I’d known, even if I’d thought maybe you… I would have told you. I wouldn’t have let you—“

“Embarrass myself,” Severus said. “I suppose that’s true, you wouldn’t have let me do something as stupid as kissing you.”

“It wasn’t stupid,” Lily replied, blushing profusely. “It was brave.”

Severus scoffed.

“Yes,” Lily said. “I’d never have the courage to— well, anyway,” she trailed off.

Severus couldn’t stand to see her like this, embarrassed and guilty and very much not in love with him. “It’s alright, it’s alright,” he told her, in a cold tone implying that it wasn’t. What he should’ve said was, 

*I forgive you.
I’m sorry.*

He said none of those things. He just looked at her, his sallow face flushed red, and walked away.

As all this was happening, James and Gillian were shouting at each other.

This, in and of itself, was not uncommon in the slightest. They rarely ever fought about anything real, and usually they were just yelling for no reason, which was, of course, the only reason there was. James liked to argue, and Gillian liked to yell, so between the two of them, these shouting matches could go on for hours.

Perhaps it wasn’t so much arguing as debating, as James so loved to do. Debating everything and nothing. There was no aggression, no hate fueling these conversations. It was simply a desire to talk loudly in the general direction of the other, and to kiss and make up moments later.

“Well, I’m sorry, but I think you and Sirius hexing third years is a bloody waste of time,” Gillian said. “Honestly, you’ve been a real git lately, hexing everyone you see, and I’m tired of it.”

“Really?” James demanded, suddenly angry with her, angry that she couldn’t possibly understand how he felt responsible for everything, how the only thing he could think about half the time was the war and hexing random people was really the only way to deal with it, because otherwise…

James then said something to ruin it all, everything the two of them had built, something much more serious than James liked to think it was. The truth was, he’d grown so accustomed to her presence that the thought of her leaving was painful. “I’m surprised you even noticed, all you care about is yourself.”
“Excuse me?” Gillian asked, one thin eyebrow arched dangerously. “Don’t deny it, you never want to talk about anything but you,” James snapped at her. Seeing her expression turn sad and hurt, James felt an overwhelming wave of guilt. “Gill, I’m so sorry.”

“No,” she said, her face flushed red. “No, don’t be sorry, you’re right! It’s true, I do only care about myself, but do you know what you are, James Potter?”

“What?” James asked.

“You’re selfish! You’re a prick! You hate Severus for no bloody reason and somehow, even though he’s her best friend, you still expect Lily sodding Evans to fall in love with you!”

“I don’t —“

“Oh, don’t deny it!” Gillian shrieked. “I heard about you two in Defense Against the Dark Arts, I know what happened!” She was referring, of course, to the patronus incident, as it had been known for the past few weeks.

“Because I told you,” James replied, a sort of awful calm sinking through him. They were going to break up, it was going to happen, and there was no point in fighting it, because it was exceptionally clear that it was over.

“NO! Because I heard it from Cindy, who heard it from Isabelle, who heard it from Lily, and all you said when I asked you about it was ‘yeah, whatever’!”

“What was I supposed to say?” he asked. “Wouldn’t it have made you jealous?”

“JEALOUS?” Gillian demanded. This clearly had been the wrong thing to say. “Jealous! I’m not jealous of Lily Evans!”

“You’re — you’re not?”

“No! Why should I be? I’m better than her!”

James blinked in confusion. “At…sleeping around?” He knew instantly that this had been a ridiculously stupid thing to say.

“At everything! What’s she got that I don’t have?” Gillian shrielled. “But it’s nice to know what you think of me! That I’m just a slag!”

“I don’t think that,” James protested weakly. “It’s just…”

“What? What is it?”

“I’ve…been obsessed with Evans since second year,” James said, frowning. “And I didn’t think about…“

“My feelings,” Gillian finished for him. “You used me!”

“It wasn’t like that!”

“Oh, don’t lie to me, I’m not an idiot, Potter,” she snapped. “Peter told me what you said.”

“What I said…?”

“I’m quoting here,” Gillian said, making air quotes with her sharp fingers. “‘She was interested, and I was bored.’ Is that what it’s been this whole time? You were bored! Bored, so you decided to string me along for no bloody reason!”

“That’s not…” James protested weakly, but suddenly he saw the past few months of his life with stunning clarity. That was exactly what he had done, albeit unintentionally. He had, without a doubt, strung her along for absolutely no reason at all other than what she’d said, the awful truth. She was interested, and he was bored.

“I just…I wanted…”

“To have a stupid girl to shag!”

“No,” James replied. “No, I wanted to see if I could get over Evans, because there’s nothing to get over but I still think about her, and I can’t stop. Is that what you want to hear?”

“It isn’t.”

“‘Well, I’m sorry. Is that what you want to hear?’ Lily demanded of Benjy. She was trembling with exhaustion, her vision blurred from tears. Her hair was tangled and knotted in her hands, which had not left her head for several minutes.

“It isn’t.”
Lily had to stop for a moment and remember what they were fighting about. “What do you want me to say, Ben? It didn’t mean anything,” she closed her eyes. “Severus kissed me, but — you saw, I didn’t kiss him back! I didn’t want him to —!”

“That’s not why I’m upset.”

“What’s wrong?” Lily asked. “Please, it’s Valentine’s day, I don’t want to fight with you.”

“I know that it didn’t mean anything,” Benjy said. “I know you don’t feel that way about him. That’s not the problem.”

“What are you saying?” Lily asked.

“Seeing you with him made me realize… I can’t be with a girl who would forgive someone like that, over and over again. I mean…it’s wrong, Lily, what he and his friends are doing, and I would’ve thought that you of all people would…”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Me of all people?”

“You’re a Muggle-born.”

“Severus…” Lily’s face crumpled, her chest aching as she realized, too late, that the only reason Severus had ever pretended not to support the Dark Lord, not to want all Muggle-borns dead, was because he was in love with her. “He doesn’t love me. He just wanted a reason not to be like them,” she said, trying to convince herself of this.

“I don’t want to hear you defend him,” Benjy said. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“You know I’d never —“

“But you turn a blind eye to what he’s doing because he’s your friend,” Benjy said. “It’s bad enough. I’m sorry, Lily.”

“No, I’m — I wouldn’t, that’s not — you don’t —“ she protested, feeling at once detached from everything. Her heart seemed to have collapsed in on itself, it was sucking all the air from around her. She could scarcely draw a breath.

“And I’m… I’m still seeing Meredith. I was going to end it with you, I just… I needed a reason.”

Lily blinked. “For how long?” she asked, after a long, painful silence.

“About a week,” Benjy said. “Between that and Snape… there’s just no reason for me to pretend I still have feelings for you.”

Lily lowered her eyes, her fists clenched in her gloves. There was a lump in her throat, and her face was growing warm, but she refused to cry in front of him.

“No,” Lily said. “No, you know what, it’s fine, I’m happy for you.”

“Lil…”

She stood. “If you love Meredith Errington, that’s the way it is.”

“You’re not angry?” he asked, incredulous.

“Of course I am,” she said. “But you can’t hate someone for loving someone, can you?” She was talking more about Severus than she was about Benjy, and maybe, subconsciously, more about James than she was about anyone.

“I’m sorry,” Benjy said.

She looked at him and forced a smile, painful and tearful. Her lower lip was trembling, and tears glistened in her eyes. “It’s fine,” she said in barely a whisper. “I’m okay.”

“Lily, please… I didn’t want to hurt you, I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Benjy,” she insisted.

She turned and ran, not to the common room or to her dormitory, not to the astronomy tower, but somehow, somehow without really noticing at all, to the Quidditch pitch, which lay abandoned, the green coated in a light dusting of snow.

She sat behind a spectator tower and sobbed into her hands. She cried for so long that her eyes stung, her chest ached, she stopped being able to feel the biting February chill.

“Alright, Evans?” James asked, appearing behind her.

She couldn’t bring herself to speak.

He sat without being asked. “Me either. Everyone’s heard about you and Snivellus, and that Benjy Fenwick broke up with you.”

She didn’t reply, but wiped her face with her freezing fingers.
“Gillian and I broke up,” he said. “Do you ever just think you’re living your life the wrong way? That there could be something else you could be doing — never mind,” he sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. A single messy curl flopped into his eyes, but he ignored it. “That was a ridiculous question. You always do the right thing in the end, not like — well.”

Lily wanted to argue, but instead she sat there silently.

“Aren’t you going to ask why we broke up?” James asked. He hadn’t cried, or yelled, or done much of anything at all. After Gillian had stormed out, he’d sat on his bed with his head in his hands, uncertain, all of a sudden, what he was meant to think or feel. “It was so stupid, you know. Me and her.”

Lily looked at him, frowning. Her frown created a little dimple between her eyebrows that James hadn’t noticed before. He didn’t think he’d ever been this close to her — their shoulders were nearly touching, he could feel her warm breath beside him.

“I understand why you won’t talk to me, y’know,” James said. “I’m a bit of a git, honestly. I don’t blame you. But I want to talk to someone who isn’t going to try to make me feel better, so you’re my only option.”

She looked down at her hands, clenched and trembling in her lap. She was so, so tired of being angry and even more tired of being sad, so she waited for him to speak again.

“She really thought I was only dating her because I wanted some girl to shag,” James said. “Maybe that was part of it, I dunno. I thought that’s why she was dating me. We never really talked, me and her. I didn’t even like her — I mean, she was a good girlfriend, but not exceptionally intellectually stimulating. So I don’t think I have a right to be upset, but it’s the way it all happened. We were arguing and suddenly she was yelling at me and then she was just gone.”

He wasn’t sure he missed Gillian Hartly, but he was acutely aware of her absence.

It wasn’t like losing part of him, because he hadn’t loved her, no matter how much he missed her or how much it hurt, he knew he hadn’t loved her. It was more like having lost something and not being able to remember what it was, but knowing, strangely, that it was gone.

“Is it wrong to miss her?” he laughed slightly. “Never mind, don’t answer. I ought not to. I do, though, more than I should. Do you miss Fenwick?”

Lily wasn’t sure. She still didn’t speak. She was worried that if she did, she might start crying, or she might say what she was trying so desperately not to say, which was that she didn’t miss him. Not at all. She missed being in love, but the love that had existed between them had been slaughtered by Meredith Errington six months beforehand, and it had only just been starting to cautiously grow again.

But missing Benjy Fenwick was impossible, because, like James had said, there was nothing to miss.
“Sorry mate, but she had to go.”
“Yeah, there was nothing good about that.”
“Her, or their relationship?” Remus inquired.
“Both,” Sirius replied with a slight smirk.
James threw a galleon at Remus’s head. “You win.”
“What?” Remus asked.
“The bet about Evans and Fenwick. You win. They broke up earlier today.”
Remus shrugged, pocketing the gold. “Shame, that.”
While in the morning, all the gossip had been focused on them, now all people were talking about was Severus Snape and Lily Evans. While what exactly had transpired was something very few people knew, there had certainly been something, of this James was certain. “He’s in love with her,” James declared.
“Fenwick?” Sirius asked.
“No. Snivellus. He’s in love with Evans.”
“He…he’s what?” Remus asked, shifting slightly so Sirius’s head rested against his shoulder.
“He’s in love with her,” James said bluntly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to find someone to punch in the face.” He stalked out of the common room, seething with hopeless rage and sadness and some other, indescribable emotion he wasn’t sure how to deal with.
“I’ll go,” Peter volunteered, having only just entered the common room himself. He’d been on a date with a girl, and had been spending all day wishing that he’d never agreed to date anyone. As he started after James, unsure what he was going to say to comfort the Marauder in front of him, he had a strange thought.
*If this is what being in love does to people, I don’t think I ever want to be in love.*

Chapter End Notes

a few things about this chapter
1) next chapter I'm planning something that's going to ruin your lives so I wanted to give you something nice before I ruin everything but I failed
2) the poem about Snape is literally the least clever thing I've written in my life
3) again I am apparently incapable of writing nice light-hearted chapter so instead have this in which everyone except for Remus and Sirius is suffering
Perhaps it was fate that Severus Snape and Sirius Black were both in exceptionally foul moods when they met in the corridor outside the Great Hall. Perhaps it was nothing but a coincidence that when Snape was upset, he sought out the Marauders, or that when Sirius was upset, he sought out Snape. These were nothing more than “perhaps” at the time, but it was all the things that could have been coincidences that culminated, at midnight, to the worst night of all of their lives (thus far.) In future years, each would ask themselves, would that have happened if I’d done just one thing differently? If I’d kept my mouth shut? If I’d turned left instead of right at the end of the corridor on my way to Charms? If I’d just done something… Sirius, most of all, would wish for the rest that he could go back and change what he’d done that night, but the past was in the past, and there was nothing they could do to change it. Whether they could have prevented what happened, well, that was impossible to say, wasn’t it?

The answer was yes, and no.

It started where it ended: in the fifth year Gryffindor boy’s dormitory.

“I know you miss her, Prongs, but honestly, now that she’s gone it’s nice to be able to get a full night’s sleep,” Peter said, stretching as he climbed out of bed that morning. This was not the first time he’d said this, but he occasionally repeated it because it had made the others laugh hysterically the first time.

“It’s been a month,” James yawned. They were referring, of course, to James’ unfortunate split wth Gillian Hartly (unfortunate for him, not as much for the others.) “And I am over it.” Sirius gave an exaggerated sigh and rolled his eyes. “We wish you were over it. But you’re not.” “I’m not?”

“You’re not,” Remus confirmed. “Sirius, explain.”

“Exhibit A,” Sirius said. “Yesterday. You saw her red lipstick on Bertram Aubrey’s collar and insisted that I help you inflate his head. While admittedly hilarious, it was not the typical reaction of one who is ‘over it.’”

“We did get detention for that,” James said with a grin. “Was fun, though.” “Maybe for you,” Sirius grumbled. “I had to clean the floors with Filch breathing down my neck.” “Yeah, I know,” James said, pointed across the room to the two-way mirrors, which lay side by side on the floor. “By the way, you have a spectacularly long nose hair that I was forced to look at for all three hours of that hideous detention. I named it Winston,” James said.

“And it is magnificent,” Sirius replied with a grin.

James groaned.

“Hey, Moony, wake up,” Peter said, throwing a pillow at Remus.

Remus blinked his eyes open, pain scratching in his skull. “Sorry,” he said softly. He could feel his bones beginning to shift already, stretching his skin.

While the others were always itching with excitement for the full moon, Remus was filled with dread. The anxiety, anticipation of it was almost the worst part, knowing that the wolf would come as it always did.

“Now, what on earth are you apologizing for?” Sirius asked, with a gentle kiss to Remus’s forehead. “D’you want us to bring you back some breakfast?” Peter asked.
“Not hungry.”
“Nonsense,” James said. “We’ll bring you back half the table.”
“Thanks,” Remus said softly, closing his eyes again.

It was a regular day in the sense that James and Sirius ran down to breakfast, followed closely by Peter, and when James sat down and began to read the Daily Prophet he shouted commentary to the entire table. It was a regular day in the sense that Snape was glaring at the Marauders with nothing less than pure hatred, and when they looked back (if only briefly) there was genuine loathing in their eyes.

It was a regular day in the sense that the Black family owl swept into the hall, dropped a letter in front of Regulus, and flew away. Except it didn’t.

Rather than following the aforementioned directions, it landed in front of Sirius with a letter in its claws.

“Ah, c’mon, don’t open it,” James said, as Sirius’s face drained of color.

“Really, don’t,” Peter said.

“It could be important,” Sirius protested.

“It isn’t,” James said, snatching the letter out of Sirius’s hands. “See, I’ll read it.”

“Prongs —” Sirius said.

“Look,” James tore open the letter. “Blah, blah, blah, disgrace to the family, blah, blah, blah, if Bellatrix even invites you to her wedding we expect you to be on your best behavior, blah, blah, blah, clearly that half-blood boyfriend of yours is a horrible influence, blah, blah, blah,” he shot Sirius a look. “See?”

“Right,” Sirius crumpled the envelope in his hands. “Right, of course. Hey, if I can get this envelope to land on Evans’s head, what do I win?”

“Eternal respect and devotion?” Peter asked.

“Why would I win something I’ve already got?” Sirius grinned lazily. “One, two, three —“

James adopted a fake announcer voice. “Padfoot shoots, he scores!”

Lily flinched as the paper landed in her hair. “What do you want, Black?” she asked scathingly.

“From you? Nothing,” Sirius said.

Lily rolled her eyes and looked away.

As breakfast drew to an end, Sirius picked up the letter from his parents and stuffed it into his pocket. Peter noticed but didn’t speak, and if James noticed (which he likely didn’t, he was busy talking to Felicia about a new Quidditch play he was working on) he didn’t let on.

“What are you carrying all that food for?” Marlene wanted to know.

“It’s for Remus,” Peter explained, blushing. Somewhere along the line, he realized, he had begun to genuinely like Marlene McKinnon. Maybe, he thought, maybe this was what it was supposed to feel like when you fancied someone. He wouldn’t know, really, he’d spent too long wondering if there was something wrong with him.

“He’s sick again?” Mary asked.

“Are you two still…” Marlene wanted to know.

“Madly in love?”

Sirius somewhat enjoyed it when Remus wasn’t around, because Remus never wanted to tell people about their relationship, while Sirius very much enjoyed discussing it with anyone and everyone who would listen.

“Yes,” James said. “And it’s very annoying for the rest of us.”

“Ridiculous,” Sirius said, throwing an arm around James’ shoulder. “You’d think he doesn’t appreciate us.”

“And if you thought that, you’d be correct,” James joked. “I’ve got to go yell at our alternates that didn’t show up to practice,” he glared down the table at a few third years who’d only barely made alternate, and were, quite frankly, lucky to be able to associate themselves with the Gryffindor Quidditch team at all. “And I may end up having to kill them.”

“Fair enough,” Sirius picked up a plate laden with fruit and various kinds of cereal. “Pete, bring this
to Remus, will you? I’ll be there in a few minutes.”
He hesitated just a moment in the corridor with the letter clenched in his fist. The people leaving the Great Hall subconsciously gave him more space than was strictly necessary. After all, everyone knew that when Sirius Black was holding a letter from his family, it meant trouble.
James’ voice echoed in his mind,

*Don’t read it, mate,*
then Peter’s,

*Sirius, don’t…*
then last of all, worst of all, Remus, or what Remus would’ve said had he been there.

*Padfoot, c’mon. They’re not worth it.*

Sirius closed his eyes and took a deep breath, shoving the letter back inside the pocket of his robes. Perhaps without him really noticing, his pureblood upbringing had taken over once again, what had been drilled into him since birth. *No matter what you feel, don’t make a scene. Never let them see you crack.*

When pressed, Walburga Black had never elaborated on what “them” referred to.
Sirius broke into a jog, winking indulgently at a girl who’d been staring at him in blatant admiration for what seemed like hours. He high-fived a first year on his way up the staircase, forcing his trademark smirk across his face.

“What’s wrong?” Remus asked as Sirius walked in the door, tense with the effort of keeping up appearances. Sirius’s face slowly fell, all the false confidence slipping away.
“I got a letter from dear old Mum and Dad,” Sirius said, sitting down next to Remus on the bed. “I mean, really, after the Christmas I had with them, you can’t possibly blame them for wanting to put their two Knuts in, can you?”
“It’s March,” James pointed out from across the room, pulling his robes over his head.
“Well, Bellatrix’s wedding is in a few months,” Sirius said. “And when it comes to me and my horrible habit of making very public scenes in very public places, it usually requires a few months in advance.”

“Padfoot,” Remus said softly, reaching for Sirius’s hand.

“Nah,” Sirius inhaled sharply through his nose. “I’m fine. Let’s go, we’ll be late.”
“Since when d’you care?” James asked.
“I don’t,” Sirius replied, with one of his shrugs, so graceful and lovely that it almost persuaded them nothing was wrong.

There were exactly seventeen times throughout that day that Sirius could have read his parent’s letter. First during History of Magic, during which Binns droned on for so long that half the class was asleep and no one would have noticed.

Then, when Peter was talking about how shiny Marlene McKinnon’s hair was, as the others rolled their eyes, Sirius had the perfect opportunity to sneak away to read. He felt the letter in his pocket, burning, a constant reminder.
After that, ten more opportunities presented themselves in the form of Charms class, as they were going over last year’s Cheering Charms and the entire back row of the class was passing notes rather than paying attention.

At dinner, Sirius didn’t stop tapping his foot against the cold floor of the Great Hall even once. As the usual full moon’s excitement began to spread through the Marauders’ small group, Sirius grew more and more distracted. He felt strangely detached from everything, as if he was a ghost.

“Mate,” James said. “Oi, Snuffles, honestly,” he elbowed Sirius sharply in the ribs. “If you’re not going to pay attention —“
“I am,” Sirius snapped. “Paying attention. I’m just —“
“Not,” Peter cut in, and Sirius sighed.
“Listen,” he said. “My parents don’t just —“
James groaned.
“No, Prongs, listen,” Sirius said insistently. “They never just write for no reason. And, quite
honestly, it’s bloody impossible to sit here pretending I care about McKinnon’s hair or who snogged who in a broom cupboard when I know I should read it.”

“Shouldn’t,” James clarified. “You shouldn’t.”

Sirius nodded slowly. A tendril of black hair fell into his eyes, and he left it there, a black smudge at the corner of his vision.

“Sirius,” Peter said softly, with a gentle, warm hand on Sirius’s arm.

“Sorry,” Sirius said. “I’ll…er, I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Padfoot, don’t —” James said, his struggle to pass this all off as a joke breaking momentarily. Sirius wasn’t listening; his mind was already back in a shadowy corridor of slamming doors and screams. He stalked out of the Great Hall, looking poised and powerful and somehow nervous and broken, and it seemed strange that it was possible to be all of these at once.

“Dearest Sirius,” he read, his voice less than a whisper. “If only we could express to you how we regret the way you behaved towards your brother this past Christmas. Unfortunately, after seeing your behavior, the family is less than willing to have you present at Bellatrix’s wedding. We loathe to see how your love for mudbloods, particularly that boyfriend of yours, has clouded your judgement.”

Sirius clenched his teeth before reading on, his dark eyes storming.

“If you insist upon this behavior, perhaps it may be time to consider sending you to your Uncle Alphard to knock some sense into you. Son, you need to start drawing a line between what you want and what it is your duty to do, or there could be consequences we can’t protect you from.”

Underneath these words lay a threat, that if he crossed them again he may not live to regret it. Sirius felt the world spin away from him; he clenched his fists and hit the wall as hard as he could. The rough stone scraped his knuckles, but he kept hitting it, the letter abandoned on the ground next to him. “Fuck,” he gasped after several minutes of this, collapsing against the wall. “Fuck, I can’t…I can’t do this, I can’t…”

He was waiting for the moment where James and Peter would run out of the Great Hall to see if he was alright, but they never did.

“I’m not your son!” he shouted at the paper. “I’m not your —”

“Black,” Severus’s cold voice said from around the corner. It seemed, at once, obvious that it would be Severus who found him there, his knuckles bleeding, his shoulders shaking, and that Sirius would know instantly what he had to say to get Severus to just go away, once and for all.

Sirius’s face shut down almost instantly, going utterly blank. “Ah, Snivellus. Just who I was hoping to see.”

“Missed me?” Severus asked dryly.

“Hardly at all,” Sirius replied.

“It’s the full moon tonight,” Severus commented, with a snide expression on his face. “Funny, that. I haven’t seen your friend around today.”

“Haven’t you?” Sirius asked. “Sorry, I don’t keep obsessive track of what my friends are doing at all times.”

“Drop the act, Black, I know,” Severus snapped, drawing his wand. “Don’t make me hex you.”

“Fine!” Sirius shouted, realizing, somewhere in the back of his mind, that this was a horrible idea. “Fine, if you think you know, d’you want me to admit it?”

“Yes,” Severus said. “That’s exactly what I want.”

“Alright, then,” Sirius shouted. “He’s a werewolf, and I know you’re just dying to see where we go every month, aren’t you? For months, now, you’ve been asking, trying to figure it out, haven’t you?”

Severus waited, a vicious grin spreading across his face.

“There’s a knot in the Whomping Willow that freezes the tree,” Sirius said recklessly. “From there, you can get into a passageway, and that’s where —”

“That’s where the werewolf is,” Severus interrupted, and turned, running down the corridor.

“Right,” Sirius said after him. “Right, yeah.” A sick desire to let Severus go, to let Remus attack him was spreading through him, and maybe if James had been there, or if the letter from his parents wasn’t lying on the tile at his feet, he might’ve told Severus to stop.

He didn’t, though. He ran down the corridor to find James and Peter, a wicked smile spreading
across his face. “Prongs, I’ve thought of the most hysterical thing,” he said, before James could speak.

“Right, let’s hear it,” James said enthusiastically, but as Sirius began to explain, his smile faded from his face.

“And when he sees Moony, he’ll just…” Sirius burst out laughing. “Can you imagine?”

From the pallor of James’ face, it was clear that he could imagine very well. “You…you did what? D’you even know how unbelievably stupid that was?”

“He’ll never really figure it out, though,” Sirius said. “He won’t get past the Whomping Willow, even if I did tell him how to —”

“You told him what?” James demanded.

“Yeah, but —”

“Are you fucking insane?” James asked. “Really, Sirius, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“No, Prongs, it’ll be —”

“Moony could kill him!” James shouted, grabbing Sirius by the shoulders. “What the bloody fuck do I have to say to get that through your head, you know he can’t control it, and if he kills Snape he’ll go to Azkaban or worse! They could fucking execute him, you —” James ran a hand through his hair. “How long ago was this?”

“Five — five minutes?” Sirius guessed. “I dunno, it was…”

James glanced outside at the rising full moon, the darkening sky. “I have to go,” he said. “Peter, stay here with Sirius and make sure he doesn’t do anything else stupid.”

“I — Prongs, I —” Sirius called after him, but James was gone, running into the night with determination alight in his hazel eyes.

He found Severus standing motionless outside the Whomping Willow, watched him point his wand at the knob on the tree and the perpetual motion just…stopped.

Severus stood there for a moment longer before beginning to climb into the tunnel, and James threw an arm out to stop him. "Snape!” he shouted, pulling the other boy back from the tree. Severus's feet slipped from under him, sending them both tumbling into the passageway beneath the Whomping Willow.

“You idiot,” James said, voice thick with anger. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“As if you’d care,” Severus replied. The sound of growls and teeth snapping together echoed down the tunnel. “Is that…”

“Don’t just stand there, you bloody prat, move!” James shouted.

The werewolf had been drawn to the source of the noise, and now approached them slowly, nose sniffing the air. He scratched the space just in front of Severus, a few experimental paws of the air, and then his fangs were bared, snapping.

“It’s real,” Severus said, outstretching a hand.

“And it’s not a bloody unicorn, either! MOVE!” James shoved Severus out of the tunnel and stood there for a moment, facing Remus. “Moons,” he said, his face twisted in hopeless fury. “I’m so, so sorry.”

The werewolf roared, a paw slammed into James’ shoulder. James staggered, clutching his arm. Pain radiated from his shoulder all the way to his fingertips, but he ran.

James and Severus scrambled away from the Whomping Willow, and James, without missing a single beat, drew his wand. “Just because I saved your life doesn’t mean I’m going to let you run around telling people about him!”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Severus said hastily. “I swear!”

“Like hell you won’t, you’ve been waiting for the right opportunity for years!” James shouted.

“Can’t believe Dumbledore lets a monster run around the bloody school every month,” Severus sneered. “No wonder this place is — “

James hit him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Blood trickled down his mouth, and James drew his fist back again. “Shut up,” James said, mouth drawn into a line. He was shaking with anger, overcome by it, so furious that suddenly he didn’t know who he was even angry with. “Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said. “You’re going to go to bed, pretend this never happened. Because
if you tell anyone, I swear to Merlin I’ll kill you.”
He wasn’t joking. He’d thought there was a line, a limit to what he would do to protect Remus’s secret, but there wasn’t. It was just this: keep Remus safe, and whatever he had to do to make sure that happened was inconsequential.
“You wouldn’t,” Severus sneered, blood coating his teeth.
“You used the fucking Cruciatus Curse on Peter, you made Sirius angry enough that he’d tell you about Remus, and you kissed Lily Evans,” James said. “Maybe I should’ve let Remus eat you!”
“But you didn’t,” Severus said.
“You’re right. I didn’t, because I’m a fucking decent person, and if you’ve got even a shred of respect for anyone in the world, you’ll keep your goddamn mouth shut,” James shoved Severus as hard as he could, sending him stumbling back up towards the castle. “Now get out, before I change my mind!”

“Did he —“ Sirius stood as James walked into the dormitory.
“I stopped him,” James said. “And you’re lucky I did, you bloody -- what were you THINKING?”
“I wasn’t,” Sirius said. “Is that what you want to hear? I’m sorry!”
“Don’t apologize to me,” James said coldly. “I’m not the one who you screwed over. I’m not the one who could get expelled for this, because you COULDN’T KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!”
“Don’t tell him,” Sirius pleaded.
This stopped James in his tracks. “Don’t tell him?” he repeated, in a dangerously soft voice. “Don’t tell him? Well, I won’t, but as he’s your boyfriend I would hope you’d tell him yourself!”
“Why does he have to know?” Sirius asked.
“What do you mean?” Peter asked. He couldn’t look Sirius in the eye.
“If we could make this go away, would he ever have to know?”
“YES!” James shouted, quite hysterical at this point. “FOR MERLIN’S SAKE, PADFOOT, CAN YOU EVEN HEAR YOURSELF?”
“I just…” Sirius sank onto his bed, his hands buried in his pitch black hair. “I don’t want to lose him.”
“You don’t want to lose him?” James repeated, dumbfounded. “Are you bloody joking? Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you revealed his biggest secret to the one person who wants to see us all dead!”
“I —“ Sirius closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, aren’t I? I didn’t want —“
“What did you think was going to happen?” James demanded. “Severus would see Moony and just forget about it?”
“I don’t know!” Sirius shouted. “I don’t know, I had just read the letter from my parents —“
“You did what?” James demanded.
“I…” James would not hear it.
“This was because of your parents? You fucked over someone who loves you because your parents uninvited you to a wedding?”
“You don’t get it.” Sirius said, fists clenched. They were sore and bruised where he’d punched the wall. “Your parents love you, you don’t get it.”
“I bloody well know that, don’t I?” James demanded. “I can’t — I can’t even begin to describe how stupid you are! What if Snape had been killed, then? What if Moony had killed him?”
“I didn’t think it was…”
“Yeah, you don’t think, Padfoot, that’s the point,” James sighed.
The disappointment was the worst; James had been angry at Sirius before, and would be again, but never had he looked at Sirius with such heartbreaking disappointment in his face. “I’m sorry.”
“I know,” James said. “That’s not enough, though. Do you even know how Moony’s going to react when he finds out? D’you think he’s just going to say, ‘oh, alright,’ and move on with it?”
“No,” Sirius said softly.
“Right,” James said. “Of course not! He’ll never trust you again. I thought you knew better, Sirius, I thought you weren’t like your parents, acting like people’s lives don’t mean anything!”
“I’m not —”
“Don’t,” James demanded. “Just — just get out, Sirius, I can’t even look at you right now, get out!”
Sirius did, slamming the door behind him. He wasn’t sure where he would go, or what he would do, or what he was even thinking of doing…
*I thought you weren’t like your parents.*
Can’t even look at you right now.
Get out.
Sirius ran outside, down to the Black Lake. The darkness was overwhelming, inside his chest and around him, the light shining faintly on the cold water. Without thinking, he threw himself into the water. He sank through the darkness, opening his eyes, watching reeds swirl in the water around him, looking at the faint, thin patches of ice still floating on the surface of the lake. He lay there, letting the cold run through him, soothing his bones. He felt all the rage and anger that constantly boiled within him churning, and maybe the only way to let it out was to open his skin, but he’d promised…
What did promises mean to people who wouldn’t look you in the eye anymore?
What did promises mean to people who might never trust you again?
He screamed at the top of his lungs, screamed as loud as he could, until he could hardly breathe.
Eventually, his screams turned into quiet, gasping sobs, tears streaming down his face. He crawled out of the water, shivering, so cold it was impossible to think.
He pulled out his wand and sliced his skin, first small, insignificant cuts across his pale, shaking wrists, then deeper, carving lines deep into the expanse of his arm, shaking. *Maybe I should kill myself, maybe I should kill myself, maybe I should* —
“Sirius,” James’ voice said from behind him, and Sirius turned to see nothing there, nothing but the empty night and the trees. “Don’t.”
“Why not?” Sirius asked the air. Perhaps James was really there, perhaps he wasn’t, perhaps it hardly ever mattered. “Would you care?”
“I’m angry with you,” James said. “I don’t want you dead.”
“I don’t — I’m not going to pretend to understand how you feel,” James said. “I don’t, I — I can’t, but please, just come back to the dormitory. It’s…it’s going to be better in the morning.”
Sirius shook his head. “I doubt it.”
“Sirius,” James begged, invisible still. (Was he there? Did Sirius only wish for it so desperately that he was hearing things that were not happening?)
“I can’t take it,” Sirius said. “People like you are born to be heroes, and people like me…” he gestured at his wrists. “I’m fucking brilliant, you know, I could be anything, but all I am is a massive fuck-up.”
“That’s just not true,” James said. “If anything, you’re an average-sized fuck-up.”
Sirius chuckled dryly. “Go,” he said. “I’ll be alright, I swear.”
“You’re never alright,” James replied.
“That’s true,” Sirius said.
“Can I be honest with you, mate?”
“Absolutely,” Sirius said to the air.
“I’m going to stay under the cloak for this, because I’m not sure I can look you in the eye and say it,” James sighed heavily. “There’s something wrong, here, Padfoot, and you know it, and I know it. Any time you think about your parents, you start doing stupid shit like this. I doubt I’ll ever know what they did to you, but I need you to get out of that fucking house.”
“I’m not —”
“I think you spend half your life thinking about that place. I don’t want you back there, Sirius, and I’m saying that as your brother, not just your friend. I’m not joking.”
Sirius tried to speak, but James interrupted him again.
“Don’t think I’m not still pissed at you, because what you did to Moony tonight is fucking unforgivable, and if he ever wants to speak to you again it’ll be more than you probably deserve,”
James said harshly. “But you did it because of your parents, so I had to say something before you do something else.”
Sirius just nodded. “Alright.”
“Alright?” James asked, ripping off the cloak. “Really? That’s all you have to say?”
“What d’you want to hear? I’m sorry.”
“I dunno,” James said. “I’ve never been more angry at you, but I can’t — I need to know you’re going to be okay, because frankly you’re really starting to scare me.”
“I’ll be fine,” Sirius said, unsure if it was the truth.
James was silent for a moment, then he looked at Sirius with a slight smirk. “You’re soaking wet, did you jump in the lake?”
“I thought it might help,” Sirius said sardonically.
“Did it?”
“Not even slightly,” he stood, pulling his sleeves over the slashes across his skin.
“D’you want me to fix that?” James asked quietly. His face was drawn and sad, but a restless anger rested in the slope of his shoulders.
“Nah, it’s alright,” Sirius said.
“One more thing,” James said. “You can’t make Remus feel bad about this. It’s not his fault that you —”
“I know,” Sirius interrupted. “I won’t.”
“Good,” James exhaled. “Good.”
“I’m sorry, James,” Sirius said, his voice hoarse and broken. “Really.”
“I know. It’s just…” James closed his eyes. “What were you thinking? I just — I can’t understand what exactly you thought was going to happen. Snape is lucky to be alive, but if he tells anyone, everything we’ve done for Moony will be for nothing.”
“I know,” Sirius said.
“You — you know?”
“That’s right,” Sirius started back up towards the castle, exhaustion and misery weighing down his steps.
When Remus woke up in the Shrieking Shack the following morning, he knew he was alone before he saw the empty room. It wasn’t so much knowing as feeling, feeling the cold air and the silence, tangible in the spring morning.

“Padfoot…?” he asked, and instantly, without really knowing why, his heart began to race. The wolf knew something Remus did not, something Remus couldn’t remember. The pain was instant and overwhelming as he tried to stand without help for the first time in months. Madam Pomfrey found him there, in the tunnel, and helped him back up to the castle alone.

“This isn’t quite as easy as it used to be,” she told him, drawing the curtains around his hospital bed. He looked at her with pain glazing his vision. “Where are they?” he asked.

Madam Pomfrey’s mouth pursed. “I’m sure I don’t know,” she said, but there was pity in her face. “I’m certain they’ll be along soon enough.”

She waved her wand over Remus, and he fell into deep, dreamless sleep, some dormant part of him distantly aware that there was something irreparably wrong, something about the whole situation that screamed of a secret waiting to be told.

“Prongs,” Sirius said. “Please.”


“Nothing,” James said. Peter gave him a worried look, and James shifted, his injured arm held stiffly against his side. “It was nothing you did.”

“Snape,” Remus said suddenly, certain of it, at once. “Snape was there —“

“Don’t panic, Moons,” James said quickly.

“Explain,” Remus said, his voice beginning to tremble. “Now, please.”

“Sirius,” James said.

“Can you give us a moment?” Sirius asked Peter and James, who left almost immediately, practically tripping over themselves in an effort to escape. There was a coldness that stood between Sirius and James now, a sort of careful avoidance, an anger that boiled between them.

Sirius cast a Silencing Charm with the sort of careful, controlled movement that made Remus want to roll up Sirius’s sleeves to see what he’d done.

“Sirius,” Remus said, biting his lip. “What happened?”

“I made a horrible mistake,” Sirius said.

“James is furious with you,” Remus observed, looking down at his hands which rested, shaking, in his lap.

“Yeah, he is,” Sirius said.

Remus waited, silent, his eyes fixed on Sirius’s face.

Sirius took a deep breath. “Er…well…”

“Sirius.”

“Alright,” Sirius sighed, aware, uncomfortably so, that what he was about to say would be devastating. “I told Snape about you.”

“About…?” Remus understood at once, and was unable to process exactly what he felt. His mouth was dry as he spoke, his amber eyes full of betrayal, panic, horror. “Why?”

Sirius closed his eyes. “My parents…”

“D-did you t-tell them, too?” Remus asked — stammered, really, he could barely think — and put his head in his hands, shaking.

“No! Merlin, no, I wouldn’t. I — they just —“
“Your parents are shit, I get it. What does that have to do with Snape?”
“You don’t get it!” Sirius yelled, kicking the chair he was sitting on as hard as he could. It toppled over and slid along the tile floor with a loud screech.
“What I get,” Remus said. “Which isn’t much, really, but because of your parents, you told Snape about my condition — I just —” he closed his eyes, a lump in his throat. “I don’t understand why you’d do that to me.”
“I’d never…”
“You did, though,” Remus persisted. “You told him. And…and he…”
“He was there,” Sirius said. “In the Shack. I was going to let you…”
Remus swallowed hard. “Sirus…” he knew he ought to be angry, but all he could feel was broken.
“It’s Snape, though,” Sirius persisted. “He already sort of knew —”
“No,” Remus said. “He thought. He never could’ve known for sure, not until you told him, until he saw…” a new, horrifying thought occurred to him. “Did I hurt him? Did I —”
“No,” Sirius said. “James pushed him out of the way.”
“James —? James was there?” Remus asked. “He —”
“He saved Snape’s life,” Sirius said, with a little smirk. “Funny, isn’t that?”
Maybe it would’ve been if Remus had been able to catch his breath. “If he tells — I’ll be expelled, they could put me in Azkaban for this, or worse —”
“For what?”
“For being a werewolf,” Remus said. “Don’t be naive, Sirius, werewolves aren’t exactly popular. They don’t need a reason to — to —” a desperate sob escaped him, and he curled in on himself.
“How could —”
“We’ll go to Dumbledore,” Sirius said.
“Maybe we can,” Remus said. “But you clearly don’t get what this means — I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, I’m lucky you lot and James’ parents are allowed to know. If it gets out, especially to the people Severus is friends with…” the helplessness of it all sunk in, the impossibility of getting out of this unscathed.
“I didn’t think — “
“You never think,” Remus said. “You just did it, and you didn’t think about what might happen, because consequences aren’t something you ever concern yourself with but I thought…” he gave a soft, tragic chuckle. “I thought I was the exception to that. I thought you cared about something, I thought I could be the something you cared about, I just…” he looked at Sirius. A purple bruise spread across his cheekbone, swelling, and there were scratches across his throat, and Sirius felt like crying. “I really thought we’d changed you, I thought you weren’t like them —”
“Like them?” Sirius asked hoarsely. “Like my parents?”
“I thought you’d learned that people’s lives mean something, I thought you’d learned to think of someone other than yourself — I just…sometimes I forget you can’t get rid of the way you were raised.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sirius demanded, rising to his feet, filled with an anger that burnt within him. “The way I was raised —”
“It makes a difference,” Remus said. “We can pretend all we like, but if it comes down to it, it makes a difference.”
“You can’t really think — “
“I don’t want to argue, Sirius,” Remus said wearily, feeling a million years old. “You can believe whatever you’d like. But you — you did something unimaginable, I really…” he’d known — almost forever, it felt like — that it was going to end like this. With pleas and fighting back tears and shouting and blood, blood raining down from the sky, blood surrounding them and choking them, filling their lungs. “I keep turning it over and over in my mind, and I just can’t understand.”
“I…” Sirius grasped Remus’s hands, his face full of regret. “It was so stupid, Moony, so stupid — I didn’t think it would — I never wanted…”
“I need time,” Remus said, taking deep, shaking breaths. “I need to think about this and us and… I just…I’m going to be honest, here, I really don’t see how I can forgive you for this.”
“I know,” Sirius nodded, though the words felt like ice spreading through him, chilling him to the bone. “I don’t think I’ll be able to forgive myself, either.”
Remus closed his eyes again, tears pressing against his eyelids. “Go,” he said, and Sirius left. Remus lay alone in the empty hospital wing and cried, tears streaming down his scarred face.

“Moons,” James said. Remus opened his stinging eyes, wiping tears off his cheeks.

“I-James,” he said. “It’s — he —”
James threw his arms around Remus, who, like a child, cried into his shoulder for what felt like years.

“Can you tell me something?” Remus asked, once he’d recovered enough to breathe. Exhaustion closed in around him, darkening the edges of his vision. “Why did you save Snape?”

“It was the right thing to do,” James said. “But I did it for you, not him.”

“I just…Sirius, I thought he loved me.” Remus said, quite aware of how pathetic he sounded, and unable to do anything about it.

“He did,” Peter said. “He does.”

“How could he do that to me, then? How could he…if he loved me, he’d never…”

“I don’t know,” James said.

“I can’t…I don’t want to see him again,” Remus said.

“Remus…” Peter said.

“Please go.”
When neither James nor Peter made any attempt to move, Remus took a deep breath. “Listen,” he said. “I feel I’ve already sacrificed as much of my dignity as any self-respecting bloke should be allowed to do, so please, please, just get out.”

“We’re going to sort this out,” James vowed. “I swear it, we’re going to —”

“I don’t really think there’s anything you can do,” Remus said bluntly.

“There’s got to be. We’re not going to let —” Peter said.

“Right,” Remus said, a tinge of anger going into his voice. “There ought to be, but I learned an extremely long time ago that there isn’t always going to be a way out of things. Maybe you all should learn that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” James demanded, angry, despite himself. Since the previous night, he’d spent every moment being furious, at Sirius, at Snape, at Peter, even at Remus.

“Do you know what the word ‘marauder’ actually means?” Remus asked, and when James didn’t reply (he didn’t know, really, he only knew what it had come to mean to all of them.) “It means someone who seeks out things to destroy. And I think that’s what you and Sirius,” Sirius’s name caught in his throat, and he hesitated for a moment. “What you and Sirius have been doing since the beginning. And you don’t care who gets hurt in the process, even if that person is me,” he said. James bristled. “Are you bloody joking?”

“Madam Pomfrey,” Remus said, still looking determinedly at James. “Please tell them to come back later.”
Madam Pomfrey shooed them out of the hospital wing, and Remus was alone.

“Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore told James, calm as ever. “Mr. Snape has informed of the events which transpired last night.”

“Did he?” James asked tersely, with a murderous glance over at Snape.

“I have called Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin to give their statements of what happened,” Dumbledore.

“Professor,” James pleaded. “Remus had nothing to do with this —”

“That remains to be seen,” Dumbledore said.
“You aren’t going to expel him, are you? I mean, it was just — it wasn’t his fault.”
“I have no intention of doing anything until I have heard the entire tale, incriminating as it may or may not be,” Dumbledore said sternly. “Ah, Mr. Black, please come in.”
Sirius walked in with a miserable slump to his shoulders. “Before you say anything,” he said. “It wasn’t Remus’s fault, and if he gets expelled because of something I did I can’t live with myself.” It might’ve been just a phrase, but it caught James’ attention, and he looked at Sirius with concern before the mask of anger went back over his face.
“Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said. “I assure you that any consequences faced by Mr. Lupin will be entirely justified. Do you know if Mr. Lupin will be joining us?”
Remus was, at that very moment, pacing outside the grand set of double doors that led to Dumbledore’s office, a sheen of nervous sweat on his forehead.
“Ah,” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Lupin, you may enter,” he called, and Remus walked in slowly. Pain was evident in his every step, but he doggedly ignored it. Madam Pomfrey had waxed poetic about how he ought not to leave the hospital wing in his condition, but he’d been adamant that he had to control the damage Sirius had done before word got out.
“Hello, Professor,” Remus said, taking a seat next to James. He wouldn’t — couldn’t — look at Sirius.
“Mr. Snape,” Dumbledore said. “Why don’t you begin with what exactly the circumstances were that led you to the Whomping Willow last night?”
“I knew what Lupin was,” Snape said. “I’ve known for months.”
“May I inquire how?” Dumbledore asked.
“I just — I just knew,” Severus replied. “It was obvious, the way they were always sneaking about. It didn’t take a genius to figure it out.”
“Ah,” Dumbledore said. “And the reality of Mr. Lupin’s condition was your concern.”
“What —? No!”
“Then why,” Dumbledore asked, and there was steel in his voice. “May I ask, did you feel the need to discover where Mr. Lupin goes each month?”
“I just…” Snape hesitated, scowling. He looked at the floor. “He’s a monster. And everyone should know about it. He should be kicked out of school.”
“Shut up,” James snarled, his hands clenched on the arms of the chair. “You don’t know what you’re talking about —”
“Pardon me, Mr. Potter, but I must request civility in my office,” Dumbledore said.
“Right,” James said. “Sorry.”
“Mr. Snape, you may proceed,” Dumbledore said.
“Black was upset about something, and he started shouting at me. He told me where to find Lupin and how to get there.”
“It wasn’t — Remus, I swear it wasn’t like that,” Sirius protested.
Remus didn’t reply, but he at least was looking at Sirius now, although the very sight of the Marauder was enough to make him want to run from the room.
“I saw it,” Severus said.
“Mr. Lupin?” Dumbledore asked.
“The werewolf,” Severus looked up at last, and the amount of hatred in his face was shocking. “I saw it. Then Potter —”
“Saved your life and didn’t get a thank you?” James snapped.
“I was going to say hit me in the face,” Severus replied.
“After saving your life,” James said.
“It wouldn’t have killed me.”
“He’s a fully grown werewolf,” James said. “You couldn’t have stopped him if you tried.”
Severus exhaled through his nose, glaring at James.
“Thank you for your testimony, Mr. Snape,” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Black, is there anything in Mr. Snape’s story that you wish to dispute?”
Sirius looked at Remus. “No,” he said. “As far as I know, that’s what happened.”
Remus flinched. Subconsciously, he’d thought, just maybe, that Sirius would say that none of it was true, that Snape was making it up, that this was all a prank.

Dumbledore only nodded slowly. “Mr. Potter,” he said. “Please describe the events last night.”

“Sirius told me what he said to Snape,” James said. “I went after Snape to stop him, but it was too late. He’d already seen —” James’s voice failed him almost immediately. He could hardly breathe, he could only look at Remus and think how sorry he was.

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Snape, what do you intend to do with this information?”

“He should be expelled,” Snape said furiously. “You can’t let a monster run around the school like this.”

“Hogwarts rejects the use of that term to describe people with lycanthropy,” Dumbledore’s blue eyes flashed momentarily.

“It’s what he is,” Severus muttered. “I think everyone has a right to know they’re taking classes with a werewolf.”

“Professor,” Remus said. “Severus makes a valid point. If it would be best for me to be…” he swallowed hard. “I would go quietly.”

“No —” Sirius protested, his voice strangled.

“If you expel Remus, you’ll have to expel me, too,” James said firmly, and Dumbledore arched one silver eyebrow.

“I certainly do not intend to expel anyone if it can be avoided,” Dumbledore said. “Mr. Snape, I must impress upon you the danger exposing Mr. Lupin’s condition would put him in. It seems — perchance unfair might be the word? — to endanger him when he has done, as far as I can see, nothing wrong.”

“Nothing wrong? He nearly killed me!”

“You seem no less worse for the wear, Mr. Snape. Mr. Lupin will not face punishment for this situation.”

Remus nodded somberly, but both James and Sirius exhaled sighs of relief.

“Mr. Black,” Dumbledore said. “What you have done is a direct violation of the trust Mr. Lupin had put in you in revealing his condition. Not only did you put Mr. Snape’s life at risk, but you endangered Mr. Lupin as well.”

“I just — it was —” all Sirius’s arguments died in his throat. “I’m sorry.”

“I do not believe that I am the one due an apology,” Dumbledore said.

“Remus,” Sirius said.

Remus still refused to look at him; his chest felt as if it had caved in, there was a writhing mass of pain where his heart was meant to be, and how could he look at Sirius and listen to an apology?

“I’m sorry,” Sirius said desperately. “I know it’s not enough, but I’m so sorry.” When Remus didn’t reply, he sighed, a shaky, drawn out production of a sigh that was painful to hear.

“Apologize to Mr. Snape,” Dumbledore prompted.

“Sorry,” Sirius muttered, sounding significantly less sincere.

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said pleasantly. “Now, Mr. Black and Mr. Snape, I’m assigning you two detentions a week for the rest of the month to provide you time to reflect on your actions.”

Sirius only nodded. He felt he deserved much worse; he knew James felt he deserved much worse, and Remus…

“And Mr. Snape,” Dumbledore said. “You must keep quiet about the events which transpired last night. You are not to reveal to anyone what you know or what you have seen, under any circumstances, or I daresay the consequences will be…unpleasant.”

Severus bit the inside of his cheek and nodded.

“It is necessary for Mr. Lupin’s safety that his secret is kept,” Dumbledore said. “I expect you to uphold the agreement we have made for the remainder of your time at Hogwarts, and, one would hope, afterwards.”

“Of course, Professor,” Snape said, with a slight, fake smile.

The fifth year Gryffindor boys’ dormitory, the Marauders dormitory, was split three ways. James and
Peter took the side closest to the door, a significant gap between them and Sirius, who had claimed the opposite side of the room and kept the curtains around his bed almost perpetually closed. Remus was in the middle, and he wouldn’t look at any of them.

“Moons,” James said. “You want dinner?”

“No,” Remus said, although the growling in his stomach suggested otherwise.

“Right,” James said, so obviously avoiding Sirius’s gaze, so clearly aware that Sirius’s eyes were on him. “Well, Pete and I are going, then.”

“Right,” Remus echoed.

The question was unspoken, the ‘what about Sirius?’ that died before it left Peter’s lips, the question that Remus and James were refusing to let themselves ask.

“Er,” Remus said, with a deliberate look at Sirius. “Actually, I’ll go with you.”

“Oh,” James said. “Alright.”

They left Sirius alone in the room, and he lay quiet and still, incapable of crying or really doing much of anything but lying there wishing that he hadn’t ruined everything, that it wasn’t all in shambles.

At dinner, Lily looked up sharply upon seeing them. The meddler in her wanted to know what had happened, because there was very clearly something, a Something that had been so devastating that it seemed strange for them to be at dinner. She whispered to Mary,

“What d’you think happened?”

Mary shrugged indifferently.

“Mare, look,” Lily pointed subtly over her shoulder at Remus, who was eating his food with singular aggression, his shoulders slumped towards the table. Peter was stabbing his mashed potatoes rather than eating them, and James had eaten his entire dinner and now had his face planted on the empty plate.

“So?” Mary asked. “What’s the problem?”

“Look at them,” Lily said. “Something’s wrong.”

“No offense, Lil, but you care too much.”

“Why would I be offended by that?” Lily asked innocently. “It’s absolutely true.”

Mary snorted. “I’ll ask, if you really want to know.”

“Why can’t I ask?”

“They hate you, you hate them…” Marlene said from across the table. She was snuggled comfortably against the enormous chest belonging to one Kingsley Shacklebolt, whom she had been dating for nearly a week, much to Peter’s dismay.

“I don’t,” Lily said, and the others rolled their eyes. “I don’t! I just prefer their silence in order to keep the peace. Y’know, as a Prefect, I don’t want to have to go around deducting points.”

“You love to deduct points,” Mary said.

“Lies,” Lily replied calmly. “All lies. Remus,” she said, and he looked up from his steady demolishing of the food in front of him. “Are you alright?”

“Er…yes,” he said, at once unbelievably sad. He sank in on himself like the upside-down cake in front of him and sighed. “No, but there’s not much you can do about it.”

Lily nodded. “Let me know if you need anything?”

“Of course,” Remus replied.

Throughout the brief conversation, Peter hadn’t stopped stabbing the various piles of food on his plate, nor had James lifted his head for even a moment.

“Something’s very wrong there,” Lily murmured, almost to herself. “Severus is upset too, but he wouldn’t tell me what was wrong…”

“Ask again,” Kingsley suggested in his gravelly voice.

Lily’s stomach squirmed unpleasantly at the idea of seeing Severus, of stepping into his crowd of Slytherins to draw him out. Would he go with her anymore, after everything? Would he stare at her blankly as though he’d never seen her before? Would she walk away, give up mid sentence because it was easier than remembering how close they used to be? “No,” she said. “It’ll all come out eventually. Everything does.”

Mary shrugged her agreement and returned to her long-winded rant about the unfair principles of
transfiguration marks that Lily really hadn’t been listening to in the first place.
So, when James threw an apple from the table across the room, a furious sort of growl emitting from
his throat, Lily didn’t comment, and when Remus left dinner to “go to the loo” and never came back,
she pretended not to notice. When Peter hesitated next to James, who had his hands buried in his hair
and was muttering under his breath, for a second too long, just enough to make it clear that there
really was something to be worried about, Lily just smoothed down her skirt, stood, and walked back
to Gryffindor Tower like nothing was wrong.
“Black!”
Sirius had scrambled to his feet when she’d walked in, but when comprehension dawned across his
face — you’re not Remus — he slumped back to the couch. “Sorry,” he muttered.
“This is a pitiful sight,” Marlene said with one eyebrow arched, looking at Sirius. “How much have
you had to drink?”
Lily hadn’t noticed at first, but there were scattered bottles around Sirius on the couch, and one
balanced precariously in his shaking hand.
“Seven,” Sirius replied vaguely.
“Seven what?” Marlene asked, pointing her wand at the bottles. They gathered into a neat row by the
fire.
“Er…?” Sirius shrugged.
“How drunk are you, exactly?” Mary asked, sounding somewhat impressed.
“Very,” Sirius declared.
“So instead of eating dinner, you…drank the entire stash of fire whiskey we had up here?” Marlene
asked.
“He’s right downstairs,” Lily pointed out.
“Nah,” Sirius said. “You don’t get it.”
“They broke up,” Marlene whispered to Lily, who nodded as if this explained everything she’d been
wondering about that day.
“Oh,” Lily said. “Do you know why?”
Marlene shook her head. “You know Remus. When he doesn’t want to talk about something he’s
like a brick wall.”
“Black,” Lily said. “What’s wrong?”
Sirius just shook his head. “I can’t,” he said, although he was unclear what exactly he couldn’t do.
“I’ll just…I’ll just go…” he stood as if planning to return to his dormitory.
“Do we want Remus to see him like this?” Mary whispered.
Marlene’s brown eyes widened. “Good point.”
Mary looked at Sirius, down at her hands, still carved with the faintest of stretched pink scars, and
noded. “I know a place where we can take him.”
She led them to the room, the room that appeared when you needed it and disappeared when you
didn’t. The door opened to reveal a cozy, fire lit room, furnished with a four-poster bed. “Right,”
Marlene said. “Black, time to go to sleep.”
“Can’t,” Sirius said, but he lay down anyway, long black hair splayed across the pillow. He seemed
confused by the sudden change of scenery, and looked around, bewildered.
“I’ve never seen him this drunk,” Mary giggled in Marlene’s ear. “And he once tried to convince me
he was going to marry Professor McGonagall.”
“He’s tried to convince me of that when he isn’t drunk,” Marlene replied with a little smirk.
“I’m tired,” Sirius complained loudly.
“Right,” Lily said. “Goodnight.” All light in the room was instantly extinguished, surrounding Sirius
in darkness. Lily hesitated in the doorway a moment longer, lingering somewhere between pity and
annoyance.
“Lily,” he said, in what was clearly meant to be a whisper. “Lily, promise me — promise me you’ll
tell him!”
“Tell him what?” Lily asked.
“Tell — tell Remus I’m sorry,” Sirius said, and Lily nodded, her face softening slightly. “I’m sure he knows,” Lily said, but Sirius was already asleep.

That was the first night Sirius would spend in the Room of Requirement, breathing into the darkness, the shadows around him moving, waving, bending like the vicious branches of the Whomping Willow. There would be nights and nights to come, times where he knew from the moment he walked into a room that he wasn’t welcome there, that James and Remus and Peter were never really going to forgive him.

The next morning, Sirius went anxiously to Quidditch practice. As he stepped onto the field, broomstick clenched tightly in one hand. His shoulders were tense as he walked, his eyes fixed on James, who was laughing with Arnold Pierce and not looking at him.

Sirius cleared his throat, and James glanced over briefly, but there was none of the usual affection in his face. There were veins in his forehead standing out, and he stood stiffly, straining not to look at Sirius.

“Right,” James said; and he was addressing all of them, but his gaze slid over Sirius without seeing him. “Drills. Everyone. Now.”

“The bloody hell’s up with him?” Cail muttered, and Sebastian nodded, frowning.

“What’s about to be ‘up’ is your broomstick up your arse if you don’t get in the air,” James snapped, and Sirius chuckled despite himself.

Sebastian rolled his eyes, and the team rose in unison, coordinated, like a school of fish. They sensed each other’s movements before they happened, they moved as one; the quiet shift of broomsticks and huffed out breaths of spring air was the only sound of the team. This was the magic of James as a Quidditch captain — somewhere along the line that year, he’d shaped them into something more than a house Quidditch team. They knew each other, trusted each other implicitly, and this flawless coordination made it clear. James could watch them and be proud, most days, but in that moment he would only look at Sirius and think that he was sorry, and that he was angry, and that he couldn’t reconcile the two in his head.

Chapter End Notes

so jk rowling released an ebook and said how to become an animagus should i go back and add scenes to some old chapters or should i ignore it completely
“For Merlin’s sake, Prongs,” Peter said as they walked to Potions together, Remus behind them in casual conversation with Lily, and Sirius nowhere to be seen. “You’ve been avoiding him for the better part of a month.”

“I resent that,” James said lightly, though there was nothing light in the determined set of his jaw. “Resent what you like,” Peter said irritably. If the split had been detrimental to James, and certainly to Sirius, it had been nothing but beneficial to Peter, who was now, for all intents and purposes, James’ best friend. It was all he’d ever aspired to be, but it was a full time job. “It’s true. We’re the Marauders —"

“We were.” James said tersely. “We’re nothing now.”

“That’s not true,” Peter said. “You can think it, but it isn’t. We’ve been best friends since first year, and whatever you think about Sirius now, you can’t forget that. He’s still part of your family.”

“I haven’t told my parents about it,” James said dully. "They’d be more angry with me than they'd be with him."

“Because you want to forgive him,” Peter insisted. “You want things to go back to normal.”

“That’s not going to happen. I can’t — I can’t forgive him for what he did,” James said.

“To Remus. Not to you. To Remus.”

“And I’m supposed to forgive him because it didn’t affect me directly?” James asked coolly.

Peter shook his head, floppy, dust-colored hair shaking over his forehead. “That isn’t what I said. I said that even Remus is getting closer to forgiving him.”

“You wouldn’t know it from talking to him,” James said, a dark edge to his voice. “He complained for an hour last night about Sirius throwing himself on Amos Diggory — who, by the way, I’m almost certain doesn’t play for that team — to make him jealous.”

“I wasn’t listening,” Peter said unapologetically. “I had homework. And I want us to move past this, it’s driving me mad.”

“Go mad, then,” James said, dropping into his seat. He propped his feet up on the desk and waited, casually, for Lily Evans to take her assigned seat next to him. He was more irritating than ever in those few months, always picking fights, full of an uncontrollable restlessness that expressed itself in the form of tapping feet and a running mouth that never grew quiet.

Remus sat on the other side of Peter, sinking into his desk. He buried his head in his arms, taking deep, shaking breaths. He could feel Sirius’s eyes on his back, knew he was being watched, and the thought made him sick. No matter how they’d pretended that they were alright, that they were all still friends, it felt like something their friendship wasn’t going to survive. They were barely speaking to each other, how could they even pretend that nothing was wrong?

“Lupin,” James said; their Marauder nicknames were a thing of the past, now, and they behaved like the other boys of their age, calling each other by surnames only, carrying on a friendship that wasn’t quite like it had been before. It was shallower, more hollow, almost. The affection was genuine, still, but that was all that remained of what had been a group of boys who loved each other so much they hardly had space for anyone else. “You alright?”

“Fine,” Remus replied, not looking up.

“Did you write the essay?” James asked.

“Seventeen inches of parchment,” Remus replied, and lifted his head briefly to smooth the parchment on his desk. “Why?”

“I wrote fourteen,” James said. Why was it so uncomfortable to talk to Remus? It was like they were strangers now, all of them, strangers who knew each others' secrets.

“Knowing you, it’s the best fourteen inches Slughorn’s ever read,” Remus said, with a touch of his old, dry humor. James chuckled.

“Sorry I’m late,” Slughorn boomed, sweeping into the dungeons with all the impressiveness that a very short man with a blonde handlebar mustache could manage. “I’ll be assigning partners for your
O.W.L preparative brewing session this morning. I trust you're all prepared?"
“Wonderful,” Peter groaned; it was always his luck to be paired with a Slytherin.
“Mr. Pettigrew,” Slughorn said, crossing the classroom to adjust a photograph of himself with the Minister of Magic, smiling and waving, which was about to topple off his desk. “You will be paired with Miss Evans.”
Lily smiled at Peter with some degree of warmth, and James muttered something under his breath that was less than complimentary towards Peter. Peter only shrugged in response, unable to quite believe his luck.
“Mr. Potter,” Slughorn said. “You will work with Mr. Black.”
James glanced at Sirius, who appeared to be biting back an argument, and nodded.
The two of them worked side by side, none of the casual ease of the past lingering in their movements.
They had once moved in sync, almost identically; they had been better than brothers, they had been mirror images of each other, and yet just different enough. Now, they’d fallen out of step, and it seemed they might never make their way back in.
“Flobberworm intestine,” Sirius said. His voice was familiar and unfamiliar. It was not what Sirius’s first words to James in a month were meant to be, but at the same time, it was, on an objective level, extremely funny.
“Right,” James replied with only a hint of a smile, passing the previously mentioned intestine to Sirius. Both had a sort of manic energy to them now, an anger at each other, at everything.
They finished their potion flawlessly within minutes; even when they were hardly speaking to each other, there was an undeniable talent that both of them possessed. While by no means the best in their class — Severus’s potion was so perfect he could have bottled and sold it — they were certainly capable. As Slughorn applauded their work, Sirius glared at James, unable to handle the silence for a second longer.
“Are we going to talk about this?” Sirius demanded.
“Talk about what?”
“Potter,” Sirius said flatly.
James made a shocked noise that sounded like, “urpfhlighlig.” He cleared his throat. “Listen -- Sirius, I'd like to forgive you but I...justcan'tandimissyouandneedtoangrywithyouforawhile.”
“What?” Sirius interrupted. “Slow down.”
“Erm. I want to…not talk about this, now,” James said determinedly. “Or, well, really, ever. Sorry.”
Sirius arched a single eyebrow. “Sorry?”
“That’s right,” James’ voice was harsh and not really his own.
“I don’t really give a fuck whether you want to talk about this, actually,” Sirius said. “It’s been long enough. I’ve given you all time and space and whatever the fuck else you wanted. I’m ready to be the Marauders again.”
“That’s not your call.”
“Whose is it, then? Yours? Peter’s? Remus — Remus’s?” He still stammered over Remus’s name. It was difficult to think about him, and it hurt to see his face.
“It’s not anyone’s call because it’s not going to happen,” James persisted. “Leave it, Black.”
“No,” Sirius snapped. “You’ve been doing this for weeks, and I’m not going to sit here and let — “
“Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, do I need to send you outside?” Slughorn demanded, and if he’d been expecting a meek response, he certainly didn’t get it.
“Sure,” Sirius said, already halfway to the door. He didn’t check to see if James would follow him; he already knew he would. Maybe it was some leftover reflex from when they’d been friends, but James had stood up almost instantly, seemingly before he really noticed he’d done it.
“Detention, Mr. Black!” Slughorn called after Sirius, but detention could no longer even attempt to intimidate him. He was living through hell with the others, watching them avoid his gaze, knowing what he’d done and how he deserved never to be forgiven for it.
Before they were even fully outside, James swung his fist back and hit Sirius as hard as he could. His fist collided with the side of Sirius’s face, sending ringing through his head. His vision shifted,
blurred, and came back into focus. He saw James' face, twisted with anger, his lips curled. Sirius gritted his teeth through the pain radiating from his cheek and punched James in the stomach. James let out a strangled gasp, dropping to the ground, landing on his back with a loud smack. His head struck the stone, bouncing once, almost comically. “Shit,” James groaned. Sirius didn’t apologize, but he helped James to his feet, practically yanking the other boy's arm out of its socket. “So that’s how we’re settling this, then?”

“Got a better idea?” James demanded.

Their fight stopped being a cause-effect sort of thing and was more a ruthless attack, no beginning or end, struggling, kicking, fighting. Sirius wasn’t sure if he wanted more to hurt James or to be hurt, to face what he deserved for what he’d done.

“When are you going to —“ Sirius cut off his own sentence by hitting James in the face. “Fucking get over it?”

“I can’t,” James spat blood over his lip.

“Why?”

“Why the bloody hell do you think?” James demanded. “You crossed a line, Sirius, there’s no coming back from that!”


“No, tell me! I told Snape about Remus, that was shit, I know, but what did I do to make you hate me?”

James was so surprised at this that he stopped the fight entirely, taking several steps back. “I…I…”

“You’ve got just as little cause to be angry with me as Peter, and he’s forgiven me —“

“It isn’t —“

“It’s you being the same stubborn git you always are!”

“What’s wrong with being stubborn?” James demanded.

“You’re being an arse,” Sirius said. “And that’s putting it nicely.”

“That’s what you think?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? Well —“ as people began to file from the Potions classroom, James lowered his voice slightly, but not much. “I just can’t do it.” James admitted.

“What?”

“Forgive you.”

Sirius shook his head. “Bullshit,” he said.

“I need to be angry with you,” James persisted. His voice was muffled by his really quite spectacular swollen lip. “For now, at least.”

“Why?” Sirius demanded roughly.

“You didn’t just betray Remus that night,” James said.

Sirius looked at him with desperation briefly glimmering in the depths of his dark eyes. “If you can’t forgive me, I swear I’ll —“

“What?” James interrupted bluntly, not appearing to care one way or the other. “Off yourself?”

Sirius gave a brief twitch of his head that could’ve been interpreted as a nod.

“That’s not fair.”

Sirius was silent. I don’t care I don’t care I don’t care —

“You can’t force me to want to be friends with you because of that — it’s not — it’s not right.”

James protested weakly, concerned, despite his convictions. Was there ever a time when he wasn't concerned for Sirius, when he didn't see Sirius's eyes flickering with the memories of Grimmauld Place?

“Ted’s friend was killed by Death Eaters yesterday,” Sirius interrupted. “For crossing the street. Have you ever heard of such a --? He was in a Muggle neighborhood,” he stopped, voice rough.

“Ted…?”

“Andromeda’s husband.”

“Ah,” James nodded.
“And the girl who grew up down the street from Peter had to move houses because Lucius Malfoy was seen in their neighborhood and Peter’s mum warned them to get out. Not that you’d know that, even though Peter mentioned it yesterday,” Sirius laughed bitterly.

“Why…?” James asked. He wasn’t entirely certain what he was asking.

“There’s awful shit going on right now. Really awful. And we’re probably going to have to die for it,” James opened his mouth to protest, but it was pointless, almost. Sirius was only stating out loud what they both knew, had known since the war started. It was becoming clear, as they watched their parents, either too cowardly or too proud to fight, that it was going to be up to them to change things, because the way things were, nothing was ever going to be any different.

“No, I’ve thought about it. I’ve made my peace with it. What I mean is, if that’s what’s coming for us, we don’t have the time to hold grudges. People are being betrayed by their own family, we can’t afford not to trust each other.”

James took this in silently, hesitating, almost shaking. “…Alright.”

“Alright?”

“Yeah,” James stood, gingerly touching his face. “Bloody shit, did you have to hit me so hard?”

Sirius shrugged. “You deserved it.”

James laughed, though it hurt his mouth terribly, and threw his arm around Sirius, walking with him down the corridor. It was over, just like that, everything. James was still angry and Sirius was still desperately sorry and desperately in love with Remus, but it was over.

As soon as Peter saw them, his face lit up.

“Thank Merlin,” he breathed, and Sirius laughed. “I was going mad! Is it over, then?”

James and Sirius looked at each other and both nodded. “It’s over.”

“…Alright.”

“What the bloody hell d’you mean ‘it’s over’?” Remus demanded in the common room that night as James explained the day’s events, pressing ice against his bruised face.

“What I said,” James said. “I’m not going to hate him anymore.”

“I never hated him,” Remus said. “I’d never…”

“I’m not telling you to forgive him,” James said.


“What?” James asked, with one of his classic eye-rolls.

“Don’t hex me for saying this,” Remus warned, and James chuckled darkly. “I’m not joking, don’t —“

“Fine, fine, go ahead,” James said, gesturing with one hand.

“I can’t be friends with him because I’m still in love with him,” Remus ran a hand through his hair.

“Oh,” James stopped in his tracks (he’d been pacing, as usual — before everything, Sirius had used to joke that he would wear holes in the carpet.) He stared at Remus, slack-jawed. “Oh — Remus, can’t you see what this means?”

“…”

“He still loves you, and you still love him, so — so —“

“He doesn’t love me,” Remus said. “He never did. He never would’ve done that if he loved me.”

“He did,” James vowed.

“Past tense,” Remus muttered, and forced a slight smile. “It’s alright, though. He and Diggory are probably better suited than he and I are.”

James shot him a look; it was excessively clear to him that Amos Diggory and Sirius Black, while not in any way in a relationship, were obviously involved in a plot to drive Remus to insanity.

“Don’t make me hex you, Lupin. He’s just trying to make you jealous.”

Remus sighed.

“It’s working, isn’t it?” James teased.

“No! Erm…well, slightly,” he confessed, furious with himself. “Should it?”

“Sirius certainly seems to think so,” James replied, abandoning the ice on the table and instead lighting a cigarette. Remus was struck by the thought that maybe he wasn’t the one who’d been hurt.
the most when Sirius had told Snape about him. In a way, a strange, backwards sort of way, it had broken something inside James, had made him more reckless than ever before.

“Don’t smoke inside,” Remus chastised, but James ignored him.

“The question here is, what are you going to do about it?” James asked, exhaling a cloud of smoke into the air. The firelight was casting shadows around his cuts and bruises, flickering light on his face.

“Nothing. I can’t — how can I ever trust him again after what he did?”

“I don’t know,” James admitted. “I can’t even pretend to get it. But listen, Moons——”

Remus’s heart skipped a beat at the sound of his old nickname. Maybe this all was getting closer to the way things had been before, maybe this could all finally be over, maybe it was going to be alright.

“Listen, it’s all going to turn out fine,” James promised, at once uncomfortably aware of his misstep.

He adjusted his glasses on his nose and cleared his throat. “We’ll work this out like we do everything else.”

“I hope so.”

Sirius had honestly intended to snog Amos Diggory in the Forbidden Forest, walk out, and go about his day. Perhaps it wasn’t the most elegant of plans, but it seemed to be making Remus very jealous. Five quills had been snapped that morning alone, in what Sirius rather hoped was a jealous rage.

However, for all Sirius’s less than honorable intentions, he had not done any of those things. He had, indeed, gone into the Forbidden Forest with Amos Diggory, where Diggory had proceeded to kiss him chastely on the cheek and tell him he wasn’t interested.

Sirius had, to his great embarrassment, heaved an enormous sigh of relief.

“What?” Amos asked, with some amusement.

“Nothing,” Sirius muttered, but he was gazing out of the forest, and there was a faraway look in his eyes.

“You’re still carrying a torch for Lupin, then?” Amos asked, not unkindly.

Sirius nodded miserably. “I hate him,” he said, with sudden, violent anger evident in his tone.

“Except I don’t, because I deserve it.”

“No you don’t.” Amos said decisively, climbing onto a low hanging branch. He sat there, legs dangling, and Sirius looked up at him with a slight smirk. “If you want him back, talk to him.”

“It’s not that simple. If you knew what I — how could he love me after that?” Sirius asked, climbing up after Amos. He sat next to him, the forest blue and still in the spring light, not exactly cold, but nowhere close to warm. A herd of thestrals moved between the trees, little more than shadows.

“Could it hurt to try?” Amos asked.

“It…”

“It wouldn’t make things worse, would it?” he persisted.

“I…”

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I dunno,” Sirius sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Try,” Amos advised. “Trust me, it’s worth it.”

Sirius looked at him for a moment. “He’d be right to never forgive me.”

“Don’t,” Amos said quietly. “Don’t sit here wallowing. You’ve been doing that for weeks. I still don’t know what you did, or why Lupin’s so pissed at you, but — it’s got to end.”

“I don’t know if it can. James has forgiven me, but that’s not the same…” Sirius trailed off.

“If you don’t go, I’ll push you out of this tree,” Amos warned, jumping down himself. He landed effortlessly, with all the trained grace that Sirius had. All the students who’d grown up with money moved the same way; gracefully, lazily, unhurried.

“Fine,” Sirius smirked.

“Let me know how it goes, yeah?”

“If it goes well,” Sirius said, absently scratching at one of his arms. “The entire bloody school will know.”
He found Remus at the edge of the Black Lake, practicing freezing spells on the water. As ice frosted over the rippling water, spreading from the center outwards, Remus looked up and saw Sirius. His heart skipped a beat, the spell wavering, the ice disappearing instantly.

Sirius walked up next to him, with a slight smirk.

Remus ignored him and began the spell again; ice spread slowly over the black water, rippling pondweed freezing into place.

“How long are you going to keep ignoring me for, then? All month? The rest of the year? Because I’m about this close to setting the castle on fire if it’ll just get you to look at me.” Sirius confessed. He threw a stone at the water, and it skidded across the ice before Remus’s spell failed, and it sank.

Remus was silent for several long moments, staring at his reflection in the water. He slowly let his wand fall to his side and looked at Sirius, his heart racing.

Sirius gazed back, and slowly, the corners of his mouth tugged into a smile. “Forever, then?”

Remus began to smile too, and it felt good to smile and have it be real, to smile and actually feel something other than crushing emptiness. “Yeah,” he said at last. “Most likely.”

Sirius blinked in surprise. “I should probably start by saying how sorry I —“

“No,” Remus interrupted.

“No —?”

“No, don’t,” Remus said, standing, dusting grass off his robes.

“What? Why?”

“Don’t apologize,” Remus said.

Sirius was cautiously quiet, his eyes fixed on Remus’s face. “Why?”

“I’m not angry with you,” Remus said. It was a relief to finally talk to Sirius, to hear his voice without the slightest trace of hostility in it. “I was, at first, but…”

“James talked to you, then?”

“No,” Remus said. “He wanted us to work this out on our own. Sirius, what you did, it was awful, but… I…”

“Can I go first?”

Remus nodded.

“I’ve spent the past month hating myself for what I did to you, but I really… I wasn’t thinking about you when I did it, and I know how stupid and selfish that is, but I only wanted to hurt Snape, and I’ll never… I can’t take that back, but I can tell you that seeing you hating me is worse than anything I could feel about myself. Even if you can’t forgive me, even if you never want to see me again, I need you to know that —”

“I forgive you,” Remus said simply, looking Sirius directly in the eye.

“How can you?” Sirius asked, with a sad little smirk.

“Because I love you,” Remus confessed. Leaves rustled around him, and the water lapped at his feet, and it was true. Despite everything, it was true.

Sirius moved closer to him, reaching a hand out. Remus looked down at Sirius’s outstretched hand and took it in his, and both smiled.

It was Remus who kissed Sirius first; this would be what they would tell James, much later, one drunken night during the war when it was all starting to fall apart.

Then, when telling the same story at Grimmauld Place many years later, they would say that it wasn’t so much that. It was more that they looked at each other, full of love and longing, and kissed like the world was ending.

It wasn’t the first time the world had ended for them; nor would it be the last.

“James is going to,” Sirius panted in between kisses, his hands tangled in Remus’s hair. “Flip his shit when he finds out.”

“Let’s not tell him,” Remus replied, his hand gently brushing the side of Sirius’s face.

Sirius thought he must have seemed confused, although really all he was thinking was that he wanted to keep kissing Remus forever.

“What, you want to pretend we hate each other?”

“No,” Remus laughed slightly; how strange it was, the idea that he could ever feel anything but love
towards Sirius. Even in his anger and betrayal, he’d never once hated Sirius, never once wished him out of existence. “I just...I think we were…too obvious.”
Sirius rolled his eyes. “Subtlety has never been my strong suit.”
Remus grinned, wrapping his arms around Sirius’s waist to draw him closer. “Or mine, really, but we’ll have to make do.”
“Why?” Sirius complained.
“I’m not saying we have to keep it a secret,” Remus said. “I just...he forced us to get together the first time — not that I didn’t want to, of course, it was just all very public — and James hasn’t had much to do with this...so I thought that...”
Sirius smiled; Remus didn’t see it so much as feel it. Sirius’s smiles, when they were genuine, which they seldom were, were like being bathed in sunlight. “D’you remember that? We were at his house and there were all those bloody fairy lights everywhere, and he forced you to admit your feelings for me in front of him and Peter?”
“It was possibly the most humiliating moment of my entire life,” Remus said. “Including the time that I tried to play Quidditch.”
“You weren’t that terrible.”
“Padfoot,” Remus smirked. “I was awful. But falling headfirst off a broomstick in front of James’ parents is surprisingly not the first time I’d tried to play Quidditch.”
“No?” Sirius asked in surprise.
“Unfortunately,” Remus said. “Right before I started at Hogwarts, I was playing Quidditch with some of the other wizard children on my street, since my parents had finally decided to let me out of the house to make friends,” there was vague discomfort with the memory in his expression, but he suppressed it with another smile. “Not only did I fall, I fell off the roof of a church, really, spectacularly broke my nose, and was so upset that I accidentally caused the entire town to freeze over.”
“The entire town?”
“It’s a small town,” Remus defended. “My nose is still crooked to this day, look,” he pointed to his nose, which was, indeed, slightly crooked — by no means to the extent that Dumbledore’s was, but undeniably crooked all the same.
“Was it at least winter?” Sirius asked.
“No,” Remus disparaged. “It was July!”
“Same thing in Wales, really.”
“Did I ever even tell you I used to live in Wales?” Remus asked, pressing a quick kiss to Sirius’s temple as they turned to walk back up to the castle.
“Didn’t have to,” Sirius said smugly. “You had such a strong Welsh accent first year most people couldn’t understand you.”
“Sod off,” Remus joked, and it felt right to be laughing and joking with Sirius again, to be alright, to feel like everything was going to work out fine.

James had just returned from the ruthless hexing of a few fourth years, who had, quote unquote, “been irritating.” His fists were clenched, suggesting that perhaps this had been more than a harmless jinx. He’d charmed the corridor to dump buckets of ice cold water over the heads of every student that walked by, and was, as a consequence, in an in-between sort of mood. It was a dangerous way for him to feel, one that had become very common for him in recent months, and very few could guess what reaction awaited them when approaching James in this state.
When James stormed into Gryffindor tower with a scathing, “bowtruckles,” in the direction of the Fat Lady, he swore at a first year who’d gotten in his way as he stormed up the stairs, and all at once it was clear that James Potter was prepared for a fight, no matter how you looked at it. The door to their dormitory was locked, but he didn’t think much of it as he forced it open; if you jiggled the lock hard enough, the door would open, no matter how many locking spells you put on it.
He flopped unceremoniously onto his bed, throwing an arm over his eyes, and was only interrupted from his brief, blissful nap by the sounds of unmistakable moaning coming from the next bed over.
He glanced at Remus’s bed, which lay empty, and then over at Sirius’s bed. The curtains were mostly drawn, with a slight gap through which Sirius and Remus’s entangled legs were briefly visible.

James blinked, mouth hanging open in shock. “WHAT —“ he began loudly, leaping to his feet. “THE BLOODY FUCK?”

There was a distinct sound of scuffling and Sirius’s face appeared in the crack of the curtains. “Jimmy,” he said in a slightly strangled voice. “Didn’t know you were here.”

“Lupin, I know you’re there,” James said, sounding not even slightly calm. Remus poked his head out briefly, his cheeks flushed bright red. “Oh, hello, James,” he said politely. “Didn’t see you there.”

“Obviously,” James replied, with an eerie calm that was much worse than any yelling he could’ve done. “Did you two just not think to mention to me that you’re back together, or was this something I wasn’t intended to find out about?”

“Both?” Sirius asked hopefully.

“How could you not TELL me?” James demanded. “It was — we were — we’re just —” Remus spluttered.

“How could you not TELL ME?” James asked again. “We — James —”

“I’VE SPENT WEEKS TRYING TO GET YOU TO EVEN LOOK AT EACH OTHER! I THINK I DESERVED A BIT OF A WARNING!” “Listen,” Remus pleaded.

“How long exactly has this been going on?”

“A week,” Sirius muttered.

James’ hazel eyes went wide behind his glasses. “A — a week?”

Both Sirius and Remus were silent.

James sat, running his hands through his hair. “That’s…” they almost expected him to yell again, but he didn’t. “And…you didn’t…it’s…This is bloody brilliant,” he said at last, shocked. “I mean, after everything that — it’s a miracle — you’re even talking to each other!”

“I think he needs a drink,” Sirius commented to Remus, who managed a smile.

“I bloody well do,” James boomed, leaping to his feet. “Moons, get the fire whiskey!”

“I’m, er, not going to do that,” Remus said, sounding quite embarrassed.

James didn’t even hesitate. “I’ll be back,” he said. “Got to tell Peter.”

“James,” Remus called after him. “It’s meant to be a secret.”

“Sorry, can’t hear you over the sound of me telling the entire castle,” James replied, and with that, he was gone.

Sirius and Remus looked at each other and smiled.
Aspirations and Desperations

“This morning marks the beginning of your career meetings with your heads of house,” Dumbledore said over breakfast. Somehow, although most of the school looked as if they’d been dragged backwards through the Forbidden Forest at this hour of the morning, not a hair in his sweeping grey beard was out of place. “Your lessons will be scheduled as usual, although the fifth years will miss a great deal of class in order to discuss their futures.”

There was a slight cheer at the prospect of missing class, but the reminder that they were expected to, by this point in the year, know exactly what they planned to do with their lives was deeply disheartening.

“How I have no life plans whatsoever,” he draped his arm lazily around Remus. “And am quite honestly planning to die before the age of twenty five.”

James laughed, but it hadn’t quite been a joke. “Listen, at least you’re missing History of Magic for your interview. I’m missing Defense Against the Dark Arts,” he sighed. “And I firmly believe that if I don’t learn how to duel Snape properly, I may die.”

“Potter, why are you still in your Quidditch robes?” Professor Sprout asked, bustling past him.

“For the aesthetic, Professor,” he called after her, but she was already gone.

Remus snorted.

“Remus, what do you want to do after Hogwarts?” Lily asked conversationally, leaning towards him with her green eyes earnest.

Remus’s face drained of blood. “Oh, er, I, er…I really haven’t decided yet,” he muttered.

“Oh,” Lily frowned slightly, creating a dimple on her forehead. It was such an unimportant detail, but James would remember it clearly for years. “I’d’ve thought you’d have a full life plan by now?”

Remus managed a weak laugh. “No,” he said, turning back to the Marauders. “No, that’s not really been an option for me.”

Peter’s face crumpled in concern. “Remus…”

“Pete, it’s fine,” Remus said, adjusting his Prefect’s badge on his chest. He forced an unsteady smile. “I’m going back to Gryffindor Tower, I’ll talk to you later,” he said, practically leaping from his seat.

“Should go after him,” Sirius said distractedly; but he’d hardly seemed to notice how upset Remus had been at the mere prospect of having any sort of future, of seeing a life beyond Hogwarts.

James nodded, but Sirius did not stand. Within moments it was forgotten; how strange it was that such a thing could be so significant and yet barely noticeable, something none had recognized until they found Remus in their dormitory, later, shaking so badly he could barely stand. They were all silent; they always were when one of them was upset. Peter wrapped a blanket around Remus’s trembling shoulders, and Sirius held his hand, and James sat and talked to him quietly.

“McGonagall would never lie to you to make you feel better,” James said. “If she says there’s a chance, there’s a chance, right?”

Remus nodded shakily. “I just…” he sighed. “I took all the most difficult classes, I study twice as much as the lot of you, and I’ll still never —“ he let out a shuddering gasp. “I didn’t want to think about this. I didn’t want to think about what’s going to happen to me when —“ his next words did not need to be spoken. It was abundantly clear that he, out of the four Marauders, was the one for whom Hogwarts offered the most protection, the most safety, and the one who would suffer the most if there was a breach of those castle walls before he was ready to face what lay outside them.

“Mr. Black,” McGonagall said calmly. “I must ask you again, what do you intend to do with your future?”
“Er,” Sirius said, and forced a slight smirk across his face. “Well, why don’t we talk about something else, Professor?”

“I must remind you that this is a career meeting,” McGonagall said sternly.

“Right. What about your career, Professor? Are you satisfied teaching Transfiguration? Do you ever regret not remaining in the field of Quidditch after your injury?”

“That’s hardly relevant,” McGonagall said, unruffled. “Mr. Black, I must insist.”

“Right, er, I suppose…”

“You are Keeper for Gryffindor Quidditch team, is that correct?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“And you have considerable talent in this area, although not quite the commitment needed to become a professional Quidditch player,” McGonagall mused. “Would you be interested in a Quidditch-related career?”

“I hardly think that with everything going on in our world right now Quidditch should be my or anyone’s main priority,” Sirius said.

“So you wish to be involved in the war, then?” McGonagall asked.

Sirius nodded, and at once, his expression was grave. “I have to do something.”

“That responsibility does not lie on the shoulders of our students,” McGonagall told him, but he wasn’t listening. “Very well, Mr. Black. What careers have you considered?”

“I haven’t,” he replied bluntly. “People in my family don’t need jobs.”

“I take it you disagree with that,” McGonagall replied calmly. “Would Magical Law Enforcement be of any interest to you?”

Sirius considered briefly, and at once, it seemed like such an obvious answer that he had to laugh at himself for not thinking of it before. “Yes.”

McGonagall nodded as if she’d expected this. “You’ll need Transfiguration, of course, and you could get by with Exceeds Expectations, but I fully expect an Outstanding from you.”

Sirius nodded. “Right.”

“And you’ll need Defense Against the Dark Arts as well. I’ve heard that you’re top of your class.”

Sirius nodded, a slight smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “You’ve heard correctly, Professor.”

“You’ll also need Herbology, Potions, and Charms. I trust that won’t be an issue?”

“No,” Sirius replied calmly.

“Although I certainly see that you are determined to make a difference in Magical Law Enforcement, it is an extremely difficult career. I do not worry for your talent, Mr. Black, but your dedication may require some work. In fact, I daresay I have not seen you commit to any activity in the longterm in all your years at Hogwarts.”

“Blame inbreeding,” Sirius replied.

McGonagall ignored him. “However, if you are truly serious about a career in Magical Law Enforcement, I am prepared to help you as much as I am able. If, that is, you are certain about this.”

“I am,” Sirius said.

Lily Evans waited outside McGonagall’s office, nervously wringing her hands. “Miss Evans,” McGonagall called as a green-looking Bella Ernest slipped out of the room.

Lily sat, doing her best to remember not to tap her foot. There was silence in the office — why isn’t she saying anything? Should I be saying something? Which one of us is supposed to talk first? Can I get a guidebook about this?

“Miss Evans,” McGonagall said. “I see that you are quite excellent at Charms and Potions.”

“Er…thank you, Professor,” Lily said, a hand going to her head to smooth a stray tendril of dark red hair back behind her ear.

“Have you had any thoughts as to what it is you might want to do in the future?” McGonagall asked.

Lily had never been more convinced that McGonagall’s sole purpose on earth was to wreak havoc upon her life.

“No,” she admitted. “I…’ve considered becoming a professor, and…and when I was young I wanted to be a…er…a veterinarian.”
McGonagall nodded sagely, although Lily was almost certain the professor would have no idea what a veterinarian was. “Well, Miss Evans, you are certainly a very gifted witch, and dedicated to your studies. May I recommend you involve yourself with athletic activities as well?”

“Quidditch?” Lily asked. “Oh, no, that’s a horrible idea. I can’t —”

“Very well,” McGonagall interrupted. “I have noticed that you advocate for the rights of Muggle-born students.”

“I wouldn’t say advocate,” Lily explained, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks. “But er, educating and informing, absolutely.”

“Have you considered a career in diplomacy?”

Lily almost laughed at this, but instead she smiled politely. “I hadn’t, but that would be a career I would be interested in pursuing. What would that entail?”

McGonagall smiled ever so slightly as she watched the girl’s demeanor change entirely. The tenseness had gone out of her shoulders, she was smiling. It was clear, instantly, that Lily Evans had discovered what it was she wanted to do with the rest of her life. “I recommend at least five O.W.L.s,” McGonagall said. “Although you hardly have cause to worry about your qualifications. Other than your unfortunate Transfiguration marks, I expect great things from you.”

Lily smiled, and found herself mentally writing a letter to Petunia.

Dear Tuney,

McGonagall said she expects great things from me. Can you imagine? Me! Mum would be thrilled to know I’m going into diplomacy — I know it’s surprising, but I finally feel like I know who I want to be.

Love,

Lily

“Mr. Lupin, I do appreciate you agreeing to schedule a career meeting with me,” McGonagall said as he approached her desk.

“Of course, Professor.” He sat, folding his hands in his lap.

“I realize how hopeless your condition may make having any future job seem, but —”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” Remus said. “I’ve done the research, and I know that there isn’t much chance of…” his shoulders slumped.

“I do not respond well to self-pity, Mr. Lupin,” McGonagall warned him. “Listen carefully. You have many options, despite what you may have convinced yourself. While your condition is an obstacle you shall certainly have to overcome, it does not have to hinder the rest of your life.”

When Remus heard these words (not for the first time) it was at once clear to him that she was right, that it wasn’t hopeless, that he was, really, truly was, going to be alright. Every time she told him this, each time she reminded him that he had a chance at happiness, it rang instantaneously true. She was right, despite what he spent most of his time attempting to convince himself.

“Right,” he said. “Absolutely.”

McGonagall’s lips twitched into something like a smile. “There are many options for young people with your condition.”

Remus bit back a retort; that there was no one his age with his condition, that only one werewolf had been heartless enough to bite a child.

“For example,” she continued. “You could advocate for awareness of lycanthropy. You could teach at Hogwarts, or you could —”

“Become a death eater,” Remus said hollowly, and he could tell that the words had done exactly what he’d intended. “Because that’s what everyone thinks I’m going to do, right? Everyone who knows what I am.”

“Mr. Lupin, I highly doubt that any of the people who know you would believe that,” McGonagall replied, but there was a kind of understanding in her steely eyes. “Please, Mr. Lupin, give yourself the best chance you can. I understand that it is difficult when all your classmates have opportunities you may never get, but you are far too young to be giving up on yourself.”

Remus nodded, turning the words over in his mind. “Of course, Professor.”
“Have a biscuit, Lupin, and I’ll present you with the options.”

“Are you nervous?” Peter asked James. “I’m nervous. I’m so nervous I can barely think. Am I shaking? I feel like I’m shaking.”
“You’re shaking,” James told him. “Merlin, calm down, mate. It’s a career meeting, not the Wizengamot.”
“Right,” Peter said unconvincingly. “What if she asks me what I want to do with my life?”
“Well, considering this is a career meeting,” James said sardonically. “I seriously doubt that she’s going to ask you about the weather.”
Peter shrugged. “What if I don’t know what to say?”
“Well, it’s not Arithmancy, Pete, you can’t just sit there and nod until class is over.”
Peter frowned. “I can’t?”
“Likely not,” James shrugged. “Ah, look, it’s your turn. Good luck, mate.”
“If I die in there, tell my dogs I love them,” Peter said dismally.
“What about your mum?”
“Tell her she’s alright, I s’pose,” Peter replied with a little smirk, and James chuckled, clapping Peter on the back.
“Go on, mate, you’ve got this,” James said, and Peter walked through the doorway with increasing trepidation, his palms slick with sweat.
“Mr. Pettigrew, please take a seat.” McGonagall said, not even glancing up at him.
Peter nearly tripped over his own feet in his haste to sit.
“Now, Mr. Pettigrew, what is it that you aspire to do after Hogwarts?”
McGonagall peered at him over the frames of her square glasses, and arched a single, thin eyebrow.
“Cooking.”
“Er…yes? …I made a soufflé once.”
“A souffle.”
“Right, yeah,” Peter said. “I mean, it didn’t turn out fantastical, it was really…er…lumpy. But…I mean, I’m not —“
“While a perfectly acceptable career goal,” McGonagall said. “I do not think I can encourage a student to take O.W.L.s and become a chef.”
“Right,” Peter said. “Right, of course. Er…maybe I’d like to…work at Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor?”
“The bar for your aspirations is unbelievably low,” McGonagall said. “Surely, Mr. Pettigrew, a fairly talented wizard such as yourself can think of something productive to devote your life to.”
Peter nodded shakily. “Er…of course.”
“Despite what you may believe, Mr. Pettigrew, you have enough talent that there are endless opportunities for you.”
Peter was certain that no one had ever told him he had enough talent for anything, and he was even more certain that he didn’t quite believe her.
“So, Mr. Pettigrew, I will ask again. What do you want to do with your life?”
Peter cowered under her stern gaze; he was instantly convinced that no one had ever hated anyone as much as McGonagall had to hate him in that moment, hate his cowering and his stammering and his fear. How could she even stand to sit there across from him, frowning intently, waiting for him to speak?
“I…er…I dunno,” Peter had not thought about what he wanted to do with his life beyond whatever the others were doing, and was beginning to regret it. “I wanna…er…stop Voldemort.”
“And how, exactly, do you plan to do this?”
There was, Peter mused, a definite reason why he was rarely the one who made plans. “I…er…I hadn’t thought that far ahead.”
“You excel in the classes necessary for a career in healing, Mr. Pettigrew,” McGonagall pointed out, clearly amused by his floundering.
“Er…that’s…yeah, I could — I could do that.”

“Could?”

“I’d…I’d like that, yeah,” Peter said unconvincingly.

McGonagall nodded, seemingly satisfied. “To pursue a career as a healer, Mr. Pettigrew, you will require a minimum of five O.W.L.s this year and five N.E.W.T.s next year, with Outstanding or Exceeds Expectations in Potions, Transfiguration, Herbology, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Peter grimaced. “Five…” he said.

“Mr. Pettigrew,” McGonagall said; she sounded exasperated at the very least. “I do not appreciate laziness in my office.”

Peter flushed bright red. “Er…right.”

“Well, Mr. Pettigrew, if you are willing to put in a significant amount of effort, I see no reason why you might not become a healer.” She said this, Peter thought, in the patronizing tone of a mother telling her child that it was possible to be anything.

At a certain point in life, that stopped being true, and for Peter Pettigrew, that moment was there in McGonagall’s office, being told in no uncertain terms that it was only going to be possible for him to do what he wanted if he believed in himself.

The problem with Peter Pettigrew was that he had never, not for a second out of his entire life, believed in himself.

Alternatively, James Potter had experienced self-doubt so infrequently that he was convinced it was an emotion that only belonged in the hearts of those who were not strong enough to overcome it. This was his mistake when he swaggered into McGonagall’s office, sat, and smiled patiently at her.

“Ah, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Shall we start with Quidditch?”

This was not what he had been expecting, not in the slightest. James Potter, full of restless, nervous energy, had been ready to give McGonagall his rehearsed speech about how he had to save the world, about how he had long since felt like he had a greater purpose, and he wanted to use that purpose, to do something, anything.

He had not even thought about the possibility of Quidditch.

“A talent scout will be watching your next Quidditch game, and I have given him your name.”

“My name, Professor?” James asked.

“Yes, Mr. Potter. Or have you suddenly changed your mind, since the last five years at Hogwarts have been spent discussing your undying love of Quidditch?”

James blinked. She was right, of course, far be it from him to accuse McGonagall of anything other than correctness at all times, but in a way, she had also never been more wrong about him. “Of course not, Professor.”

“Mr. Potter,” she said. “I have seldom, in my years of teaching, seen a student with as much dedication to Quidditch as yourself. Any Quidditch team should consider themselves lucky to have you, and I, certainly, am proud to call you Gryffindor’s Quidditch captain. Especially at your age —“

this was as close to complimentary as James had ever seen McGonagall, and the thought brought a slight smile to his face. “There are abundant opportunities for a young Quidditch player of your talent, Mr. Potter.”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” James interrupted. “I don’t want to play Quidditch.”

“You — you don’t?” McGonagall asked, and if James hadn’t known any better he might’ve thought she sounded disappointed.

“No. Professor, I’m sorry, but I can’t let myself play Quidditch. Not knowing what I know.”

“And what is it that you know, Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked.

“That if we don’t do something about Voldemort, no one else is going to.”

McGonagall’s heart broke for him; this boy filled with so much talent and energy and raw potential, thinking that he had to throw away the rest of his life for a war he hadn’t started. She couldn’t help but think that he was already a soldier, although he had not seen battle or tasted blood, and that it was too late for him. For all of them.
“Very well, Mr. Potter,” she said. “I take it you’d like to become an Auror.”
James glanced out the window of her office at the empty Quidditch pitch and nodded. “Yes,” he replied.

“This is not where I pictured this going,” James said honestly.
“Is it ever?” Sirius asked, arching a single eyebrow.
“Yes.”

The situation was this: the Marauders had pulled off yet another prank, in which the second floor corridor had been filled with spiders. There were three problems with what should have been an innocent prank. One: they had been caught and labelled as the perpetrators almost immediately. Two: The corridor, upon being filled with spiders, had not been empty. Three: the people who had occupied this corridor were Lily Evans and Severus Snape.

“Spiders,” Peter said. “We had to go with spiders, and it had to be while Lily and Snape were patrolling.”
“I didn’t know they had patrols!” James protested. “Remus was supposed to know!”
“They were supposed to be patrolling the third floor,” Remus complained. “It isn’t my fault.”
“How exactly is that not your fault?” Sirius wanted to know.

Remus rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, Snivelly being trapped in the corridor covered in spiders is not exactly cause for concern, but Evans — Evans!” James ran a hand through his hair. “I can’t believe we did this to Evans.”
“You,” Remus corrected. “You did this. I was not complacent in the summoning or subsequent releasing of seven hundred spiders.”
“And that’s exactly what you’ll tell McGonagall while you serve all four hours of detention with us, I suppose?” James asked with a cheeky grin.

Remus gave a heaving sigh. “Alright, alright, you’ve made your point.”
“Poor Lily,” Peter said sympathetically, and James nodded.

“Probably,” Sirius said.

James kicked him halfheartedly in the shin. “I hope you tell her you said that when we’re happily married.”
“With your seven cats?” Sirius teased. “And Evans is happily married to someone who didn’t either ignore or actively torment her for the better part of five years?”
James snorted. “Seven! Try seventeen!”

The others roared with laughter as if this was the funniest thing any of them had ever heard; it was common courtesy among the Marauders to react like this any time any of them told a joke.

“Listen, I’ll see you in detention. I’ve got to go deal with the patrol schedule,” Remus ran a hand through his hair. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Why is it your responsibility?”
“Because I’m the only Prefect aside from Lily who actually cares about anything,” he sighed. “And now that she’s in the hospital wing covered in spider bites, the responsibility of order in this school falls to me.”
“We trust you, Remus,” Peter piped up. “You’re very responsible.”

Remus laughed.

“Evans,” James said, approaching her bed in the hospital wing.
She scowled at him. “Is there something you want? Or was covering me in spiders not enough for you?”
“I’d like to establish that it was an accident,” James said. “And I’m very sorry.”
“Really,” Lily asked dryly. “An accident. You accidentally released seven hundred spiders into the second floor corridor?”
“No, no, that part was definitely not an accident,” James clarified.

Lily shrugged. “Fair enough. I got detention because of you, y’know. Did you even get caught?”
“WHAT?” James demanded, outraged. “They can’t give YOU detention! You haven’t done anything!”
Lily only chuckled softly in response.
“I did get caught, though,” James said, and at this he began to spike up his hair again. Lily noticed immediately; she couldn’t stop noticing, and she didn’t quite know if the action was irritating her or not. “Detention tonight in the forest.”
“See you there, then,” Lily said bitterly.
“This can’t be your first detention, can it, Evans?” James asked.
“It isn’t,” Lily said coldly. “But I didn’t need another one to add to my record.”
James snorted and turned away. “See you ‘round, Evans.”
She did not reply.

“He’s cute,” Marlene said objectively, braiding Lily’s hair since Lily, with her bandaged hands, could not do it herself.
“Potter?” Lily rolled her eyes. “On an extremely objective level, he’s not terrible looking.”
“Have you seen his arms?” Marlene asked.
“What is it with you and arms?” Mary wanted to know.
“They’re nice,” Marlene said defensively. “He’s got a little scar on his shoulder. It’s adorable.”
“I know how he got that,” Mary said. “He was showing off for Black and fell off his broom.”
“It’s a miracle he hasn’t died yet,” Lily said, in a tone that suggested she wouldn’t care either way if he did.
“Act heartless all you want, Lil. Least he apologized.”
“And yet here I am, covered in spider bites, and Sev won’t even speak to me.”
“He hadn’t been speaking to you much anyway,” Mary said objectively. She handed Marlene a hair tie off her wrist, briefly exposing the ‘Mudblood’ scars that wouldn’t fade — it must have been a cursed knife, she’d realized, but it had been too late to do much of anything about it. Lily and Marlene either didn’t notice, or decided it wasn’t worth the effort to ask. Mary wouldn’t have blamed them for either one.
“That’s true,” Lily sighed, and glanced in the mirror. “Thanks, Marl,” she said, running her hand over her hair. Her bandaged finger caught in a red curl, and it pulled out of the braid and hung beside her face; if James had been looking at her, he would have smiled with that look he sometimes got, the look that meant that he knew Lily was the one and had known since the moment he’d met her.
“You’ve ruined it,” Marlene sighed dramatically, but there was a smile on her face.
“Don’t be late to detention, Lils,” Mary said, and Lily rose to her feet.
“Cruel and unusual punishment,” she declared. “Were the spider bites not enough?”
“Apparently not,” Marlene pushed Lily in the direction of the door. “We won’t wait for you,” she winked suggestively, and Lily threw a pillow at her.

Inside Hagrid’s hut, the four Marauders were visible, heads thrown back in laughter. Hagrid’s booming chuckle shook the foundations of the hut, and Lily found herself watching the scene through the window with a slight smile on her face.
“You should’ve seen it, Hagrid,” James was saying. His voice was slightly muffled through the thick glass of the hut windows, and Lily had to strain to hear. “Best play of my life.” The topic, Lily assumed, was the most recent Quidditch match, during which James had executed a play which, according to Mary, he’d been planning for months.
“It was magnificent,” Sirius agreed, leaning back against the wall. He had one arm around Remus and was stroking his shoulder gently. “Really, it’s a shame you missed it.”
“Yeah, yeah,” Hagrid grumbled. “I had some business to take care of. Y’know, official Hogwarts business.”

The Marauders nodded their understanding.

“Think it’s jus’ about time to start workin’,” Hagrid said, glancing out the window at the darkening sky. “Them bowtruckles, y’know, they’re hard ter catch.”

“Bowtruckles,” James rolled his eyes.

“C’mon, c’mon, I shouldn’t’a put it off this long anyway.” Hagrid said, leading them outside. Lily joined them silently, and was greeted only by Remus and Peter, while James and Sirius ignored her.

“Lily, good to see ya again,” Hagrid said with a warm smile, and she smiled back at him.

“Arligh’, so all yeh gotta do is collect ‘em from the trees and put ‘em in these buckets here,” Hagrid handed each of them a bucket. “And I’ll see yeh in about an hour, arligh’?”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, with a dramatic sigh.

The darkness drifted around them, settling in shadows and exchanged smirks as they began to hunt for bowtruckles.

“Evans, explain something to me,” James said, and Lily arched her eyebrows in response. “What exactly did you do to warrant a detention?”

Lily sighed. “Sev and I were doing patrols, and I got distracted and let his friends drag him off, and when he got back, the entire corridor was filled with spiders.”

The Marauders gave identical smirks.

“And he didn’t get detention because?” Sirius asked, leaning down to pluck a bowtruckle from between the roots of a tree.

“I’m muggle-born,” Lily said. “The professor who saw us in the corridor was Professor Jefferson,” Jefferson was known for claiming to be “Muggle-friendly” but consistently punished Muggle-borns more harshly than any other students.

“And what?”

“He blamed me,” Lily gave a brief, dry smile. “Can’t really fault him for it.”

“I can!” James said hotly. “How dare he accuse you of —“

“Doing something you did?” Lily asked.

James was speechless. “Er…yeah, exactly.”

Lily shrugged; the shoulder of her robe slipped as she did so, revealing the white collar of her neatly pressed shirt. James had to clench his fists to fight the urge to reach out and put it back in place, to brush his knuckles against the soft skin of her throat as he did so. He wouldn’t do it, because he wasn’t supposed to, because Lily had only ever been annoyed by him, and he knew she had no idea the depth of his feelings for her.

“D’you think,” Sirius said bitterly. “That if you hadn’t decided to play knight in shining armor for poor Evans, we’d even be here right now?”

“Yes,” James said, at the same time as Remus and Peter chorused, “No.”

Sirius glared at James. “Exactly. I was innocent in these proceedings. I certainly do not deserve to be collecting bowtruckles at this ungodly hour of night.”

James let out a dry sort of chuckle, mostly air, and it echoed into the silence of the forest. It was all so quiet; the entire world seemed to be holding in a breath, and he could not find the energy to dispute Sirius’s statement, which had been untrue on all counts.

James moved so quickly he barely had time to think; he was just collecting bowtruckles in those stupid silver buckets and he thought of all the things he’d rather have been doing and then it was happening, really happening. James Potter and Lily Evans were holding hands.

Lily looked down at their intertwined fingers, surprised, but didn’t withdraw her hand.

Lily exhaled a quiet, shaky breath — she’s nervous, James thought, and the idea was somehow thrilling — and pulled him along beside her, scanning the treetops for bowtruckles. Little glittering black eyes peered around them, but Lily ignored each one that she noticed, because if she hadn’t, she would’ve had to drop James’ hand and for some reason, she didn’t want to do that at all.

Sirius and Remus had gone to kiss behind a tree somewhere, and Peter had made himself mercifully
scarce, and James and Lily were alone and holding hands. Her skin was very warm against his, and their hands looked lovely together in the dark; hers so pale it nearly glowed in the shadows, his dark and riddled with bruises and scars from countless quidditch matches and pranks and fistfights.

“I, er—” Lily said, her heart fluttering in her chest. “Um, have you written the Potions essay?”

“Course,” James replied. “Why, d’you want help with it?”

Lily looked vaguely insulted. “No,” she said. “I was just asking because Sev hadn’t.”

“Right,” James said, mouth twisting into a scowl. “Sev.”

“Don’t talk about him like that, Potter,” she said.

He didn’t like the way she was saying his name, ‘Potter,’ spitting out the name like she couldn’t stand to have it on her tongue an instant longer. He dropped her hand, and she did not resist, pulling her arm tightly against her body. “What is it with you and him?”

“He’s my best mate!” Lily defended.

“Really? Because it seems that you wouldn’t have half as many problems in your life if you never spoke to him again.”

“I can’t do that,” Lily said, green eyes narrowed to slits. “How dare you even suggest that—”


“Severus is my friend. He’s been there for me through everything for years, and even though we’re having some differences right now, I trust him more than I trust anyone else in the world!” Even as she said it, a nagging bit of doubt crept into the back of her mind.

“Been there for you through everything? What about with your sister, when you talked to Sirius instead?”

“He had no right to tell you that,” Lily snapped, snatching a bowtruckle out of a tree and, despite her fury, placing it gently in the bucket. “The things he told me are things I know you don’t know, and I wouldn’t tell you because—”

“Because?” James interrupted.

“Because I wouldn’t do that to him! I barely tolerate Black, but I wouldn’t tell you because he asked me not to.”

“Save it for someone who’ll believe you, Evans,” he snapped. “Don’t act high and mighty, it’s not worth it.”

“I’m not acting,” she hissed, stomping ahead of him. Her scarf got tangled on a tree branch, and she allowed it to be ripped from her neck as she stormed away.

James caught the scarf and balled it in his fist. “Evans, c’mon.”

“What?” she demanded, whirling around. “What do you want?”

“We were almost bonding, there, Evans, we were almost friends!”

“You and I will never be friends,” she snapped. “Not while you and Sev keep up this ridiculous feud! It’s stupid, Potter, don’t deny it.”

“It isn’t stupid. He and his Death Eater friends — don’t shake your head, Evans, you know it’s true! — are willing to kill Muggle-born students, and the only reason you aren’t one of their victims is because Snape’s in love with you!”

“Severus and I are only friends.” Lily said, her voice settling into cold indifference.

“Is that what he tells you —? Don’t answer,” James sneered. “I already know.”

“You don’t know because you don’t bother,” Lily replied. She grabbed her scarf out of his hand and draped it clumsily around her neck, the bucket in her hand swinging wildly. “You just want to blindly hate him because you think it’s black and white, you think he’s a Muggle-hater and that he doesn’t care about Muggles — or me!”

“It is black and white,” James persisted. “You just refuse to see it for what it is.”

“I’m not refusing to see anything,” Lily snapped. “I know who Severus is, and I know who you are, and believe me, you’re not nearly as different as you might think!”

“Don’t insult me, Evans,” James said.

“I’m not,” Lily said coolly. “You wouldn’t understand, Potter, I wouldn’t expect you to get it—”

“I don’t! Frankly, Evans, you can do far better—”

“Better! And by better you mean you, I suppose?” she asked shrilly.
“Well, since you’ve brought it up — yeah, that’s what I mean!” James snapped. Lily stared at him for a moment, dumbstruck. “You’ve got to be joking.”

James shook his head tightly. The muscles in his jaw were clenched, and a vein was jumping in his forehead, and he was fairly certain that he was about to die of humiliation. Why on earth had he said that? What had possessed him to do something so unbelievably stupid?

“James! Lily!” Hagrid’s voice rumbled from beyond the trees. “Don’t make me come in there after yeh!”

James and Lily exchanged panicked, guilty glances and started towards the sound of his voice.

“Evans, before you — y’know, never speak to me again —"

"I would be justified in doing so," Lily said, not quite looking at him.

"You're right, Evans, but I don't want that."

Lily smiled despite herself.

"It wasn’t any of my business, and I’m sorry." James said genuinely. He wanted to take her hand again, but he wasn’t sure how she would react, or if she’d let him, or if it would destroy the fragile foundation of friendship they’d somehow created.

“‘You’re right, it wasn’t,’” she said curtly, but her eyes softened at the sound of his apology. “It’s alright. I’m sorry, too.”

He gave her a tentative smile, and she found herself smiling back.
The morning of April Fool's Day was a delicate thing for most of Hogwarts, everyone holding their breaths, because if there was one thing that was a constant in their lives, it was that every year, the Marauders would pull a hilarious prank, always at the expense of someone else, and always the talk of the school for at least a year afterwards.

That year, however, James was not included in the extensive planning of the prank, and when Sirius told him what it was going to be only a few short minutes before it happened, he could not help but feel slightly offended and very annoyed.

“That’s not funny, Pads,” James said from his bed, for what felt like it must’ve been at least the tenth time. He saw Sirius nodding, laughing his characteristic laugh - first a slight chuckle, then full blown guffaws. “No, it isn’t, let it go, will you?”

“It is,” Sirius declared.

“It is,” Remus commented.

Peter, who was cleaning his side of their room, said nothing, but his shoulders were shaking with the tell-tale signs of laughter.

“Don’t do it,” James warned, reaching lazily for his glasses. He adjusted them on his nose as he sat up, his feet dangling over the end of the bed. “It wouldn’t even work.”

“It would,” Sirius said.

“I agree,” Remus said.

“You lot are the worst,” James said, but there was undeniable affection in his tone.

“We’re not,” Sirius replied. “You love us. Now, Moons, Wormtail, are we doing this?”

“We’re doing this,” Peter said, abandoning his cleaning. It had been a hopeless cause anyway.

“Why.” James deadpanned.

“It’s Marauders’ Day,” Sirius said with a smirk, and it was, and at once he was struck by just how strange that really was; that people knew what to expect from them, that anyone knew who they were at all.

“Or, more specifically, April Fools Day, but what exactly is the difference?” Remus added. James sighed.

“Are you coming with us or not?” Sirius wanted to know.

“Yeah, yeah, give me a moment,” James complained.

“We’ve given you several moments. You’ll miss breakfast.” Peter pointed out. In Peter’s mind, missing breakfast was a punishable offense against the natural order of things.

“Fine,” James dragged himself out of bed and followed the others down the stairs.

“Wait,” Sirius said, in the entrance of the Great Hall.

He stepped in, and immediately, most of the eyes in the room went to him.

“I’d like to announce that I’m very proud of James Potter.” Sirius said, and Dumbledore glanced at him over his half-moon shaped spectacles but did not interrupt, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

“We know,” Remus muttered.

“For ACCEPTING WHO HE IS!” Sirius continued, a broad smile spreading across his face.

“Sirius,” James complained. “Can we not be doing this?” There was a certain level of showmanship about it all -- they exaggerated it all, the joke, to see how people might react. Some people in the
Great Hall were already laughing hysterically, although Sirius hadn't gotten to the joke yet.

“AND EMBRACING THAT THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CANNOT CHANGE ABOUT YOURSELF!” Sirius declared. Then, in a stage whisper to Remus, “Should I throw in some tears? I feel like tears would be good.”

“No,” Remus whispered back. “Tears would not be good.”

“What’s your point?” Regulus called from the audience, and Sirius scowled briefly, a flicker of real emotion, of regret almost, passing across his face.

“MY POINT IS —“ Sirius declared. “JAMES POTTER FANCIES PEEVES THE POLTERGEIST!”

The entire Great Hall burst into loud laughter; Even Dumbledore was chuckling slightly, and McGonagall was almost smiling.

“That is not funny,” James muttered, but he was grinning at Sirius in a way that meant he knew it was.

Sirius was too busy laughing to reply.

“How is that even funny?” James asked, but he knew.

By the end of the day, it was a school-wide joke that James Potter was in love with Peeves. People were writing “James + Peeves Forever” on bathroom walls, screaming it in the hallways, and being generally annoying about something which had started as a joke. James was fairly certain an over inspired third year was beginning to make badges declaring his allegiance to the pairing of James and Peeves.

“Let it go,” James complained. “I don’t fancy Peeves. How would that even work?”

“Who am I to place judgement on love?” Remus teased, and both Sirius and Peter snickered.

James sighed, snatched a book out of a passing second year’s hand, and threw it at Peeves, who floated above him blowing heart-shaped bubbles and being uncharacteristically quiet.

“Wasn’t very nice, Potty!” Peeves said. “Wasn’t very nice at all.”

“Sod off,” James replied, and the Marauders began to laugh again. “This isn’t going to become a thing, y’know,” James warned. “Only actual jokes —“

“It’s already a thing, Prongs,” Sirius said, winking at a first year who was painting a large banner with James and Peeves’ names.

“And it’s definitely a joke,” Remus cut in.

“I hope the giant squid eats you both,” James grumbled.
read the words.

Lily,

*Please come home. I wrote to your headmaster and he’s going to put you on the train home this afternoon. Your mum took a turn for the worse last night, and this morning she was gone. I’m so sorry, Lils. I love you so much.*

- Dad

Lily didn’t like the phrasing. “Gone.” She wasn’t gone, she was dead, she was dead… Lily sunk to her knees, a sick feeling rising in her. She couldn’t be dead, because Lily wasn’t ready for her to be dead, wasn’t ready to have to prepare herself for a life without her mum there, wasn’t ready to be alone.

She didn’t cry; it didn’t feel real, and she couldn’t quite bring herself to believe it had happened. How could her mother be dead when she could picture her house so clearly, in the little town of Smithers where her father had tirelessly worked to support their family and where Lily had met Severus and where Lily and Petunia had run and played through the stretching, glorious summers before Lily knew she was a witch? How could her mother be dead when she could still smell her mother’s perfume as she’d hugged her goodbye after Christmas? How could her mother be dead when Lily had said, “I’ll see you soon,” and she’d thought it was true? How could her mother be dead when she had always been so full of life?

“Lily?” Marlene said. “D’you want to come study with us?”

Lily turned to Marlene with her eyes full of horror. She gestured to the letter in her hand, her voice broken in her throat. “It — my mum —”

Lily didn’t need to say anything else; Marlene had thrown her arms around her, and Lily was sobbing into her shoulder like the world was ending, because for her, it was.

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Lily swallowed, fighting back tears, and sat down in her mother’s favorite chair next to the phone. The chair didn’t smell like her anymore; it smelled like medicine and hospitals and dust. She hadn’t sat there in a long time.

Lily dialed the funeral home and asked questions, took notes. Every time the funeral director would drop the line, she would cry, but when he came back, she would be nothing but courteous and professional, because it was what she was supposed to do, what she had to do for her family. She missed the next two weeks of school, and everyone she knew wrote her letters and sent flowers; their house was a shrine to their grief, and even after the funeral, they were trapped inside it. The funeral was nothing like Rosaline Evans would have wanted. There was crying and the music was ghastly and all Mrs. Evans’ friends were sobbing into their handkerchiefs. Mr. Evans was silent throughout, and when he stood to talk about his wife, his voice shook so badly he was barely understandable. Lily and Petunia held hands throughout the ceremony, and occasionally smiled at each other.

Vernon sat on the other side of Petunia. It was the first time Lily had ever met him, and she was less than impressed; he seemed a Muggle of the very worst sort, set in his ways, firm in his beliefs, not at all inclined to romanticism or fanciful things. Lily, who was both romantic and fanciful, instantly disliked him, but based on the way Petunia looked at him, she decided to at least be courteous. Whatever else Petunia might say about Lily, it could not be said that she was lacking in any sort of good manners.

The Evans family went home that night to their little house and its little yard and their little dog. The house felt cavernous but suffocating; there were memories at every turn. The family turned on the television but didn’t watch anything, because there was hardly any point. They sat together on the overstuffed couch, tangled together in their grief. They couldn’t talk because every conversation stopped at the dead end where Mrs. Evans was supposed to be, and they couldn’t be silent because if they were silent they were remembering that she was gone and they were alone.

As the darkness of the spring night spread throughout Gryffindor tower, as most of the house was asleep or in the process of falling asleep, James Potter lay restless on top of his blankets, an arm thrown across his face. “Oi, Moons,” he said into the dark room. “Evans wasn’t at breakfast this morning.”

“No, I imagine not,” Remus replied; it was almost the full moon, and he was unable to sleep from the pain in his bones, so he sat, reading a book by the light of his wand. “She’s back in London.”

“Why?” James asked, trying and failing to sound disinterested.

“Her mother died,” Remus said. “It wasn’t a shock, she’d been sick for months, but Lily’s devastated.”

James’ eyebrows furrowed. “I’ve got to do something.”

“James, with all she’s going through right now, I think the best thing you can do is leave her alone.” Remus said, not unkindly. "And what exactly could you do?"

James ignored him. “When d’you think she’ll be back?”

“A week,” Peter replied, voice bleary with sleep. “And please, Prongs, you don’t know what it’s like to lose a parent. The last thing she’ll want or need is to —“

“You’re right,” James interrupted. It was funny how often he forgot that Peter's father was dead, that Peter never got to grieve, that Peter dealt with it every day. James didn't even want to know what that felt like, couldn't even indulge Peter's sadness for long enough to let himself imagine it. Peter’s mouth fell open. “I — I am?”

“Don’t look so surprised, Wormtail, it does happen once in a blue moon.”

“It — it does?” The others chuckled.

“Her mum really died,” James said, sounding almost sad. “That’s awful. I don’t know what I would do if I lost my mum.”

Remus and Peter nodded their agreement, but Sirius snorted and said, “I’d rejoice.”
“Padfoot, it’s too early for your negativity,” James said.
“It’s nearly midnight, Prongs,” Sirius replied. “And it’s never too early to bitch about my family.”
James snorted. “Yeah, sure.”
The sounds of quiet breathing filled the dormitory for a few moments, and then James asked,
“How did she die?”
“What?” Sirius murmured into the dark, voice muffled by pillows and blankets.
“Evans — Lily’s mum,” James took a deep breath. “How did she die?”
“No reason,” James replied, brow furrowed. “I just didn’t know she was sick.”
“Why would Evans have told you that?” Sirius asked.
James nodded. “Yeah, you’re right, it’s just…” he shook his head. “I feel like I should’ve known.”
“James, when she gets back, please,” Peter said. “Please just give her a bit of space, alright?”
Peter had never dared to tell James what to do before, and his heart raced as he felt James’ eyes fall
on his face.
“Alright,” James said softly.
That was the end of their conversation, but each lay awake for several minutes longer before they fell
asleep.

On the day of that year’s Quidditch finals, James Potter decided he was definitely being slowly
driven insane.
“Listen, I’ve built this team up from being a pile of shit to being a pile of shit that might actually not
lose, so don’t disappoint me,” James snapped the morning of their last practice. “And if you aren’t
afraid to disappoint me — which you should be — be afraid to disappoint all of Gryffindor house,
which is exactly what’s going to happen if we lose.”
“Prongs,” Sirius said. “Would you like to remove the broomstick from your arse for just a few
seconds?”
“No,” James replied, tossing his broomstick from one hand to the other.
“Right,” Sirius replied with a smirk, rising into the air.
“Feet on the ground, Snuffles,” James said. “We’ve been training all year for this, and it would just
be really amazing to win the House Cup my first year as Quidditch captain, y’know?”
The team nodded; despite what anyone could say about him, James was a great captain, and they all,
for some reason, desperately wanted to make him proud (even Sirius, however begrudgingly.)
“Right, then,” James said, smiling broadly. “Yeah, let’s do it.”
They waited in the stands until the announcer’s voice roared out over the field. “Welcome to the final
Quidditch match of the season. Ravenclaw and Gryffindor will be battling for the House Cup, and it
should be an interesting match, folks, we’ve got loads of talent on both sides. Everyone knows the
Gryffindors have been using every second of extra practice time they can get. Shall we see if it paid
off?”
Both teams flew onto the pitch, coordinated. Lily sat in the stands, silent. She clapped politely when
cued, but there was none of her usual enthusiasm; she looked terribly sad, and James smiled directly
at her from his position on the field. She gave a slight smile back, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.
“The Quaffle is released and the game begins!”
James instantly forgot about Lily and about Sirius and nerves because all there was, all that mattered,
was that he was on the pitch and he was flying, darting after Benjy Fenwick, the world narrowed to
him and his team and the Quaffle. He snatched the Quaffle from Fenwick’s hands and sent it soaring
back towards Mary. Mary caught it with both hands and darted upwards, passing directly over
Fenwick’s curly blonde head.
They were more than a team in that moment; each knew what the other was thinking, each moment
was endless and yet seemed to pass by in the blink of an eye. And before James knew it, Arnold had
cought the Snitch, the game was over, they had won…
Sirius leapt off his broom to throw his arms around James, whose mouth was open in shock.
“WE DID IT, MATE, WE DID IT!” Sirius yelled in his ear, and James laughed; they were hoisting
Arnold onto their shoulders and then James was there with him, the cup was theirs, it was in his hands, it was a miracle.

Remus and Peter had run down from the stands, breathless from cheering, because this was more than just quidditch finals, this was a game that they’d won because of James Potter, because M.G. McGonagall had not been wrong in the slightest to name him, without any permission from her aunt or from Dumbledore, her successor as Gryffindor quidditch team captain.

That night, they threw their usual party, with banners and drinks and all the Prefects standing in one corner and rolling their eyes but not really doing much about it, because, really, what was the point? And James was dancing on the sofa with a ridiculously happy grin on his face, and people were asking him about his love for Peeves the Poltergeist and he was laughing as he invented answers.

Lily, in the corner, was smiling at him despite herself. He stretched out a hand, inviting her to dance with him, but she shook her head. She couldn’t dance with James Potter because her mother was dead, because her mother would’ve told her that she should absolutely go have fun, and the thought that her mother would have said that if she were still alive was too much for Lily to bear.

She snatched the drink out of Marlene’s hand and downed it in one gulp, barely coughing afterwards.

“Damn, Lils, take it easy,” Marlene said; there was more concern than amusement in her smile. “I’m fine,” Lily said softly, as if to convince herself of exactly that. “I’m just fine.”

She wasn’t — she made her way over to Remus, who was watching Sirius do what looked like a very drunk and sloppy strip-tease -- or it might have been a seizure, Lily wasn't quite sure. And she was laughing, suddenly, and then the laughing turned into crying and it stopped being laughing at all, it was just crying like she hadn't let herself cry when she'd been at home, because her dad needed her to be strong.

“Lily,” Remus said, eyes going wide. “Er…are you okay?”

Lily shook her head. “My mum’s dead.” she said.

“I know,” Remus said. “I’m sorry.”

“Remus, I don’t think I said goodbye to her,” Lily confessed, her words slightly slurred. “I don’t even remember what the last thing I said to my mum was before she died,” Lily said. “Because I hadn’t seen her in a month! And I wasn’t writing her because I was b-b-busy and I d-d-didn’t have t-t-time,” she was sobbing now, her shoulders sinking.

“Moons,” Sirius complained. “Pay attention to me.”

“Sorry, just —” Remus sighed, I am not drunk enough for this, he thought, but he couldn’t let himself think like that, couldn’t allow himself not to care. He helped Lily into a chair and put a blanket over her. “Lily, it’s going to be okay, alright? You’ll be just fine.”

Lily shook her head; her shoulders were trembling with the force of all the tears she’d been holding in for over a month, she could feel that she was about to break down, that she wasn’t going to be able to pretend she was alright anymore. Remus looked at her, her green eyes, hazy with drunkenness, bright with tears, and he suddenly understood that this was not something she was going to be able to sleep off.

“Lily, I don’t know what you’re going through,” he began softly, pulling at her wrists to bring her hands away from her face. “I don’t know what I can say to help you, or if there’s anything I can say at all.”

It felt strange to be comforting her like this; they were friends, certainly, but not this kind of friends. But Marlene was in a corner snogging someone who definitely wasn’t her boyfriend and Mary and James were dramatically reenacting the pass James had executed wherein he’d done a flip as he threw the Quaffle, and Lily clearly could not be alone in her current state.

“I miss her so much,” Lily sobbed, and threw her arms around Remus, hugging him tightly. Her face was damp as it pressed against his sweater, and she was shaking. “I miss her so bloody much, Remus, and I keep thinking that she’s going to come back, but she isn’t, and it’s my fault.”

“Sh, no, it’s not your fault,” Remus told her quietly. “There’s nothing you could’ve done.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about her,” Lily said. “I had no idea until I read the letter. Shouldn’t I have known?”
“No,” Remus shook his head, although he wasn’t quite sure. “No, there’s no way you could’ve known.”

“Petunia wouldn’t even help me plan her funeral,” Lily sobbed. “She was our mum, and Petunia couldn’t even forgive me for long enough to plan her funeral.”

So there it was, at the root of everything. Petunia.

Remus looked at Lily and wanted to cry with her; she was so small and so sad and very drunk, and she’d just lost her mum and had been lying to everyone who asked her if she was alright.

“Lily, I’m so sorry.”

“Me too,” Lily said softly, burying her head in her arms again.

Around them, the party went on — James dedicated the House Cup, which they were almost sure to win now, to Peeves the Poltergeist, and everyone had another round of butterbeer, and the laughter and music went on late into the night.

The next month of their schooling was devoted entirely to O.W.L.s — none of them had every studied so hard for anything. Remus and Peter devoted every waking moment to reading over their notes in each class over the past four years. The common room was devoted to the fifth years, who were studying so determinedly that they had allowed the room to fill with loose scraps of parchment and empty inkwells, and even the house-elves were too afraid to disturb this shrine to their hard work.

“Remus,” James threw a piece of parchment at the back of Remus’s head. “Leave it alone. You’ve been at it for hours.”

Remus shook his head. “Prongs,” he said. “The Charms exam is next week monday, and if I can’t remember the bloody Cheering Charm, I may cry.”

James snorted. “It’s easy.”

“For you, maybe,” Remus replied curtly, turning back to his notes.

“I’m bored,” James complained, flopping backwards over the couch. “Everyone’s studying.”

“Like you should be,” Mary commented, and James rolled his eyes at her.

“I finished studying a week ago,” James replied lazily, cracking each knuckle individually with increasingly loud popping sounds.

“Oh, sod off,” Peter muttered, but he couldn’t even pretend to sound annoyed. “I can’t get the bloody practical bit right. Is it swish-and-flick or flick-and-swish?”

“Swish and flick,” everyone in the common room replied simultaneously, and Peter gave a self-conscious sort of laugh.

“Right, thanks,” he muttered, and levitated a log from beside the fire into the flames.

“See, Pete, you’re fine,” James said.

Peter shrugged indifferently, as if it might not matter one way or another.

“You’re not seriously worried about Charms, are you?” James asked disbelievingly.

“Of course we are,” Remus replied. “Prongs, if you aren’t going to help us study, please be quiet.”

James sighed.

“Fine.”

Remus and Sirius sat together in a golden, sunlit patch of grass, robes abandoned on the ground beside them, pressed white sleeves rolled to their elbows. Sirius had taken his tie off and hung it on the branch of a nearby tree.

“I should really be studying,” Remus said absently.

Sirius leaned all his weight against Remus’s shoulder, nearly pushing Remus to the ground. “No,” he said against Remus’s neck. “Stay.”

Remus smiled. He would never get used to it, being told to stay when every part of him that screamed ‘monster’ wanted him to go.

“Pads, I’ve really got to —”

“Nah,” Sirius interrupted, the weight of his arm around Remus’s shoulder holding Remus to the ground, or perhaps it wasn’t so much that as that Remus so desperately wanted to stay there in the
golden summer light, for the rest of his life. Remus grinned again, and he leaned in to kiss Sirius. He’d never get over it; the miracle it was that he, Remus Lupin, was kissing Sirius Black, and that Sirius was kissing him back with what could be described only as enthusiasm, and that there was no more anxiety and shifting eyes, only comfort and happiness and love.
Sirius’s hand moved down over his spine, his arms wrapped firmly around the other boy’s thin body — it was strange that they could feel so magical and so alive like this, arms tangled together, lips crashing together and breaking apart like waves, the sun beating down on their heads, dappling through the trees.
They were so in love, they were so in love, they were so in love and it felt like it might never end, but of course it did, eventually, it always did.
“Oi!” James said, standing before Remus and Sirius where they sat beneath a tree in the sun, kissing with hands pressed against each others faces, fingers threaded through hair. There was an expression of mild annoyance on his thin face, and he seemed undeterred by the fact that they were enthusiastically snogging and paying him no attention whatsoever.

“What d’you want, Prongs?” Sirius asked against Remus’s mouth, shooting a rude gesture at James without looking at him.

James rolled his eyes and sighed, his hands restless, finding his wand in the pocket of his robes. “Oh, don’t make me hex you,” he snapped.

Remus and Sirius broke apart at this; these days, James always meant the threat when he spoke it. Whatever it was that had snapped inside him, whatever it was that none of them had been able to pinpoint or really even notice it when they weren't specifically looking for it, it was more raw, more urgent than before. There was a vein jumping in his neck visible even from the ground, and the muscles in his quidditch-toned arms were taut, his fists clenched tightly, fingernails digging into calloused skin.


“What is it?” Sirius asked, and at once he knew it was bigger than he’d even be able to guess. What was it that he was suddenly too afraid to ask? What was the meaning of the question that lingered at the back of his mind?

“I’m bored,” James answered with a sardonic smirk, but that wasn’t it, wasn't it at all. Something was very plainly and completely wrong, he wasn't alright, not at all, and there was something in his gaze that meant he needed to talk to Sirius alone. It meant that he wasn't going to mention it here, or now, mention whatever darkness around him that was edging its way into Remus and Sirius's golden, sun-drenched kiss. It seemed a distant memory now.

Sirius looked at him and said, “What exactly makes that my problem?” It was strange how he could ask that and it could mean, please tell me if you’re okay. And James replied with, “nothing,” and it didn’t mean nothing, it meant something, and it meant something important.

Remus mumbled an awkward excuse to leave, sensing that this was something he was not privy to, something that James would not be able to tell him.

“Mate,” Sirius said, stretching out a hand so James would help him to his feet. He looped his tie lazily around his neck and tied it without looking down. “Not that I don’t care about your problems, but —”

“I know,” James said. “I wouldn’t have interrupted that if it wasn’t important.”

“What’s wrong, Prongs?” Sirius asked.

James looked at him, desperate to speak, at once. “There was an attack on my dad’s office.”

“There was — what?” Sirius asked; his heart was racing.

“My dad’s office at the ministry — they were getting too close to something, I didn’t know the — my dad was — you’ve heard how he —” James could barely speak. "I don't know, I don't know what happened! It was just -- people are dead, people in my dad's office are dead, and I had no idea that..." he ran a frustrated hand through his hair.
“Is he alright?” Sirius asked, and when James didn’t answer, Sirius seized him by the shoulders and shook him violently. Fleamont Potter, hurt, Fleamont Potter, dead, it was not possible, it could not happen — “IS HE ALRIGHT?”

“I DON’T KNOW!” James shouted back, and at once he crumpled in on himself, hands covering his face. “Merlin, I don’t know, I don’t know!”

“How can you not know? You have to know!”

“I don’t know!”

Everyone had read about the attack in the papers; there was chaos, chaos everywhere. People whose parents worked with James’ dad had been asking him questions all morning, begging him to know something.

“Merlin, he’s — what if he’s —“ James looked horrified.

Sirius would’ve liked to be rational, but Fleamont had been like a father to him for years, and all traces of ‘let’s not overthink this’ and ‘I’m sure he’s alright’ had vanished from his mind.

The two boys stood together, quiet, unsure what to say to each other.

“I — my mum would’ve — Dumbledore would’ve —“ James tried to rationalize. “He can’t be —“

“No,” Sirius said, a bit too quickly. “Nah, you’re right, course you’ve heard something —“

“Right,” James replied. “Yeah —“

“I mean, it isn’t as if —“

“Exactly,” James said, and he breathed a slight sigh of relief. “Exactly, you’re right. Let’s er — well, I’m sorry.”

Sirius shrugged, and it was almost forgotten.

When James got a letter from his mother telling him his father was in St. Mungo’s, he didn’t cry. Lily had just lost her mother to cancer, that was something to cry about. People went to St. Mungo’s all the time, it was just a hospital, it didn’t have to mean anything, it didn’t have to mean he was going to die.

They pretended everything was alright for the rest of the day; James, as far as anyone could tell, was solely focused on studying for the Charms exam the following day, and he did not mention what had happened to Remus and Peter. Remus had read it in the Daily Prophet but hadn’t brought it up to James, while Peter had stopped reading the papers as the last mention of a Muggle family from his hometown being brutally murdered had sent him into a fit of tears.

“Potter,” Rabastan Lestrange said. “Did you hear?”


“Hear about your father, idiot. It’s a sad day to see pure blood spilled, even Muggle-loving —“

“My dad isn’t dead!” James thundered. “I swear to Merlin, Lestrange, you don’t want to —“

“What?” Rabastan sneered.

It was all too easy to provoke James, and Sirius didn’t make any attempts to hold him back when he shouted, “Impedimenta!” and sent Rabastan backwards into a crowd of students who’d gathered around him.

James didn’t want a fight; furious tears were glimmering in his eyes, and he stormed away with a muttered, “sod off, Lestrange,” over his shoulder, as if that would ever be close to enough to express the depth of his worry for his father, as if any insult or jinx would be enough to quell the unshakeable dread that had been rising in his chest all day.

“Prongs,” Peter went after him, because Sirius wouldn’t, because Remus didn’t know what to say.

“No offense, Wormtail, but I’d like to be alone right now,” James snapped in a way that Peter did not think he could’ve possibly found less offensive.

“James —“ Peter said. “Just tell me what’s wrong.”

James shook his head.

“Prongs,” Peter said.

“My dad’s in the hospital. There was an attack on his office, and I don’t even know if he’s going to be alright —“

“He’ll be fine,” Peter said instinctively, because he had to be -- it was James’s family, they were
“Is that what you thought when your dad died?” James asked suddenly, and Peter blinked.
“I — of course — I didn’t —?” Peter spluttered. “James, it isn’t the same thing. My dad —”
James shook his head. “If my dad dies, I don’t know what I’ll —” his hands were shaking, and he
clenched them into fists. “I don’t think I’d —”
“It’s not going to happen,” Peter said, a hand on James’ shoulder. “I swear.”
“How do you know?”
“Because I just know,” Peter said.
James nodded. “That’s what I’m supposed to say.”
Peter gave a slight smile in response. “It is, isn’t it?” he paused. “You always know when
something’s about to happen. You would’ve known, don’t you think, if he was going to die?”
James frowned. “Perhaps,” he crossed his arms. “I don’t know, I — I don’t remember.”
“Prongs, trust me,” Peter said. “Everything’s going to be fine. I’d be more worried about our Charms
O.W.L if I were you.”
“I must be the only person left alive who doesn’t give a damn about Charms,” James sighed and ran
a hand through his hair, spiking it up at the back as he did so.
“I wouldn’t let Flitwick hear you say that,” Peter said, and James let out a short laugh. The letter
from his mother lay crumpled in his pocket, and as they walked to class together, he slipped his hand
into his pocket to roll the paper between his fingers, just to know it was there. Because as much as it
was proof that something terrible had happened, it bore the words: don’t worry, dear, your father
will be fine.

“Bloody hell,” Sirius said when Peter shook him awake the next morning. “You couldn’t’ve let me
sleep for ten more minutes?”
Peter shook his head. “We’ve got our Charms exam today.”
“Do I need to repeat my earlier statement?” Sirius asked, eyebrows arched.
Peter just sighed and started for the door.
“Wormtail,” James called after him. “I can see you sweating from here. Just relax.”
Peter went slightly red and mopped at his forehead with his sleeve. “Right, course,” he said
unconvincingly. “It’ll be fine.”
“Don’t be dramatic,” Sirius said, following him through the door.
“That’s your job, I suppose?” James asked, and Sirius smacked him across the back of the head.
Their Charms exam was not as much of a grueling ordeal as they’d come to expect over the past few
months — the written portion was fairly simple, although Peter struggled for half an hour with
remembering the counter-charm for hiccoughs, and spent the rest of the written test with his forehead
pressed against the desk, letting out deep, slow breaths. His quill lay abandoned in the inkwell,
untouched for several minutes.
When Greyson, the ministry witch overseeing their exams, called out into the dead silent room that
the exam was over, there was an audible sigh of relief from all corners of the room. Their parchments
raised in a line and flew over their heads into the expectant hands of the witch, who smoothed the
pile down, her hands laden with ornate rings.
“The practical portion of your Charms O.W.L. will commence in five minutes. Please remain in your
seats during this time.”
“Oh,” James whispered. “Black.”
Sirius smirked over his shoulder at James. “Potter?”
“How’d it go?”
“Swimmingly,” Sirius whispered, in what was clearly an imitation of Remus, who, had he been able
to hear them from across the room, would have defended his frequent use of the word.
James smirked. “I heard from Kingsley that last year they had to make egg-cups do cartwheels for
their O.W.L. Do you think they’ll make us do it this year?”
“Silence, please!” Greyson announced. “Would Demetrius Avery,” she read from an alphabetized
list — there was an audible groan from the back of the room — “Please remain in his seat. Everyone
else, please return to your classes, and you will be called from class periodically to complete your practical exams.”
They returned to their classes, almost shaking with the adrenaline of it all. The future, their future, seemed clearer than ever now; their first exam was almost over, and they could see it, see the possibility of a life outside Hogwarts, the lives they’d been imagining for themselves for years now but hadn’t dared to let themselves hope for.

When Sirius was called, he swaggered into the classroom, wand drawn, a smile on his face. “Please cast a Levitation Charm on this egg cup,” Greyson said briskly.

Sirius’s mouth twitched up in a smirk. “A Levitation Charm?”

Greyson, a steely, tough witch, suddenly felt uncomfortable in the face of his easy confidence.

“Yes.”

He cleared his throat. “Wingardium Leviosa.” The egg cup rose into the air, hovered for a solid minute, and floated back to the table.

For the next ten minutes, he was told to make the egg cup do cartwheels, change it to any color of his choosing (he chose brilliant pink,) and double its size. He found himself hardly even anxious at all, barely thinking about failure or success. His wand was light and well-balanced in his hand, and memories of the charms came easily, his technique perfect, yet there was something aggressive in it, a violence that still lingered, after all these years, in every one of his movements.

When he left the room, Greyson found herself wiping sweat from her brow, feeling shaken to her core. There was something about Sirius that had become evident in that moment, just him and Greyson and the egg cup, something that he’d been doing an excellent job of covering up, but something underneath the surface that he couldn’t quite shake.

“How’d it go?” Remus whispered as Sirius returned to his seat in Muggle Studies.

Sirius smirked in response and twirled his wand in his hand. “It was fine,” he hissed back, leaning his head against Remus’s shoulder. He was only aware after another few minutes that he was shaking.

Remus was almost next, Lily had just been called, and after Gillian Hartly, Benjy Fenwick, and Rabastan Lestrange, it would be his turn. He wasn’t quite convinced he was even a little bit ready.

Sirius, standing next to him, was white as a ghost. “You alright?” Remus asked, glancing at his boyfriend out of the corner of his eye.

“Well, never mind.”

Lily stepped out of the room and walked down the hall, practically ran, buzzing with energy, her dark red hair pulled back from her face. Her shoulders were very tense as she walked up to Greyson with a polite little smile.

“Lily Evans?” Greyson asked, and Lily nodded, biting her lip until it was white and drained of blood. “Please cast a levitation charm.”

Lily looked at the egg cup in front of her for a moment and nodded, swishing and flicking her wand. As it flew up into the air — perhaps a bit fast, but both Greyson and Lily attributed that to nerves — a smile spread across Lily’s face, and she let out a slight, shaky breath.

“Now make the egg cup do cartwheels, if you please.” Greyson said.

“Cartwheels?” Lily repeated. In her mind, she was frantically running through all the spells she knew, and she was certain that she’d never learned it, had convinced herself she didn’t know until the charm was cast, and the egg cup was flipping across the table towards her. She let out a delighted sort of laugh and caught it in her hand.

The rest of the practical exam went easily for Lily; later on she wouldn’t really remember the details, only how overjoyed she’d been when it was over, when she walked out of the room and was struck with the sense that she’d done it, that she’d passed.

When she rejoined the others in the crowded, quiet classroom, she was beaming. The next few people went quickly, sneering as they passed; whenever one would leave, Remus would take a deep, shaky breath, trying to prepare himself, to make himself somehow believe that he was ready.
“Remus Lupin?” Greyson called into the classroom. When her steely blue eyes landed on Remus’s scarred face, she did a double-take, blinking as if to be certain that she wasn’t imagining what she was seeing.

Remus gave her a polite smile and followed her inside, trying to ignore the rapid fluttering of his heart in his chest.

He didn’t really remember the exam afterwards; he was too nervous, shaking, thanking Merlin for the long nights he’d spent practicing these spells, because by now his hands knew what to do and all he had to do was think of the charm before the words were out of his mouth and the spell was cast.

“As a collective group of Marauders,” Sirius said after Remus had returned. “We’re exactly halfway between success and failure.”

“We haven’t failed yet!” Peter piped up.

Sirius laughed, lowering his voice after their professor, Dorian Arlington, shushed them with a murderous glare. “Key word being yet.”

James shook his head. “Sod off.”

“Peter Pettigrew,” Greyson called, and Peter inhaled a deep, trembling breath.

“Good luck, Peter,” Remus said earnestly.

Peter gave him a shaky smile in return and disappeared into the exam room. He was dizzy with nerves, and could barely remember a single one of the spells he was supposed to do, much less all of them. Instead of having the eggcup do cartwheels, it rolled pathetically across the table, and his face went red in humiliation.

“Please continue, Mr. Pettigrew.”

“Er…er…right, um…um…”

After a few more moments of this awkward floundering, Greyson told him to change the egg cup color, and he turned it a weak, watery looking yellow.

The rest of the exam, however, went surprisingly well, and by the end Peter was at least half convinced that he hadn’t entirely failed. No, more accurately, he began to tell himself, it had almost appeared that he’d passed. Yes, that had to be it — the knowing little smile (or at least he’d thought it was a smile) Greyson had given him as he’d left the room had to prove it, had to prove that he hadn’t done nearly as horribly as he’d thought.

“How’d it go?” Remus asked, and Peter smiled in response.

“Fairly well, I think,” he said, with a glance at James and Sirius to see if they’d ask him about it, to see if they were even listening.

“The cartwheels, though,” Sirius whispered to Peter. “The bloody cartwheels, they were murder.”

Peter nodded fervently. “I couldn’t even remember the spell — the cup barely moved.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Only you would manage to do that on an O.W.L. practical exam, Wormtail.”

Peter blushed in response, certain he ought to feel at least vaguely insulted, but he couldn’t help but feel strangely relieved that Sirius had been paying enough attention to make fun of him.

“Potter,” Sirius whispered to James. “When she asks you to turn the egg cup another color, will you do me a favor?”

James raised his eyebrows.

“You really want me to jeopardize my Charms O.W.L results for that?” James asked.

“Yes.”

“You want me, James Potter, whose father is in the bloody hospital, mind you, to throw away five years of hard work and studying for a joke?”

“Er…yes?” Sirius said.

James looked at him for a moment and shrugged. “Alright.”

“Wish me luck?”

“Good luck!” Peter said enthusiastically, and James only grinned in response.

He unnerved Greyson in a completely different way than Sirius had; there was a very strange mix of happiness and sadness in his face, something raw and very, she could tell, unusual for him, unusual
in the sense that he’d never felt it before and wasn’t able to hide it. After levitating the egg cup, making it do cartwheels across the desk, Greyson said, “Please change the egg cup to a different color.” James cast his eyes back towards the door as if Sirius could see the smirk on his face through the wall. He waved his wand and cast the color change charm, thinking with all his might about glittering gold, the color of Lily’s hair the time she accidentally charmed it with 24 hour glitter and the sun had come through the window and seemed to have set her entire head ablaze. The egg cup turned a dazzling gold, the glitter casting swirling lights on the walls around them. “Well done,” Greyson said, and James grinned, wider and wider until his cheeks hurt and he was almost laughing, a hysterical sort of desperate laughter that was only seconds away from turning into tears. “Mr. Potter,” she said, and her voice seemed to be coming through a fog in his head. “Please double the size of the egg cup.” James nodded, but his vision was blurring — he couldn’t cry here, not in front of a Ministry examination overseer, but all he could think about, suddenly, was his father in a hospital bed, frail, dying — “Mr. Potter, are you alright?” “I — I have to — I —” he pointed his wand at the egg cup. “Engorgio.” It doubled instantly, and James excused himself from the room without being told, bursting into the corridor with his breathing coming in ragged gasps. “James —” Peter said, he knew, before the others, that something was wrong. He wasn’t attuned to James like Sirius was; it was just that he happened to be paying more attention. “James, what happened in there?” “It was — it was — it was alright, it was fine, but —” James shook his head. “Are you alright?” Remus asked. James nodded, letting his shoulders sink slightly. “I — I’m…” he trailed off and inhaled a rough, desperate breath. “What if my dad dies?” The other three looked at each other, then back at James. “James,” Peter said. “He isn’t going to die.” “And even if he does,” Remus said. “Not at all implying that he will, but even if he does, you’re going to be alright.” “I don’t know if I can — he’s my dad, Moons, he’s…he’s my dad, I don’t want him to… I don’t want to have to — live without him.” Remus nodded, his eyes large and pitying. “I understand, James,” he said. “Believe me, I do.” “I can’t — I can’t,” James said, seizing Remus by the shoulders and shaking him. Remus felt his joints cracking under the strain (he felt so fragile, but less fragile than James, certainly) but he didn’t flinch, calmly watching James as the other boy began to sob, covering his head with his arms. “Prongs,” Remus said. “Listen, here’s what you’re going to do.” James nodded shakily. “You’re going to finish your O.W.L.s, you’re going to write your mum, and you’re going to go to St. Mungo’s to see your dad as soon as you can. Alright?” James nodded. “How could this happen — his entire office was attacked, they could all be — Mariella Jorgensen’s father was killed, and Gregory Stepstree’s brother, and —” he trailed off. “And it could’ve been my dad.” “But it wasn’t,” Peter said helpfully. “Exactly,” James exhaled through his nose as they were dismissed from the hall and made their way out into the sun. “Exactly, it wasn’t, but —” he caught sight of Lily and Mary walking down to the lake and trailed off. “Let’s talk about this later.” “Mate, you’ve really got to sort out your priorities,” Sirius said, clapping James on the back. James snorted. “Yeah, yeah, I know.” “Let’s take a poll,” Sirius said, rising to his feet from the armchair in the Gryffindor room. “Who in this room honestly believes that you’re going to fail Transfiguration today?”
Almost every hand in the room rose, and Sirius snorted.
“Well,” he said, gathering his books into a pile. “Good luck, mates.”
“We’re fucked, everyone!” James declared, starting for the door.
“Yeah!” the others cheered encouragingly.
“I heard if you die in the O.W.L. exam room, everyone else passes.” Marlene McKinnon whispered.
“I nominate Peter as our sacrifice,” Sirius commented with a smirk.
Peter nodded dutifully. “Fair.”
The Marauders all burst out laughing as they made their way through the corridors towards the exam hall, but as they approached the doors, their smiles faded. “I just had a horrifying vision of McGonagall’s face when she realizes we’ve all failed,” Remus whispered, his knuckles white, arms crossed tightly across his chest.
“Five galleons says she’d cry.” Sirius replied.
“Five galleons says McGonagall has never cried in her life, and doesn’t intend to start now or ever.” Remus replied.
“Nonsense,” James replied briskly. “Old McGoggles is a giant marshmallow.”
The others snorted at this, unable to manage much more than smirks in the face of the looming Great Hall where the exam was taking place, considering the sheer concentration of students who were taking Transfiguration that year.
“Good luck!” Peter said brightly as he walked into the exam hall and took a seat.
It was only about five minutes into the written portion of their Transfiguration O.W.L. when many of the students began to show the signs of stress. Severus’s hooked and shiny nose was hovering only centimeters above his parchment, and he was scribbling furiously, his handwriting barely legible, Peter was sweating buckets, Mary was fighting back tears.
When at last the parchment was collected off their desks and they were dismissed from the room, there was a collective sigh of relief.
“That was brutal,” Remus commented. “Did anyone else completely forget the definition of a Switching Spell?”
“Moons,” James said. “I can’t forget it if I never knew it in the first place.”
Remus laughed. “Pads, did you get it?”
Sirius rolled his eyes. “How dare you even imply that I would —“ he stopped. “Ah, sod it. What even is a switching spell, anyway?”
“The process of switching two objects?” Peter guessed.
“McGonagall has specifically stated on more than one occasion that that is definitively not what a switching spell is,” Remus said. “However, I’m beginning to believe that in all her lecturing, she neglected to inform us as to what the proper definition is.”
“Page three,” Lily said as she passed by. “The definition was on page three of the textbook.”
“Of course it was,” James said, then smirked as if he thought he’d said something particularly clever. Lily gave him a sort of smile in response as she walked away.
“You have five minutes to prepare for the practical portion of your exam. You will be called in alphabetically throughout the day.”
“Blimey,” James muttered. “She expects us to sit here all day?”
“Page two,” Lily said as she passed by. “The definition was on page two of the textbook.”
“Of course it was,” James said, then smirked as if he thought he’d said something particularly clever. Lily gave him a sort of smile in response as she walked away.
“You have five minutes to prepare for the practical portion of your exam. You will be called in alphabetically throughout the day.”
“Blimey,” James muttered. “She expects us to sit here all day?”
“You will return to your regularly scheduled classes during this time.” Greyson added in a stern voice.
“Course,” Sirius rolled his eyes.
“Well, we’ve got History of Magic first, we could always ditch and study instead,” James suggested.
“And by study you mean flood the second floor classrooms?” Remus asked wryly.
“Well, obviously.” James said. “But while we’re at it we can study a bit.”
“I need to study more than a bit,” Peter groaned. “I’ll fail, and she’s already told me I’ve got to get an O —“
“You’re not going to fail, Pete, don’t be daft,” Sirius said. “Honestly.”
“I am,” Peter groaned, and followed the others up to the second floor corridor.
“Flood first, study later?” James suggested. The idea of mischief was just so much more appealing
these days, the possibility that he’d do something big enough that someone would notice, someone might say, ‘hey, mate, are you alright?’ and actually wait to hear the answer, to hear that he wasn’t, not at all, not even a little bit.

“Absolutely,” Sirius replied briskly. “Shall we?”
The Marauders linked arms; it seemed almost strange to do so now, like they had as first years, before the war, before everything. There was something in the way these exam questions were being phrased, something that had less to do with whether you’d ever need to charm a tea kettle to sing happy birthday or transfigure a pocket watch into a knife and more to do with what these spells could help you do, whether any of them could be used as weapons, as defenses.

Wednesday’s Herbology exam went by quickly — it was a fairly easy subject for all of them, particularly Peter, who found the warmth of the greenhouses and methodical approach to Herbology in general to be comforting — there were no complicated, confusing rules, very little risk of death, explosion, or any bodily harm if something were to go wrong, and Professor Sprout had a soft spot for Peter — her younger brother, Matthew, had been exactly like Peter before he’d died doing a Potions experiment, and sometimes when she saw Peter out of the corner of her eye and the light was just right, she almost felt like her brother was standing in the room with her again. Remus struggled slightly with the practical portion of this exam, nearly getting his arm gnawed off by a fanged geranium about halfway through, but they all made it out in one piece.

“Cheer up, Moony,” Sirius said. “Y’know what tomorrow is?”

“Defense!” Peter said excitedly.

“Correct, Wormtail, but if you remember I was asking Moony…” Sirius said, then smirked slightly when Peter blushed.

“I don’t really see the point in taking a Defense exam, to be honest,” James said, stretching up to hit the top of the doorway to the greenhouse (most likely just to see if he could.) “It isn’t as if we don’t already know it all.”

“See, you know we know it, and I know that, but I really don’t think Jefferson knows that,” Remus said calmly.

“Well, doesn’t matter, anyway,” James said. “Jefferson will be gone next year.”

“You really believe the job’s jinxed?” Peter asked.

“Well, we’ve never had the same teacher for more than a year,” he said. “We’re just lucky none of them have died yet.”

“As far as we know,” Sirius said darkly, and they all laughed.
Snape's Worst Memory

Chapter Notes

I was so excited to write this chapter because I got to add my own interpretation to a scene that's already really extensively described in canon. I had a lot of fun with it so enjoy.

The morning of their Defense Against the Dark Arts exam was warm and bright, sun spilling over the Hogwarts grounds and making everything clearer, almost too clear, the sort of clarity that made people see things they didn't want to see.

“Alright, honestly, this is the least of our worries,” James said. “We’ve all had O’s in Defense for five solid years, even Wormtail.”

The others nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“Nothing to worry about,” Remus said, as if he were trying to convince himself that this was true. “Nothing to worry about at all.”

“Exactly.” James said. He was fiddling with something in the pocket of his robes — a nervous tic he’d developed only very recently. “Now, eat your breakfast, Moony, and stop destroying your eggs.”

Remus looked down at his plate, where he’d ground his eggs into a small yellow pile. Breakfast had never appeared so unappetizing, but when James Potter told you to eat your breakfast, you ate your breakfast.

As exam sheets appeared on the desks of all the Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L. students, there was a collective sigh of relief. The first question was simply, “Define the Dark Arts.”

“Easy,” James muttered under his breath, and began to write, the words coming easily to him. The room was silent save for the sounds of scratching quills and rustling parchment. Each student was bent over their tables, heads close to the parchment. Certain students in the room had written an enormous amount, about twice as much as everyone else; Severus, for example, had filled nearly an entire roll of parchment, and Remus had written nearly the same amount.

Professor Flitwick marched up and down between the rows of desks, calling out times that hardly any of them were bothering to listen to.

Almost simultaneously, in their four different areas of the room, the Marauders sat up straighter, pulled their parchments towards them, and began to read over what they’d written. James smirked down at his parchment, stretched in his seat with an exaggerated yawn, and turned to grin at Sirius. Sirius, who had been leaning his head on his arm, sat up and gave James a thumbs up, keeping his face impassive as he scanned his work.

James let out a sort of airy chuckle and glanced over at Remus, who was clearly trying not to look at him for fear of bursting out in laughter.

James turned his head to look at Peter, who was trying to look calm, casual, but really had only succeeded in looking as if someone had stuck a pin in the chair he was sitting in. Peter glanced over at James desperately, hoping that something in James’ expression would trigger the answer to question fifteen, but it didn’t. Flitwick called out that the exam was over, and Peter watched with some apprehension as he scanned his work.

The hundred-some rolls of parchment flew towards Flitwick and sent him toppling onto the ground with a loud, surprised squeak. Sirius and James laughed harder than anyone as Mary MacDonald and Marlene McKinnon hurried towards the front of the room to help him to his feet.
Flitwick hurriedly thanked them, adjusting his wire spectacles on his nose. “Very well, everyone, you’re free to go!” he announced.

James had been doodling Lily’s initials on a spare piece of parchment, and as Sirius got to his feet behind him, now in full view of the very incriminating drawing on his desk, James crossed it out and crumpled it in his fist, slinging his bag over his shoulder and standing at the doorway waiting for the others to hurry up and join him.

Sirius nudged Remus with his elbow, a little smile on his face. “Did you like question ten, Moony?” Remus gave his trademark wry smile, which was a little more hesitant around the edges with the full moon fast approaching. “Loved it,” he said briskly, adjusting his bag where it was digging into his shoulder. “Give five signs that identify the werewolf.” Excellent question.”

“D’you think you managed to get all the signs?” James asked in mock concern.

They hung at the outskirts of the crowd gathered by the doors. “Think I did,” Remus said seriously. His face broke into a mischievous sort of grin. “One: He’s sitting on my chair. Two: He’s wearing my clothes. Three: His name’s Remus Lupin…”

The others burst out laughing, James and Sirius guffawing as if this was the funniest thing either of them had heard in their lives. Peter managed a slight giggle, but he was frowning.

“What is it, Peter?” Remus asked quietly, biting the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling. “I got the snout shape, the pupils of the eyes, and the tufted tail,” he said thoughtfully, “but I couldn’t think what else —”

“How thick are you, Wormtail?” James demanded. Peter’s eyes widened. James had certainly said worse to him, but there was a note of sincere impatience in his voice. “You run round with a werewolf once a month —“

“Keep your voice down,” Remus said, glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone was listening. Snape was loitering a few paces behind them, but his nose was buried in the exam question paper, and he didn’t seem to be paying any particular attention.

“Aside from Wormtail’s inability to think under pressure,” Sirius said. “I thought — well, actually, Wormy, you can’t possibly be worried about it.”

“I am,” Peter said anxiously. “I could barely remember anything!”

“Well, I thought that paper was a piece of cake,” Sirius said, with a look over to Remus like, ‘can you believe this?’ “I’ll be surprised if I don’t get an Outstanding on it at least.”

“Me too,” James said.

“At least?” Remus inquired. “Enlighten us as to what’s higher than an Outstanding?”

Sirius didn’t reply; he was watching James, who had reached into his pocket and pulled out a Snitch, and was now letting it fly slightly ahead of him before snatching it easily out of the air again. Sirius remembered seeing James fiddling with something in his pocket early that morning and didn’t know why this surprised him. Stealing a golden Snitch was hardly unexpected behavior from James.

“Where’d you get that?” he asked.

“Nicked it,” James said casually, letting it fly into the air again. The four of them stopped in front of the tree where Remus and Sirius often spent their afternoons during these summer months, and Remus and Sirius exchanged a quick, smiling look before sitting on the grass next to the others.

A loud peal of laughter floated up from the lake, where Lily, Mary, and Marlene sat with their feet dangling into the water. Dorcas Meadows, Gillian Hartly, Emmaline Vance, Cindy Brackenwell and Isabelle Risenfield had joined them, and the group were all laughing and talking. Their hair had been released from all plaits and ponytails and now flowed freely over their shoulders.

The Marauders lay in the shade of the tree. Remus was reading a book, Sirius was observing random passerby with what could only be described as an elegant sort of boredom, James hadn’t put the Snitch down, and Peter was just watching James with unabashed enthusiasm, and would gasp whenever James let his attention drift from the Snitch over to the smiling girls by the lake, particularly Lily — the sun was dancing on her red hair, he could see it even from where he was sitting.

“Put that away, will you?” Sirius asked, not appearing to care one way or the other. James had made a Seeker-worthy catch and Peter seemed on the verge of applauding. When neither appeared to listen
to him, Sirius let a nasty edge creep into his voice. “Before Wormtail wets himself from excitement.”
“If it bothers you,” James said with a grin.
“It doesn’t,” Sirius said. “There’s no use in showing off for her, though,” he said, and ‘her,’ was very evidently a reference to one Lily Evans. James was getting the impression that Sirius had seen him doodling Lily’s name on scrap parchment, and he forced his expression into casual interest.
“Maybe not,” James said, stretching again.
After a few moments’ silence, Sirius said, “I’m bored. Wish it was full moon.”
Remus looked at him, somewhat surprised by this comment. “You might,” he said, praying Sirius wouldn’t hear the bitterness in his voice. “We’ve got the practical this afternoon, if you’re bored you could test me,” he held out his book for Sirius. “Here.”
Sirius snorted. “I don’t need to look at that rubbish. I know it all.”
Remus rolled his eyes.
James’ eyes had fixed on Severus, who had emerged from the bushes and was setting off back towards the castle. “This’ll liven you up, Padfoot,” he said. “Look who it is…”
Sirius turned towards Snape, going very still. “Excellent,” he said darkly, his face twisting in anger. “Snivellus.”
Individually, James and Sirius were unlikely to ever go after Snape unprovoked, there was too much at stake, and too much had gone wrong in the past. Together, however…
They stood in pursuit of the fast retreating Severus. Remus watched over his book, pretending not to be interested, while Peter observed the scene in wide-eyed, open-mouthed shock.
“Alright, Snivellus?” James asked loudly. It wasn’t the most elegant of lines, but he and Sirius both chalked it up to nerves and lack of sleep.
Severus reacted immediately, throwing his bag to the ground, reaching for his wand, but James was quicker, and shouted, “Expelliarmus!”
Severus’s wand flew from his hand and landed on the ground a few feet away from him, James and Sirius approached now, their steps synchronized. From the outside, the attack might have looked unprovoked, but Severus had been itching for a fight for days, lurking around, sending his friends after the Marauders, seeing what it would take to make them snap. Severus was glowering at them now, murderous.
“Impedimenta!” Sirius said as Severus made a desperate dive for his wand. A crowd was gathering around them, and James glanced over his shoulder at the girls by the lake, Lily had to notice him now, had to see this.
James and Sirius advanced towards Severus, faces twisted.
Remus, watching them passively, had the thought that if one didn’t know what was happening, James and Sirius looked heartless, looked as if they’d attacked an isolated, awkward boy for no reason at all.
“How’d the exam go, Snivelly?” James asked.
Snape spat at him in response.
Sirius’s shoulders tensed. “I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment,” he said venomously. “There’ll be great grease marks all over it, they won’t be able to read a word.”
The crowd around them burst into laughter as Snape tried to get up, struggling, the jinx not quite worn off.
“You — wait,” he panted, glaring at James. Sirius, too, but it seemed that the brunt of his hatred was directed at James and James alone. “You — wait…”
It was a threat, barely veiled, and James saw in the twist of Severus’s mouth that it was a threat about his father…his father, who lay in a hospital bed at this very moment, because of the very people Severus and his friends were hoping to join…
“Wait for what?” Sirius demanded; his worried glance at James, mid-sentence, was only noticeable to those who knew him well. “What’re you going to do, Snivellus? Wipe your nose on us?”
Severus let out a strangled combination of swearing and hexes. Somewhere in there was ‘filthy Mudblood lovers’ and ‘blood traitors’ paired with a ‘one day they’ll all be dead, and you’ll be sorry’ “Wash out your mouth,” James said, cold in his anger. His jaw was clenched tightly, and he spoke
Soap filled Severus’s mouth, and he choked, glaring viciously at James all the while.
“Leave him ALONE!” Lily’s furious voice came from behind them, and James turned, shocked to see her there. She wasn’t wearing shoes, and her pale feet were freckled with dirt and stray pieces of grass.
“Alright, Evans?” James asked, his voice suddenly deep and pleasant. He unconsciously ruffled up his hair again, and Lily’s bright green eyes narrowed when she noticed.
“Leave him alone,” she said again. “What’s he done to you?” It was more righteous anger in her tone than genuine concern for Severus; the two of them had been growing apart for months, years, really, but neither thought they’d reach a point where Lily wouldn’t have been furious if someone hurt Severus, and vice-versa.
“Well,” James said, as if thinking this over very carefully. “It’s more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean…”
He had said this many times before, and Remus had grown tired of it. When most people laughed, Remus just looked at James with a silent plea, asking him to back down and leave it alone for once in his life.
Lily wasn’t laughing either, and had now crossed her arms, looking at James with great distaste. “You think you’re funny,” she said, and the way he smirked in response proved just how funny he really thought he was. “But you’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone.”
Marlene, behind her, let out an appreciative whistle.
“I will if you go out with me, Evans,” James said quickly, immediately struck with what an idea this was, what a brilliant, stupid idea.
Beside him, Sirius groaned inaudibly. “You bloody idiot.”
“Go on… go out with me, and I’ll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again.” James coaxed, stretching his hand out towards her as if actually expecting her to take it.
Lily’s face twisted in anger. “I wouldn’t go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid,” she spat.
Sirius let out an appreciative chuckle. “Bad luck, Prongs.” He turned back towards Snape. “OI!”
It was too late, by only a few seconds — a gash had appeared across James’ face, blood running over his brown skin. It dripped onto his robes, staining his white collar, and James spun with a roar of pain. His wand shot a blast of light at Severus, and he was hanging upside down, revealing pale, skinny legs. Even Remus was smiling despite his better instincts.
“Let him down!” Lily said shrilly; her mouth had twitched as if she was going to smile, but she didn’t, and her eyes were flashing again.
“Certainly,” James said indulgently. Severus fell to the ground in a heap, scrambling to his face, sallow face flushed in humiliation. As he reached for his wand, Sirius said, “Petrificus Totalus,” and Severus toppled over.
“LEAVE HIM ALONE!” Lily drew her wand; she would normally never get in a fight, she was a Prefect, but she was overcome with a sudden urge to throw her wand aside and hit James in the face. “Ah, Evans, don’t make me hex you,” James said, hands up, palms outstretched, wand balanced between his thumb and forefinger.
“Take the curse off him, then!” she shouted.
James looked between Lily and Severus for a moment, then gave a deep sigh and, with the expression of one greatly disgusted with what he had to do, muttered the countercurse.
“There you go,” he said, looking pained. Severus scrambled to his face and wiped at his mouth.
“You’re lucky Evans was here, Snivellus —“
Snape’s face was nearly purple in humiliation; he glared at Lily, who looked nothing but pitying — she felt sorry for him, that little — she was looking at James with the utmost dislike, which pacified Severus only slightly. “I don’t need help from filthy little mudbloods like her!”
Lily’s eyes went wide, her stomach turning. Her heart felt like it was writhing in her chest, raw and hurt and alive. “Fine,” she said. She might’ve expected herself to cry, but she didn’t now — her mother was dead, and even if she hadn’t been, even if Lily hadn’t already cried every tear she was
capable of crying, she wouldn’t let herself, not in front of James Potter of all people. “I won’t bother in future.”

Severus looked at her, immensely sorry, immediately, for what he had said.

“And I’d wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus,” she added, venom dripping from her voice. Lily Evans was not a vengeful person, not even slightly, but when she saw the hurt flash briefly across Severus’s flushed face, she couldn’t help but feel gratified.

“Apologize to Evans!” James roared. His wand was inches from Severus’s throat.

“I don’t want you to make him apologize,” Lily said, shouting now. Her face was bright red as she threw herself between Severus and James. She’d never been this close to James Potter — he smelled nice, she thought, and was even more furious for the thought. “You’re as bad as he is…”

“What?” James practically screamed it — after everything, after all these years of him being in love with her, how could she think that…he had an unsettling moment of clarity, seeing himself exactly as he was, but it faded just as fast. “I’d NEVER call you a — you-know-what!”

Lily shook her head, noticing that his hand had gone to his hair once again — doesn’t he ever stop? — “Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you’ve just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch,” —

So she’d noticed, James thought, and the thought brought a stupid little smirk to his face.

— “Walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can — I’m surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK.”

She looked at him for a single, furious moment, tears beginning to prick her green eyes, and turned on her heel, sprinting away.

“Evans,” James shouted desperately after her. He wanted to chase after her, to shake her until she understood — “hey, EVANS!”

She didn’t look back at him or Severus, and they both watched in silence as she retreated to the castle, storming all the way there.

“What is it with her?” James asked with an air of forced casualness.

Sirius almost laughed. “Reading between the lines, I’d say she thinks you’re a bit conceited, mate.”

“Right,” James said, grinding his teeth. His face was flushed. “Right —“ he drew his wand and Severus was dangling in the air by his ankle, mouth twisted in fury. “Who wants to see me take off Snivelly’s pants?”

“Leave it, Prongs,” Remus said quietly.

“Just having a little fun,” James said with a smirk.

“It’s not fun anymore,” Remus said seriously.

“Sod off, Moony,” James said, his wand still held aloft.

Remus looked over at Peter for support, but Peter barely even seemed concerned. He considered for a moment, wanted, desperately, to step in and to stop James doing something he’d regret. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, really, was too quiet and passive and everything James was not. He touched Sirius’s arm, hoping to appeal to some part of Sirius that knew better than this.

Sirius just shrugged him off, and Remus frowned, shrinking back. He slowly found his way down to the lake where he sat, alone, pretending to study from his Defense Against the Dark Arts textbook until the shouts up the hill subsided and the Marauders joined him. He saw Severus’s dark retreating form in the distance, scampering back up to the castle.

James looked as if he’d been rolled through the grass, and the cut on his face hadn’t stopped bleeding.

“What the actual bloody fuck, Prongs?” Remus finally forced himself to ask, and James let out a shocked laugh.

“I don’t know, mate,” James said, running a hand through his hair. He stopped immediately at the memory of Lily’s withering words. “Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you’ve just got off your broomstick. “I don’t, I just…something…something’s wrong with me, isn’t there?”

Sirius looked at him for a very long moment. “I don’t think so, mate.”

James arched his eyebrows.
“Snivellus is awful enough to bring out that side in everyone,” Sirius continued. “I mean, have you seen him? He looks like a goblin but not as attractive.”

James snorted. “I should apologize to Evans.”

“For what? She doesn’t hate you for what you did to Snivelly just there, mate, she just hates you.”

“Thanks,” James said sarcastically.

“Not to say there’s nothing you can do to fix it,” Remus added. “Just not now.”

“Wormtail, you’ve been uncharacteristically silent,” Sirius said. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

Peter just shook his head mutely.

“Oh, come off it, Peter, you can’t seriously be angry with me,” James said.

“I’m not.”

“I am,” Remus said quietly, but none of them appeared to hear him.

“I ought to feel horrible about this,” James mused after a long moment of silence, but he really didn’t.

“Maybe,” Sirius said casually. “Then again, maybe not.”

“Merlin’s beard,” James said. “You know what I need right now?”

“If you say a drink I’ll smack you,” Sirius said, voice light with amusement.

“A bloody drink.”

Sirius grabbed Remus’s book and smacked James over the head with it before the four of them started back up to the castle. Remus was practically squirming with the guilt of it all. He’d never seen James or Sirius like that, inhuman, unfeeling, and he prayed he never would again. A horrifying thought was dawning on him, twisting his gut. He’d never seen Severus like that, angry, desperate, furious — murderous. Without Lily, did he have anything to lose, and if he didn’t have anything else to lose, what was stopping him from telling Remus’s secret, from breaking his promise?

“Moony,” Peter said softly. “Are you alright?”

Remus looked at Peter, at James and Sirius, who were laughing again (how could they? How could they find this at all funny?) and he bit his tongue. He wanted to tell them how scared he was, how this fear, both hot and cold, had settled in the pit of his stomach and wouldn’t leave. He wanted to scream at them until they understood the danger they’d just put him in, the horror he would face if Severus broke his promise.

“Remus,” Peter repeated.

Remus took a slow breath and nodded, speechless. He followed the others back to the castle, hesitating just slightly behind them, casting guilty glances over his shoulder as if someone was watching him, watching all of them.

Up in the fifth year Gryffindor girls’ dormitory, Lily was lying on her bed, face buried in her pillow. She had known for years exactly what was coming, exactly how it would end with her and Severus, but she had been hoping desperately that it was never going to happen. I never thought, she let herself think, crying now. I never thought he’d go so far, I never — I didn’t think he’d — I thought there was a line he wouldn’t cross. She remembered an argument they’d had, so many months ago, when whatever it was that was underneath the Whomping Willow had attacked Severus and James — James Potter — had saved his life.

Lily remembered being stunned when she’d heard what had happened, speechless. Severus had just shrugged at her like it didn’t matter, like his life didn’t matter, like nothing mattered. It had scared her then and it scared her even more now.

“Lily,” Marlene’s silky-soft voice came through the room, and she sat beside her friend, rubbing her back comfortingly.

“He called me — he called me a — a —” Lily burst into tears again. “H-h-how could he s-s-say that? In front of e-e-everyone? In front of J-j-j-james P-p-p-p-potter!”

“What a git,” Mary said vehemently.

“I t-t-thought — I t-t-thought he was my friend,” she said. “Y-y-you know what he said to me once?”

“What?” Marlene asked.
“He t-told me Dark Magic was ‘just a laugh’! He told me h-h-he didn’t care what Mulciber did to Mary!”
Mary’s face drained of blood. “I never — I didn’t — how did you find out?” She was unconsciously scratching at her scars again, her heart racing in her chest.
“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Lily said, wiping at her eyes. “I don’t know what happened, Mary, but I know it was bad and I h-h-heard Mulciber b-bragging about it and I t-t-told Sev, I told him and he said it was just a laugh! And I should’ve known then, I should’ve known — “
“Lily,” Cindy interrupted.
Lily looked up, wiping her eyes. “Yes?”
“Severus is outside the common room. He says he needs to talk to you.”
Lily frowned. “Tell him to go away.”
Lily closed her eyes, tears glimmering in her eyelashes. Marlene threw her arms around her friend.
“You don’t have to talk to him, Lily. What he did was unforgivable.”
“I’ve forgiven him for everything else,” Lily said quietly. “I’ve given him more chances than I’d’ve given anyone else in the entire world.”
“You know what I think, Lily.” Mary said; there was no love lost between her and Severus. “He’s a git, he’s always been a git! And he doesn’t give a damn about you or your feelings. He just wants a shag, or he’s seeing how far he can go, but he doesn’t really care about you! People who care about you don’t call you Mudblood.”
“You’re right,” Lily said.
Mary and Marlene exchanged shocked looks; for years, they’d asked Lily why she didn’t just tell Severus to go away and leave her alone, why she even bothered with him when there were people who were warm and nice and lovely in this world, people whom Lily deserved to be around.
“I can’t forgive this,” Lily continued.
Marlene nodded. “Bloody well right,” she said vehemently. “And if you get the chance to hex him, throw in a leg lock hex from me.”
“No, I don’t want to see him.” Lily said firmly. “If he’s still outside, tell him I never want to see him again.”
But he didn’t leave, and hours later, when Mary and Marlene had gone to dinner (Lily said she wasn’t hungry) and returned, he remained, waiting outside the portrait of the Fat Lady.
“I’ll sleep here,” Severus warned Mary. “She’s got to talk to me! She’s got to come out eventually, and when she does, I’ll be waiting.”
Mary had hurried past without making eye contact.
She found Lily still on her bed, but she wasn’t crying anymore, now she was dry-eyed and furious, practically shaking with anger.
“He’s still there,” Mary said. “He told me he’d sleep outside.”
Lily frowned deeply. “How —” she balled her fists and took a deep breath. “I shouldn’t go talk to him, right? He doesn’t even deserve to speak to me.”
“Of course not,” Isabelle said supportively.
“I’ve forgiven him for far too much,” Lily said, starting for the door. "Maybe it's time to end it for good.”
“You’re in your nightdress,” Cindy reminded her.
“And I don’t really care,” Lily said, but she pulled on a dressing gown as she ran from her dormitory.
“If I run into James sodding Potter on my way out, I’m literally going to lose my mind!” she shouted up the stairs as she headed for the door.
As she stepped out into the corridor, feet bare, hair in red tendrils hanging down around her face, she came face to face with Severus.
“Lily,” he said, and his voice was a sigh of relief. “Lily, I’m sorry.”
Her face went very still and cold, impassive, almost. She looked at him strangely, as if she’d never seen him before. “I’m not interested.”
His dark eyes went round in his sallow face; he was suddenly overcome with the urge to hit her, to
attack her in any way he could. He watched her standing there with such anger in her bright green
eyes and all he could feel was disgust and injustice. She didn’t have the right to be angry with him; it
wasn’t her who’d been humiliated in front of everyone by James Potter, it wasn’t her who’d felt the
shame, the disgrace that he’d felt. She had no right to be angry, not when it had just slipped out
accidentally, not when it was an accident and it was never going to happen again, no matter what.
How could she look at him so accusatory, so unforgiving, when he was in love with her and she
knew it? “I’m sorry!”
“Save your breath,” Lily said coldly, folding her arms across her dressing gown. Her hands were
trembling slightly. “I don’t want to talk to you,” she said after a brief pause, her lips pressing together
into an angry white line. “I only came out here because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep
here.”
“I was. I would have done.” Here he paused to take another step closer to her. She held his gaze
steadily. “I never meant to call you Mudblood. It just —“
“Slipped out?” Lily asked, a touch of anger now coming into her voice. “It’s too late. I’ve made
excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your
precious little Death Eater friends —“
Severus shifted uncomfortably at this; surely she couldn’t know what they were planning to do to
prove themselves to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?
“You see, you don’t even deny it! You don’t even deny that’s what you’re all aiming to be!” Lily felt
sick with the sudden realization that it was no longer just a possibility, it was certainty. “You can’t
wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?”
He opened his mouth helplessly, but words failed him. He could only look at her and wish her anger
would devour him. Perhaps then he could feel something other than this crushing emptiness.
“I can’t pretend anymore. You’ve chosen your way, I’ve chosen mine.”
“No —“ he protested in a strangled voice that sounded nothing like his own. “Listen, I didn’t mean
—“
“To call me a Mudblood?” she asked with a derisive laugh. “But you call everyone of my birth
Mudblood, Severus.” She glanced into his eyes, hoping to gage some sort of reaction. “Why should I
be any different?”
He struggled, stammered incoherent noises at her, but she just shot one last withering glare at him
and disappeared through the portrait hole.
As the portrait swung shut behind him, he clenched his fist and hit the wall as hard as he could.
“You’ve no right to be angry with me!” he shouted at the empty corridor. “James Potter — he’s the
one you should be angry with! He’s the one who doesn’t deserve another chance!”
He stepped close to the portrait now, as if hoping the Fat Lady would suddenly swing aside and
admit him. She did not. “I know you can hear me, Lily!” he shouted hoarsely.
She could; on the other side of the door she waited, tearful, shaking.
“You’re not a Mudblood, Lily! I never should have said — I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, please, you’ve
got to forgive me!”
He waited, but she did not reappear.
“If you want to know what I think —“ the Fat Lady began.
“I don’t,” he snapped, and turned away.
Lily spent the following days after her falling-out with Severus writing letters. She wrote Severus letters full of her hurt and heartbreak and she burnt them before the ink had dried, lest anyone discover how she felt, how underneath her blazing anger there was a deep, cavernous sadness that she felt would eat her alive. In one of her letters to Frank Longbottom (with whom she'd kept up a casual correspondence in the years since Frank had graduated, and whose letters she enjoyed, those little tastes of what life after Hogwarts was like) she'd confessed that she felt obligated to forgive Severus, as she had forgiven all of his past transgressions.

"If you've any self respect, you won’t forgive him. There are lines that people who love you will never cross, and it is undeniable that such a line has been crossed in your situation. Besides, you're better off now. Severus Snape is nothing but bad news, for you, and for Hogwarts, I think. I remember him from school: he’d trail after you like a lost puppy, he had no respect for authority of any kind, and although you two always seemed to enjoy your interactions, I overheard multiple instances of threats and outright cruelty."

Lily kind of laughed as she read this, a feat that was almost impossible for her these days.

“Don’t let it discourage you. If you let idiots like James Potter and Severus Snape distract you from your O.W.L.s, you’ll never forgive yourself, and I’ll never forgive you for selling yourself short.” Lily smiled down at the letter in her hand and began to write her response. In it, she talked of mundane things, leaving out Severus's name entirely. She would not allow herself to spare him a thought until her anger dissipated and she could decide if it was going to be possible to forgive him. When the letter was written, she sealed it neatly, addressed it to Frank, and started on her way towards the Owlerey.

She climbed up the stairs, sweating in the summer heat by the time she reached the top.

“Prongs,” Sirius muttered; he and James were standing in the Owlerey, each with a letter in hand. James was writing to his father in hospital again, hoping to Merlin to get a response that would either confirm or disprove his worst fears. Sirius was writing to his parents to tell them how O.W.L.s were going, trying his best to keep up any pretense he had of still being their son.

“What?” James asked.

Sirius gestured over his shoulder at Lily, who took a deep breath and continued to ignore them. All I’ve got to do is send this stupid letter and then I can leave, she told herself sternly.

“Evans,” James said, and she stubbornly ignored him. “Evans, c’mon, you’re not seriously mad about — he called you something horrible, you think he didn’t deserve —“

“It wasn’t your place,” she hissed. “I can take care of myself, thank you very much, I don’t need a big-headed git like you rushing in to protect me!”

“Evans, c’mon —“ he said. She tied the letter to Archibald’s leg, patted him on the head, and sent him soaring off into the air. “Evans, talk to me!”

“I have absolutely nothing to say to you,” she replied coolly, and retreated down the stairs, determinedly not looking back, though she could feel his eyes on her.

“I’ve gone and mucked it up,” James said, lighting a cigarette. Sirius just laughed. “She hates me!”

“Nah, mate, she doesn’t,” Sirius took the cigarette from James’ hand and took a drag himself. “If anything, she’s just angry.”

“But angry with me, when…when Snape had…there’s really no comparison.”

“She’s a witch, Prongs. They’re bloody confusing.”

“You don’t even like witches!”

Sirius just wiggled his eyebrows.

“Actually, I’ve got a question. Do you?” James asked. It was surprising how seldom this came up in their conversations.

Sirius snorted. “What exactly are you asking me?”

“Well, is it a…wizards-only sort of thing?”
“Depends on which thing you mean,” Sirius replied gravely, and James burst out laughing. “I don’t know, really. All I know is that Moony — Moony and I —”
James laughed again.
“What?”
“You get this look in your eyes when you talk about him,” James said. “It’s like you’re a different person.”
Sirius smiled and the pair stood in silence for another moment or so before silently agreeing to return to the castle. Anyone who could have seen them might have remarked upon how similarly they walked, simultaneous, or how at random moments they would both let out a slight chuckle at a joke neither of them had said aloud.
The following day, the Marauders were lounging around a table in the Gryffindor common room, studying.
“Potions,” James said. “Bloody potions.”
“Despite what you might think,” Remus said dryly. “Repeating ‘bloody Potions’ over and over again will not somehow synthesize the information into your brain.”
“Well, it was worth a shot, wasn’t it?” James asked halfheartedly, scanning his potions notes with casual disinterest.
“No,” Remus and Sirius replied in unison. Peter, who was fervently reading over his notes and miming chopping ingredients, was silent.
“Out of curiosity,” Lily said to Remus; she had turned her face so James and Sirius weren’t in her line of vision. “Considering the sheer number of times I’ve seen you set your tie on fire during Potions, would you like any help studying?”
Remus laughed; it was, much to his chagrin, his worst subject. “Merlin, yes. Quite honestly, I don’t know anything.”
Lily let out a nice sort of laugh, the sort James often wished would be directed at him. “Do you know the properties that make up a basic healing potion?”
Remus tried to act as if he knew exactly what she was talking about. “Er…”
“It’s alright. I’ll teach you.”
“He doesn’t need you to teach him,” James said hotly. “We’re perfectly capable of —“
Lily fixed him with a look so cold that it stopped him mid-sentence. “But Remus didn’t ask you,” she said, in a voice that was very soft and terrifying; he would’ve much preferred her to scream at him.
“He asked me. And because I’ve got some basic decency, I offered to help. Unlike you, I actually think of other people occasionally.”
James just sneered at her until she turned away.
“I wish the two of you wouldn’t fight,” Remus said offhandedly as Lily flipped through her Potions textbook.
“We aren’t fighting,” she replied. “Fighting would imply a relationship that could be ruined by an argument, which Potter and I certainly do not have.”
Remus shrugged in response.
“Do I even want to know your thoughts on what happened last week?” she asked, pausing her studying to look up with him with thinly concealed hurt in her eyes.
“Certainly not,” he said.
“Remus.”
“Alright, alright, I’ll be honest with you. I think you’re being too hard on him.”
“Potter?” Lily scoffed. “Did you see what happened?”
“I did,” Remus said tactfully. “And I know what James did was wrong, of course, I’m not so blind that I’d ever excuse…”
“You didn’t stop him,” Lily said. She had brewed herself a cup of tea in midair — she’d always been very good at Charms — and the teacup was now warming her hands as she sat, hunched over her Potions book, sipping occasionally.
“I know —“ Remus said.
“How can you say you know it was wrong — knew it was wrong when it happened? — if you
didn’t do anything to stop him?”

“Well, in my defense,” Remus said with a wry smile. “You did seem to have it under control.” Lily laughed. “Under control is not a phrase I’d use to describe my life right now.” Remus laughed at that for perhaps a few seconds longer than was strictly necessary. After a few minutes of the two of them giggling almost hysterically, they both said, “Potions.”

“Right, Potions.”

“What’re they so happy about?” James grumbled to Sirius. He was brewing a potion on the table for practice, and every time he heard Lily’s bright voice, his fists would clench.

“Well, Lily’s finally gotten rid of Snape, so I’d say that’s cause for celebration,” Peter commented. It was close to the most directly cruel thing he’d ever said about Snape, and both James and Sirius nodded their appreciation.

“I’ll have to be restrained if that —” James growled, his face turning dark, murderous. “If he even breathes in Evans’ direction, I’ll bloody kill him.” There was no doubt, no hesitation in his voice, and Sirius and Peter exchanged a brief look, both starting to think that maybe James meant it.

“Prongs,” Remus said mildly over his shoulder. “Mind being quiet for a moment? Some of us are trying to study.” James snorted. “Yeah, yeah, sure.”

Remus just rolled his eyes in response and continued reading over his notes, desperately trying to make the techniques of how to crush jumping beans stick in his mind.

“My philosophy is, if you don’t know it now, you’re certainly not going to know it in an hour,” Sirius said, propping his feet up on the table in front of Peter.

“Merlin,” Marlene groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“What, that our Potions O.W.L. is in an hour?” Sirius asked, grinning devilishly.

There was a collective groan through the room.

“Who wants to bribe Slughorn?” James suggested.

“I’m in,” Sirius said with a grin.

“Always.” Remus said resignedly.

“Definitely!” Peter piped up.

Perhaps before, Lily might have made a sarcastic remark in their direction, with a little smile when they all laughed. But now she was just quiet, collecting her books into a neat, orderly pile.

“C’mon, we’ll be late,” Mary said, standing by the door to the common room. She leaned against the wall as she waited patiently for Lily to stand, to force an optimistic, sideways grin, and follow her and Marlene out into the corridor.

Remus suffered through his Potions exam, in so much pain from the approaching full moon that he could barely think straight.

“Mr. Lupin, are you alright?” McGonagall asked, sweeping past his desk as she scanned the rows of students.

Remus gave a tight, pained nod. “Yes, Professor,” he said under his breath.

“If you need to take a moment, some extra time can be provided —”

“No,” Remus shook his head, though the very effort was dizzying. “No, I wouldn’t want that. Thank you, Professor,”

McGonagall looked at him with concern in her steely eyes. “Alright, Mr. Lupin. Just let me know if you change your mind.”

Remus gave a brief nod and began to write furiously, pain radiating up his arm.

Sirius and James, at opposite corners of the room, exchanged a look and then glanced at Remus, both with worry in their eyes.

He looks like he’s going to collapse, James said, gesturing towards Remus. Sirius and James had this sort of telepathy at times, when they were so accustomed to reading each others' facial expressions it was almost like reading each others' minds.
Have you got the cloak? James thought Sirius's face was asking. It might have been a strange question, but James was fairly certain he knew where the conversation was heading. Absolutely, James said, cocking his head in the direction of his bag. If he does collapse, we throw it over him, turn into Padfoot and Prongs, and carry him out, right? Sirius suggested, wiggling his eyebrows.

James let out a chuckle as he finished answering one of the questions on his parchment. “Potter, is something funny?” McGonagall boomed across the silent exam hall. James just shook his head, a grin still on his face, and shot a sly glance back at Sirius.

When their parchments were collected and they were dismissed, Remus collapsed into the stone arch of a windowsill, the summer sun warming the skin of his arm that hung down outside into the courtyard. “You alright, mate?” James asked, clapping Remus on the shoulder. For the first time in a very long time, he didn’t wait to hear the answer.

James and Sirius were almost outside within seconds, Peter scurrying along behind them, and Remus had to force himself to stand and follow them, a few paces behind. “Evans,” Sirius warned as Lily, Mary, and Marlene crossed the green, arm in arm, all three smiling. “Bloody —” James began, ducking his head.

“Oh, right,” Remus said, his sarcastic smile seeming out of place on his pale, nervous face. “That’ll stop her from noticing you.”

Sirius and Peter laughed uproariously at James’ resulting scowl. “She wouldn’t have done if Moony could keep his bloody mouth shut,” James muttered, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Remus just sighed in response, running a hand through his hair. “Remus, if you want to go inside, I’ll go with you,” Peter said quietly.

Remus shook his head. “No, thanks,” he said softly, looking at Sirius. Sirius was so distracted by James, who had taken to throwing the stolen Snitch in the air again, that he didn’t appear to notice at all.

They wove their way through a crowd of anxious fifth years towards the front of the room.

“Please take your seats, everyone,” Greyson said. “The practical portion of this examination will last twenty minutes. You will be kept in isolation for the duration of the practical until every student has completed their examination. If for some reason you miss the examination, you will not have an opportunity to make it up until the end of next year, so try to be punctual.”

Remus was currently gripping the edge of a table to keep from falling over and barely heard this. “We will go in reverse alphabetical order today,” she said, and Avery’s sigh of relief could be heard throughout the room, making the hairs on the back of Lily’s neck stand up. “Mr. Wilkes, please stay behind. The rest of you will be kept in the Great Hall and called in periodically.”

“Remus,” Lily said quietly, pulling him to his feet. He had fallen asleep at his desk as Greyson was talking. “Remus, c’mon.”

Remus blinked open his eyes, his face flushing. “I’m so, so sorry,” he said, his voice hoarse. “It’s alright, you’re ill, don’t worry.” As he stood, she grabbed onto his arm. Mary, without asking, took his other arm and the two of them helped him to the door.

Sirius caught Mary’s eye at the door and wrapped an arm around Remus’s shoulder. Remus was feverish and shivering, and Sirius, who was usually cold, could feel the sick heat radiating against his skin. “Moony, you’ve got to go to the hospital wing.”

“I can’t,” Remus murmured into his ear.

Lily, although her lip was curled with dislike for Sirius, did not leave. “Remus, please go lie down. You don’t look well.”

Remus nodded faintly and allowed Sirius to half drag him down the corridor. “Have you been like this all day?” Sirius asked, his voice now edged with genuine concern.

Remus wiped sweat from his forehead and nodded. “I’m so sorry I didn’t —“
“It’s alright,” Remus said quietly.
“Here, c’mon, let’s get some air, you’re going to be fine,” Sirius said, pulling Remus gently by the hands out into the afternoon air. It was burning hot outside, and the light hurt Remus’s eyes.
“I don’t think I can…” Remus said, closing his eyes. He leaned against Sirius, taking slight, shallow breaths.
“Sh,” Sirius said quietly, his voice muffled when he pressed his lips against Remus’s forehead. “It’s alright.”
“I’m so sorry,” Remus said faintly.
“For what? It’s not your fault.”
“For everything,” Remus said.
Sometimes, when a full moon was particularly bad, he’d be like this; shaky and anxious and apologetic, with a resigned look in his eyes, like he was watching his humanity slip from between his fingers.
“Here, c’mon, let’s go to the hospital wing.”
“I don’t…I don’t want to…”
“You don’t want to fail your potions practical either,” Sirius warned, and Remus, at this, found the strength to get slowly to his feet.
“Alright, fine.”
Sirius began to walk with him, half carrying him across the courtyard. He made it look simple, casual, and Remus had never been so grateful.
“Good afternoon, Madam Pomfrey,” Sirius said respectfully, a bit of pureblood manners slipping into his voice before he noticed.
“Remus,” she said, fussing him towards a hospital bed. “Sit down, sit down. Why on earth didn’t you take him to me sooner?” she demanded of Sirius.
“I made a valiant effort,” Sirius said dryly. “But you know how he is.”
“I do,” Madam Pomfrey said briskly, and set about bringing Remus his usual assortment of pain management potions. “Mr. Lupin, I take it you have a Potions practical exam in a few hours.”
“That’s right,” Remus said.
“Given the nature of your condition, I’m certain that you could file with the Ministry of Magic’s Education Department…”
“Absolutely not.”
“I’m sure you want to succeed, Mr. Lupin.”
“I don’t want —” Remus downed one of his potions in one swift gulp. “I don’t want special treatment for being — for being how I am — I don’t want anyone to think…”
“But no one would ever have to know,” Madam Pomfrey informed him.
“Snape knows,” Remus said grimly, reaching for his second potion. “And I think Lily does as well.”
“Mr. Snape is aware of your condition?” Madam Pomfrey replied as though she’d misunderstood him.
“Unfortunately,” Sirius muttered, and Remus gave him a sidelong look. “Sorry.”
Madam Pomfrey bustled around between the beds, tsking under her breath.
“Pads,” Remus said quietly. “You can go.”
“I’ll stay,” Sirius said quietly.
Remus shook his head. “Sirius, go.”
Sirius flopped down on the bed next to Remus and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. The side of the bed was digging uncomfortably into his leg, but feeling Remus relax against him was enough incentive to stay.
Remus didn’t speak, just smiled at him weakly.
“Here, Moons,” Sirius pulled his Potions book from his bag. “Walk me through how to brew a Pepper-up Potion.”
“You’re actually helping me study?” Remus inquired. “I believe you’ve stated on more than one occasion that it’s a colossal waste of time.”
“I don’t recall,” Sirius said with a little smirk.
Remus just rolled his eyes and took the book from Sirius’s hand, beginning to read although his vision was blurred and his head spun like he’d been running in circles for hours.

“Primary ingredient in a Pepper-up potion?” Sirius asked.

Remus looked at him and smiled gratefully. “Mandrake root.”

Sirius kissed Remus gently on the lips in response.

That night, the Marauders helped Remus into the Shrieking Shack. He was nearly catatonic with pain as the moon was rising into the pitch-black sky, shaking. He had one hand in Sirius’s and the other in James’s as the transformation started, Peter, already in rat form, calming and warm on his aching back.

“I’m sorry,” Remus gasped before the wolf stole his breath from his lungs. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

The Marauders left themselves behind, then, and became mere shadows, shifting forms, at times more human than animal, at times more animal than human, but never really one or the other. They chased Remus round and round the Shrieking Shack, they held him down as he howled, they fought and roared as the moon shone bright in their young eyes.

In the morning, they were still at last. Their breaths, as they woke almost simultaneously, were perfectly synchronized, and they lay in a pile on the floor. There was blood on the ground, as there often was, but none could place whose blood it was.

James groaned as he struggled to his feet, reaching for his glasses, which he’d stored inside the piano for safekeeping. He had a vague memory of watching Peter run over the keys of the piano, creating a strange, awful sort of melody, but he never remembered much as he woke up.

“Wicked,” Sirius said hoarsely, stretching out a hand for James to help him up. “Merlin, I needed that.”

“That’s slightly worrying,” James said, but he figured he didn’t have much space to stand in that respect. “How you feeling, Pete?”

“Great,” Peter said breathlessly. James and Sirius each took one of his sweaty hands and helped him to his feet.

Remus lay curled around a blanket on the floor; much as they’d tried to stop him scratching or biting himself the previous night, he had a long claw mark down one of his pale arms.

“Moons,” Sirius said gently. “C’mon, wake up.”

Remus opened his eyes slowly; the pain was nauseating, as usual, but it dimmed as he looked at the others, their glowing, tired faces. “Thank you,” he said, his voice cracking with his sincerity.

“Don’t be a sap, Moons,” James scoffed, but he was smiling as he transformed easily into a stag, arms and legs elongating, hands and feet turning to hooves, a majestic set of antlers bursting from his head. Sirius helped Remus onto James’ back, and the four of them made their way up to the castle.

“Look,” Peter said, awestruck. The sun was rising over the sleeping castle, the sky turning lovely summer shades of pink and blue and gold. The light washed over them, fading their bruises into mere shadows, and they helped each other back up to the castle, shifting between human and animal as they pleased, to get the last precious hours of sleep they could manage before their Care of Magical Creatures exam.

“I don’t understand,” Sirius said, his voice slurring with exhaustion. “Why we have to take a Care of Magical Creatures exam when we just spent all night chasing a magical creature.”

“The Hogwarts school system,” Remus said through gritted teeth. “Was specifically designed to drive students mad.”

“Moons, you’re awake,” James said in a tone of pleasant surprise.

“You’ve been physically dragging me uphill for all of ten minutes, it’d be a wonder if I wasn’t.” Remus grumbled sleepily.

“Who’s there?” a voice called down the hill.

“Bloody —” Sirius grabbed Remus by the shoulders and pushed him behind a tree. “Stay.”

Remus sank to his knees on the ground, his head spinning. Sounds echoed in his head like music, a melody of fear and pain.

“Remus?” Lily’s voice came more distinctly now, and though the others tried to stop her, she made
her way over to the tree and knelt down beside him. “Merlin, are you alright?”

“What are you…what are you doing out here this early?” Remus asked, making a valiant effort to sound as casual as possible.

“I, er…”

Lily Evans, in the time following her mother’s death and the end of her friendship with Severus Snape, had taken to long, early morning walks. Whenever she couldn’t sleep, she would stand, wrap herself in a dressing gown, and wander out onto the castle grounds. She’d almost been caught many times, and she was aware, more than ever now, of exactly how dangerous it was to be Muggle-born and wander outside alone.

“Lily, do you have any understanding of what could happen to you out here —” Remus asked, but he was forced to stop by the wave of nausea that coursed through him.

“I do,” Lily said calmly.

She was silent for a few reflective moments as the summer air ruffled the grass around them. James, Sirius, and Peter hung back anxiously, waiting, as Lily began to ask a series of questions that Remus couldn’t answer.

“Remus, why are you out here? What happened to you? You looked so ill yesterday. Are you getting worse?”

“No,” Remus said tiredly. Lily was well-meaning and warm as she asked, leaving appropriate pauses between each question, but he couldn’t find a way to lie to her when anything he might’ve said sounded feeble and transparent.

“Alright,” she said at length. “I won’t ask any longer, not while you’re like this. But when you’re better, you’re going to tell me.”

“Lily, please…” Remus said, and began to cough, his entire body shaking.

“What can I do to help?” Lily asked quietly, and Remus looked at her with wide eyes. No one had ever asked him outright; people were always assuming or avoiding what was clearly wrong with him.

“Er, quite honestly, Lily, I need you to promise me that you’ll never tell anyone what you saw.”

“I promise,” Lily said, giving him one last look of concern. She smelled like grass and sunshine and it was the only smell that wasn’t making Remus’s stomach turn.

After she was gone, he sat there a moment longer, weeping quietly into his hands, before the Marauders came and surrounded him and lifted him to his feet and he stopped, because after all these years he still couldn’t stand for them to see him cry.

“You don’t think she knows…?” Peter asked in quiet concern.

“I know she knows,” Remus said quietly, and closed his eyes. Madam Pomfrey met them at the doorway and ushered them inside, levitating Remus on a stretcher in front of her, stone-faced. “How was it, boys?” she asked, with a slight twitching smile.

“Haven’t the slightest idea,” Sirius said, and the two boys exchanged a look. Their routine of finishing each others sentences, rapid fire conversations where no one else could get a word in, had gone neglected for weeks.

“Pain?”

“Always,” Remus said honestly. The others fell uncomfortably silent, shifting, grappling with the thought that Remus was always in pain and never felt comfortable enough to even mention it in passing.
“Is that true, Moons?” Peter asked quietly. Remus just nodded and closed his eyes, another wave of pain stretching up from his toes to the top of his head. No matter how bad it was, he had to remind himself that it was infinitely better than it had been when he was alone, when he would wake up covered in scratches and bruises and blood and spend hours loathing himself for what he was.

Madam Pomfrey tucked him into his usual hospital bed (third closest to the door on the left side) and drew the curtains, examining the others for injuries.

“No bites and scratches?” she asked.

They all shook their heads.

“You’re free to go,” she said, but they all slept in the beds surrounding Remus rather than going back to their dormitory, and she watched them for a brief moment as the sun rose through the windows behind them before bustling on about the hospital wing.

The morning of their last O.W.L. was a bright, clear June morning, the sun burning down on the grass, on the castle grounds. Years of Binns droning on and most students napping on their desks had culminated into the last O.W.L. they’d take, the determiners of their futures at Hogwarts and onwards.

“You’re not nervous?” Peter asked Sirius.

Sirius smirked, brushing a black tendril of hair out of his eyes. “Course not, Wormtail, it’s History of Magic.”

“I know,” Peter said nervously, chewing on his fingernails.

“He’s right, Pads, Binns hasn’t taught us anything in five years,” Remus muttered from the couch. He was poring over his notes again, desperately scanning them for some missing piece, anything that would help him.

“Binns is a useless excuse for a ghost,” James declared. “And confining himself to the earth for all eternity tortures the rest of us far more than it tortures him.”

Sirius sniggered. “Strong words.”

“I could’ve said worse,” James said lightly, and the others laughed.

The sun grew hotter as the day wore on and they made their way down to the Great Hall for their last exam. Exhaustion wore on each of them, the hard work, the emotional toll of two weeks spent in a state of constant stress.

“Oi,” Sirius said as they waited outside the Great Hall. “Listen, if we make it through this — “

“Is there any question that we won’t?” James wanted to know.

“Of course not,” Remus said dryly.

“Take your seats,” McGonagall called. It felt somehow fitting that she was their final examiner, standing in for Binns, who seldom could be convinced to leave his classroom.

“Good luck,” James said to the others with a little sideways grin, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes like it once had.

The Marauders gave each other a last salute like they were marching to their deaths and sat, in their four corners of the room, simultaneously, waiting with various degrees of patience and good posture for their exam sheets to appear in front of them.

They wrote furiously for hours, through hand cramps and confusion and forgetting dates and facts. And after a grueling two hours, it was over. Their exam papers flew towards the front of the room and landed in a neat pile in McGonagall’s arms, and she dismissed them with a short, congratulatory speech that hardly anyone heard. The entire class was itching to get out into the sun, and they all leaned towards the door, racing through it as though they were running for their lives.

James led the rallying cry of, “IT’S OVER!” and all the fifth years were whooping and cheering as they made their way through the halls, free at last.

“How d’you think you did?” Sirius asked James.

James smirked. “You really need to ask?”

“It wasn’t terrible,” Remus said.

“Which is more than can be said for Transfiguration,” Sirius pointed out.
“Merlin, what a nightmare,” James groaned. “You know she told me I had to get an O? I got a T at best.”
“At best? What’s worse than a Troll?” Sirius asked.
“You face,” James replied, and Sirius snorted. “A first year could come up with a better insult than that.”
“That’s definitively false. I heard a first year call someone ‘a potato face’ just last week.”
“Really? Which one?” Sirius asked in tones of false interest.
“Anthony Fairchild.”
“Not a surprise, that,” Sirius commented, and lit a cigarette, blowing a puff of smoke out over the Hogwarts grounds.
“Mate, you’re making it impossible for me to quit smoking.”
“Then don’t,” Sirius offered James a drag off his cigarette, but James shook his head.
“I’m serious, I’m going to see my dad in hospital and he doesn’t care if you smoke, but if he finds out I do he’ll murder me.”
“You’re…Sirius?” Sirius asked, and James groaned.
“Stop. Please.”
“Oi, oi, did you hear?” a passing Hufflepuff said to his friend.
“Hear what?” the friend responded, with the conspiratorial tone of one waiting to hear a particularly juicy piece of gossip.
“Well, there’s a rumor going around,” the Hufflepuff said excitedly. “That last night, someone saw a werewolf at Hogwarts!”
Remus flinched and whipped his head around to look at Lily, who, coincidentally, had been staring at him intently for at least a minute. She saw the look of betrayal on his face and shook her head.
“Who told you that?” the friend asked, and the Marauders crept closer to the gossiping pair in order to hear their tale.
“I heard it from Angelica Stockington, who heard it from Eliza Redfeather, who heard it from Magnus Mulciber —”
“Mulciber?” the other boy repeated, and the shock in his voice made it clear that he had been a personal victim of Mulciber’s bullying; a quick spell to reveal if he was registered as Muggle-born would have revealed why.
“Yeah, a couple Slytherins were sneaking out of the castle when they saw it.”
“A werewolf?”
“Yeah! Can you believe it?”
“Remus, c’mon,” Peter said softly, trying to pull Remus away. Remus stood, stunned, eyes wide.
“Oi, you don’t have to listen to this,” James said. “Seriously, c’mon.”
“No,” Remus pulled sharply away from them. “I need to know what people are saying.”
“Use your brain, Remus, we were in the Shack all night, no one could’ve possibly seen you.”
“Right,” Remus took a deep breath. “Right, of course. Unless — he looked each of them in the eye, one at a time. “Promise me I was never outside the Shack last night. Promise.”
“We promise,” the others said together.
“Then why…? Snape couldn’t have told, he knows Dumbledore would get him kicked out of school…” Remus ran a hand through his hair.
“It’s going to be alright,” Peter said half-heartedly.
“If anyone finds out, do you know what’s going to happen to me?” Remus asked in a small, helpless voice. He wasn’t sure if he wanted an answer.
“No,” Sirius said. “But I swear we’ll protect you.”
Remus nodded, not wanting to argue further.
“A werewolf! At school? Where was it?”
“I don’t know,” the Hufflepuff said excitedly. “It could be anywhere. It could be anyone.”
“It’s time to go,” James said firmly, and pulled Remus away by the arm over the grassy hills.
“James, I have to hear — I have to know —”
“You absolutely don’t need to know,” James swore. “C’mon, let’s go get some food.”
The Marauders snuck down to the kitchens, greeting each house elf they saw by name. This was a certain power that all the Marauders had, together and individually, to commit names to memory, to make anyone and everyone feel special and known.

“Pie, Mr. Potter?” a house elf named Ellie asked.

“Thank you, Ellie,” James said. “A round of butterbeer, please.”

The Marauders toasted to their futures, to the end of O.W.L.s, to many, many more nights spent celebrating in the kitchens together.
The school year ended with a kiss between Sirius and Remus in the middle of the Great Hall. Although it wasn’t an uncommon occurrence for Sirius to make large displays in public for the sake of attention and public reaction, this was a very unusual thing for Remus. It was a quick, chaste kiss, but it didn’t go unnoticed. Severus and his cronies burst into obnoxiously loud laughter behind them, reminding Remus, however momentarily, that someone knew what he was and someone had let it slip.

“What was that for?” Remus asked breathlessly.

“Nothing,” Sirius said with one of his smiles, the ones that could get anyone to do whatever he wanted. Remus felt so lucky to have one of those smiles directed at him.

Dumbledore was giving his closing remarks for the year, offering up some inspiring facts about the war, although nothing about the war was inspiring. More and more students were swearing they’d do something to stop Voldemort, that they’d do what they had to do, and that they were willing to die if necessary.

“I will not sugar-coat the reality of the war,” he declared. “It will not be easy. It has not been easy. Hogwarts itself is not safe from what is happening outside our grounds. But I, and the teachers and staff of Hogwarts, are doing our best day and night to ensure your safety. And on that somber note, have a wonderful summer holiday. For our graduating seventh years, good luck in the world, and for the rest of you, I shall see you next year.”

A quick glance around the room proved this to be false; by the next year, some of the students in the room would be dead, and some forbidden to return to Hogwarts. Many people were thinking the same thing simultaneously, but everyone returned to their dessert and began saying their goodbyes to their friends for the year.

Lily said polite goodbyes to each of the Marauders, even James, and her “have a nice holiday, Potter,” was enough to keep him smiling for hours.

On the train ride home, the Marauders sat in their usual compartment and made plans for the summer. “I assume we’re all going to be struggling through the summer,” James asked, propping his feet up on the seat across from him. “Anyone care to share details?”

“I’m not doing anything other than cleaning,” Peter said. “My mum claims our house is covered in dust.”

“My mum’s sick,” Remus said. “So I’m going to be helping my dad most of the time, I think.”

“Dad’s still in hospital,” James said, and this was all the clarification he needed.

“I’m going to my parents’ house,” Sirius said. “Again.”

“Sirius…” Remus said.

“What? It’ll be fine. I swear, I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“You’re incapable of keeping your mouth shut,” James said. “But it’s what we love about you.”

“That and my fabulous hair?” Sirius suggested, shaking his hair out over his shoulders.

“And your oversized ego, yes,” James replied, and the others snorted. James fished a couple galleons out of his pockets and bought sweets from the trolley witch for himself and the others.

Sirius Black, as history would remember him, ran away from his pureblood family at the age of sixteen. There was a scorch mark on the Black family tapestry where his name had been, and his parents remembered him without fondness after he left, calling him to any who would listen "an ungrateful troublemaker" and "a revolutionary who didn't even understand what he was revolting against."

Sirius arrived at home the summer after his fifth year with eyes full of stars and a heart full of worry. That very same afternoon, James was going to the hospital to see Fleamont Potter and determine for himself whether the worrying he’d been doing for weeks was based in any reality. Sirius awaited
James’ letter for most of the day, keeping constant watch out the window to be sure his owl wasn’t intercepted before it reached him. There wasn’t much to do in the Black family house; Sirius and Regulus were expected to be seen but not heard at all times, and since Regulus had gotten involved with Snape and his group of Slytherins who weren’t even pretending not to want to become Death Eaters, the brothers had barely spoken.

“Sirius, come out of your room,” Walburga called up the stairs. The second Sirius had arrived at home, he’d run up to his room, avoiding his parents for as long as possible, and for a few hours, they hadn’t made any attempts to draw him out.

Sirius sighed and stood to walk downstairs, his stomach twisting in knots. As his parents began to ask him questions about the school year, he answered without meeting their eyes.

“What’s wrong, Sirius?” Orion asked. There was no genuine concern in his voice, just a gruff sort of disinterest.

“Nothing,” Sirius said quietly. “I’m fine.”

“Well? How did your exams come off?” Walburga asked expectantly.

“Results will be here in two weeks,” Sirius said. “But I think they were alright.” He still couldn’t bring himself to meet her eyes; every time he looked at his parents he was filled with a sickness, an anger that no matter what he did, they would despise him. In years to come, he’d begin to believe that his young self had been blinded by anger, too quick to judgement against his pureblood family, but whether or not this was true he would never know.

“Don’t disappoint us,” Orion said, and it didn’t sound like a threat but there was no denying what it was. “We’ve already told our friends how talented you are at school.”

“Yes, well, that’s not my problem,” Sirius said.

“Don’t use that tone with your father,” Walburga warned, and Sirius was silent, waiting patiently for them to lose interest in him and move on to Regulus. Eventually they did, and Sirius retreated to his room. On his desk was the Black family owl, and in the owl’s talons was a letter.

Sirius tore it open, heart racing, to see James’ familiar messy scrawl and the words “Dad’s fine, don’t worry.”

Sirius felt as if he could breathe for the first time in weeks, and read the rest of the letter in a relieved stupor. James rounded off his letter with “please, Sirius, just be careful.” and Sirius promised himself he would be.

He sat silently at dinner when his parents discussed the deaths of the people in Fleamont’s office as if it were a victory that “Muggle-lovers” had been killed. He was quiet when his parents called James, Remus, and Peter “a load of Mudbloods, all of them” and he didn’t retaliate when they demanded of him for the thousandth time why he wasn’t more like Regulus. He didn’t provoke Kreacher when he caught the House Elf spitting on his floor, muttering derogatory things under his breath. Sirius was, for all intents and purposes, the most careful he’d ever been, but it just wasn’t enough.

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The beginning and end of it came after dinner one night in early July. The sun had set, leaving the streets cold and without light, and Number 12, Grimmauld Place, was as usual cloaked in magic and shielded from the Muggle world. “Sirius,” Walburga said. “What’s this?”

Before Sirius looked up he already knew he was in trouble. Dangling from his mother’s hand like a dead animal was a letter he’d written to Remus only a few days ago and hadn’t had the opportunity to send. He recalled, briefly, the contents of this letter.

Dear Remus,

Well, Merlin, I’m going bloody mad trapped in this house. James, as you can imagine, has been no help WHATSOEVER and has instead resorted to sending me daily letters full of such sickening affirmations as “keep your head up, mate” and “you’ll make it through.” Sweet as the sentiments may be, I think I much prefer your dry, realistic approach to such situations.

James’ father is doing much better, in case Prongs neglected to inform you in a fit of irresponsibility. If you find a way to James’ place this summer (I undoubtedly shall not, the demons have made it clear that should I exit this house unauthorized I will never be allowed to return) please hit him rather hard in the face and tell him it’s from me, with love.
Additionally, I have gone so long without a proper shag that I feel I may lose my mind. Not that I blame you or your furry little problem for this, of course, just putting the statement out there that you’ll have to find a way to make it up to me when we see each other next.

Anyhow, I must be going. In summary: Prongs is useless, and I miss you.

Love,
Sirius

P.S. Is it acceptable to sign these things with “love” when the love is not at all innocent or platonic?

Is there a better word somewhere in your endless vocabulary that you recommend I use instead?

Sirius blanched. “It’s not what you think.”

“Which part?” Walburga asked. There was a steely edge to her voice that was worrying him. “Your expression of how you despise us, your family who loves you, or when you blatantly asked this boy for…sexual favors?”

“I wouldn’t say any of that is accurate,” Sirius commented.

“What does this letter mean, Sirius?” Orion asked, running a hand over his face. He seemed exhausted by this, but unsurprised.

“Nothing! Just a little joke between me and a friend, that’s all,” Sirius said desperately. He felt violated, exposed; they’d read a letter to Moony, of all people, they were looking at him as if he’d betrayed them although he was the one who should have felt betrayed.

“Sirius Orion Black,” Walburga said, bending down so her face was close to his. She smelled like mint and something very cold, metallic, like blood. “Be honest with us. Are you a…a homosexual?”

“What? No!” Sirius said vehemently. “Of course not, don’t be ridiculous.”

“I wouldn’t call any conclusions drawn from this letter ridiculous,” Orion said sternly. He was standing behind Sirius with a hand clamped on his shoulder, and Sirius tried to shift away from him with no success.

“Sirius, all we ask is that you tell the truth. You won’t be punished.”

“And what if I was?” Sirius demanded. “What would you say? You can’t expect me to believe you’d be alright with that, you’ve been trying to marry me off to a pureblood girl since I was born, and this might throw a bit of a wrench in that plan.”

“Are you admitting it?” Walburga demanded.

“There’s nothing to admit!”

“I beg to differ,” Walburga replied coldly. “You’ve confessed to having a boyfriend in the past, and we’ve all ignored it, assuming this was just a phase you’d grow out of. But this overt…flirtation…in the context of spreading lies about your family…are we supposed to let this slide?”

“Yes,” Sirius said hopefully. “You had no right to read my letters!”

“We had every right,” Walburga hissed. Sirius tried to stand up, but Orion’s hand grew even tighter around his shoulder, nails digging into his skin. “We just want to be certain that you’re safe — “

“Safe? Safe from what?”

“We associations with unsavory characters, for one, and making mistakes you won’t be able to remedy later in your life.”

“I don’t see what I’ve done wrong,” Sirius said, looking his mother straight in the eyes. He had his mother’s eyes, but hers were so cold, colder and emptier than his would ever be.

“I’d appreciate it if you stopped being so rude, Sirius,” Walburga said. “Go to your room. Your father and I need to talk about this.”

“You knew Remus and I were dating! I told you months ago!”

“And you thought we honestly believed you?” Walburga demanded. “You’d never expressed any interest in men in your life! You were clearly just trying to get a reaction out of us, making a sad attempt to manipulate your parents.”

“That’s not — “

“Go to your room, Sirius. We’ll come get you when we decide upon a punishment.”

“Punishment? What are you going to do, beat me until I change my mind?”

“If that’s what has to happen,” Orion said. His hand released Sirius’s shoulder, and Sirius was up the stairs in an instant, locking his door as tightly as he could and barely managing to cast a silencing
charm before he started to scream.

He ran to his window and forced it open, staring out onto the street below, his breathing ragged. Can I jump from here? Would it hurt? Would it hurt more than this?

He sat there, staring out at the dark. The yellow glow of the street lights cast little pools of light on the street, light reflecting off puddles from the light rain they’d had that afternoon. Sirius remembered how clear it had been, grey and light and peaceful as the rain washed down over their house, sliding over his windows, dripping onto the street below. Now it was so dark he could barely see the houses lined up across the road.

Walburga opened his door without asking, casting a distasteful glance around the room at Sirius’s Muggle posters. “Come downstairs, Sirius,” she said, and for a moment Sirius wondered if she was going to kill him; he doubted Walburga was really capable of such violence against her oldest son, but there was a threat and a darkness in her tone that he’d never heard before.

“And should I get a belt on my way down?” Sirius challenged. He hadn’t heeded James’ warning, he wasn’t being careful, he was just looking for a way out.

“Sirius, why don’t you tell us about your boyfriend,” Walburga said as she led him down the stairs, and Sirius’s eyebrows drew together.

“Remus? He’s...he’s...he’s wonderful,” Sirius said, and then, because he couldn't imagine them being opposed to him being in love, they had to understand -- “I love him.”

“Blacks do not fall in love with ‘wonderful’ half-bloods,” Orion said. “What you want to do with men is your own business, but for Merlin’s sake, Sirius, couldn’t you at least find a pureblood?” Sirius just looked at his father.

“Answer me, Sirius.”

“I have nothing to say,” Sirius said.

“You realize we’ve been covering for you all your life, Sirius? When are you going to realize you’re too old to be making stupid mistakes like this?”

“Why do you care so much? I told you about Remus at Christmas!”

“We assumed it was a phase. A lie. Now, confronted with the proof…”

“What exactly is your problem?”

“I did not raise my son to be a degenerate Muggle-lover,” Orion said.

“I wouldn’t call what you did ‘raising me.’” Sirius replied defiantly, rising to his feet.

“And what would you call it, then, Sirius?”

“You never wanted children. Me and Regulus were born to suit your political ambitions, don’t deny it. We were supposed to be a perfect Pureblood family, and you needed two perfect Pureblood sons for that to work.” Sirius hissed. “And when I was sorted into Gryffindor, you realized you weren’t going to be able to control me, to pretend I was perfect. So you tried to scare me into quieting down, but I didn’t, and you did what you thought you had to do.”

“Don’t talk back to your father, Sirius,” Walburga warned. “All we ever did was our best with you.” Sirius looked at her. “No, you didn’t.”

“You’ve never been fair to us. You’re our son.”

“But I don’t want to be!” Sirius said at last. He felt as if his chest was about to implode, suffocating with the weight of all the things he wasn’t saying.

“Then don’t,” Orion said quietly, and Walburga looked at her husband in shock. “Walburga, the boy’s been more trouble than he’s worth. This is just the latest in a long string of his transgressions. If he wants to go, let him.”

“He’s my son!” Walburga said.

“I am not,” Sirius said defiantly, and Walburga slapped him across the face.

“Ungrateful brat,” she hissed in his face. He could feel bruises welling up on his face in the shape of her rings, and he winced as he touched his face.

“Mum…” he said. He hadn’t called her “Mum” since before he’d been sorted into Gryffindor. She stalked away, her heels loud on the floor, and left Sirius with Orion.

“You’re an embarrassment, Sirius,” Orion said, dragging Sirius to his feet. “You defy our wishes and our orders! We don’t want to hurt you, Sirius. You just need to learn your place.” Orion’s eyes were
alight with cruelty as he swung his hand back and hit Sirius in the head, reaching behind him for a silver trophy that adorned a shelf.

Sirius met Orion’s eyes defiantly. He was taller than his father now, and he didn’t want to feel small, didn’t want to be cowering, weak, afraid. What Sirius didn’t understand was the difference between standing up for yourself and being stupid; none of the Marauders really understood this. Not yet. “Do it, then,” Sirius said as Orion lifted the trophy high above his head. “If you can look me in the eye and beat me like I’m a child, do it!”

“You’re not a child, but you’re behaving as obstinately as one,” Orion growled, shoving Sirius to the floor. He placed his foot on Sirius’s spine, holding him against the cold floor.

“Don’t be a coward!” Sirius taunted him. His heart was racing, but he wouldn’t let his father have the satisfaction of seeing him afraid. “Look at me!”

“I see you, Sirius,” Orion said, low and dangerous. “I’m doing this for you.”

Sirius curled over himself as Orion beat him with the trophy, the flickering firelight reflected in the silver. He didn’t flinch or cry out, not even once, he lay so stiffly he could have been petrified. Each burst of pain brought him closer and closer to what he knew he had to do.

“I’m only doing this to teach you a lesson,” Orion grunted. “It doesn’t hurt you as much as it hurts me.”

“Please, I’m sorry,” Sirius said, when the pain was too much to bear. He was so glad none of his friends had seen him like this. “Please” and “I’m sorry” weren’t phrases that had any place in Sirius Black’s daily vocabulary.

When at last the beating stopped, Orion’s hand purple around the base of the trophy, Sirius bleeding and bruised, Sirius stood up. He felt weak and shaky, nausea twisting in his stomach, but he made his way through the entry hall to the front door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Orion demanded.

Tears stung Sirius’s eyes. “I’m leaving.”

“You’ll never touch me again.” Sirius yelled back at them, and slammed the door behind him. He didn’t leave immediately — he got far enough from the house that he couldn’t see it through the shielding charms that protected it, and he collapsed on the empty street, retching, dry-eyed.

Something about this time was different than all the others. This time, he knew he wasn’t going to come back. A few minutes afterwards, he heard a crash from the street and turned back to see everything he owned piled on the front doorstep of his house. He packed what he could into his school trunk and left the rest in the road.

“You don’t have to leave. Mum and Dad are sorry. They said you could come back.”

“I don’t want to go back, Reg.”

“You’re my brother, Sirius.”

“I haven’t been for a long time.”

Regulus fell silent at this, realizing it was true. “I always thought it’d get better one day,” he said. “So did I.”

“Are you sad it’s ending like this?” Regulus asked, and he didn’t mean with Sirius walking out, he meant with him, already mapping the pale skin on his arm where a skull and a snake would be branded in the years to come. How many times had he pictured it there, black and coiling, signaling the Dark Lord?

Sirius looked at Regulus for a very long time. “No,” he said. “No, I’m not.”

“You’ll always be a Black. You can’t make that go away, Sirius, and I know you want to.”

“By blood, maybe. I’ve been out of the will for years now, it’s not as if it wasn’t obvious how this had to end.”

“Please don’t go,” Regulus begged. He saw in Sirius’s eyes his last chance at redemption, a
flickering spark at hope; if Sirius, irreparable in his parents’ eyes, could find a way out, maybe he could too.

“I’m leaving.” Sirius said, taking a deep, pain-filled breath.

"I'm sorry I never stopped them from hurting you," Regulus said softly. "I'm sorry I wasn't on your side."

Sirius's eyes glistened with tears and he embraced his brother one last time before he turned and walked away.

He sat on the curb, holding his wand aloft in front of him, unsure if it was worth it to break the Statute of Secrecy. When he signaled for the Knight Bus, it arrived within moments, and he climbed painfully on, not making eye contact.

The people on the Knight bus didn’t ask too many questions. They offered him a bed, asked him where he wanted to go (he’d answered “James,” without thinking, and they hadn’t asked him for clarification.)

The driver of the Knight Bus was a little man named Ernie, and when he saw the cut across Sirius's face he asked, "what happened to you, mate? You alright?"

Sirius ducked his head, letting his hair fall into his eyes. “I am now, thanks.”

“I could fix those up for you,” Ernie offered, eyes round behind thick glasses.

“No, no thank you.”

“You sure you’re alright? Is there anyone I can call for you?” Ernie looked at Sirius and saw a terrified kid who didn’t have any idea where he was going or what he was doing, only that he wasn’t going back home.

“I’m alright,” Sirius promised. “I’ll be alright soon.”

As the bus sped through the London streets, Sirius sat silently, stiff, staring into the night. He couldn’t bring himself to cry anymore, and although he was shaking and clearly upset, no one comforted him.

He caught the eye of a Muggle-born girl he knew from Hogwarts; she looked terrified. He wondered how she’d found the Knight Bus. He wondered if she was running away from home too, and if she wasn’t running from home, what was she running from? He didn’t ask. He didn’t say hello.

“You look like you could use a drink,” the conductor said. She was maybe twenty, with ashy blonde hair. She’d never been pretty, it was obvious, but there was kindness in her eyes as she poured him a brimming glass of firewhiskey. “Emmeline Vance,” she said, sticking out a hand for him to shake.

“I remember you from Hogwarts,” Sirius said. His voice was hollow and empty, devoid of all his usual charm. “I think I hid your bag in the door to Dumbledore’s office once.”

“That was you?” she asked. “It took me a week to find it! What’d I ever do to you?”

“Nothing,” Sirius said. “That’s just what we do.”

“The Marauders?”

“Ash,” Sirius said, taking a swig of firewhiskey. “So you’ve heard of us.”

“You wanna talk about it?” she asked, when his second sip of fire whiskey looked desperate, like he was trying to drink enough to set himself aflame.

“No,” Sirius replied. “I want to get drunk.”

“You’re underage,” she said, but she poured him another glass.

“I probably shouldn’t drink,” he said. “I have to be sober when I see James.”

“Then stop.” Emmeline suggested, but he didn’t. “Can I offer you some advice?”

“I’d rather you offer me another drink,” Sirius suggested.

“I think you’ve had enough,” she said, and he nodded. “Whoever did this to you…you know you didn’t deserve it, right?”

“I provoked them,” Sirius said. “I knew what would happen, but I couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

“My advice to you is, hold on just a bit longer, mate. Even if it’s in two days or two weeks or two months or two years, it will get better.”

As the bus screeched to a stop, she clapped him on the back (she couldn’t have known how much it hurt to be touched, and he didn’t tell her) and said, “well, that’s my cue. Good luck, Sirius.” She
stepped back up to the front of the bus to help the next passenger on, and Sirius sat there for another
minute, staring at his empty glass of firewhiskey. It was already started to swirl his mind, jumble his
thoughts until they were almost incoherent.

When the bus stopped outside James’ house, Sirius picked up his trunk, muttered “thank you” to
Ernie and again to Emmeline, who saluted him. Sirius stood at James’s door, wrapping his shaking
hands around the bars of the gate like he had when he was a child, when he’d shown up in the
middle of the night scared for his life, never wanting to go back.

Sirius thought of that boy and thought about how much had changed: not much. Here he was again,
four years later almost to the day, he thought, although he couldn’t remember, and he was ringing
James’ doorbell for what he hoped would be the last time in his life.

James opened the door to find Sirius hollow-eyed and drunk on his doorstep.

“Sirius?” he asked. “What happened?”

“I…it…it’s over,” Sirius said at last.

There were a thousand moments exchanged in the words they didn’t say next, but it came down to
this:

Welcome home.

“You’re not going back?” James asked as he made a bed for Sirius on the floor next to him, but it
wasn’t really a question. He’d known the second he saw Sirius’s face that this was it, this was the
last time, it was over.

“No,” Sirius said.

“Are you alright?”

“No,” Sirius shook his head. “No, I’m really not.”

“I’ll write Moony and Wormtail tonight. They’ll get here by tomorrow afternoon —”

“No,” Sirius shook his head. “I don’t want them to see me like this.”

“How much did you drink?” James asked; he could smell the fire whiskey on his friend’s breath, he
could see the drunken haze across Sirius’s eyes.

“Enough.”

“Sirius…”

Suddenly James’ arms were around Sirius and Sirius was shaking, and he could hear James’
heartbeat telling him he was still alive, they were still alive.

“I’m so proud of you,” James told Sirius, and Sirius looked at him and smiled.

“I think it’s going to get worse before it gets better, don’t you?”

“It” in this case was “everything.”

“Yes,” James replied cautiously, testing out the word on his tongue like he’d never said it
before. “That’s exactly what I think.” He waited before he asked what he’d always wanted to know.

“Sirius, what did they do to you?”

“I can’t…” Sirius swallowed hard. “I can’t say it.”

“Did they beat you?” James asked, noticing, for the first time, the swollen welt across Sirius’s cheek.
He didn’t know how he hadn’t noticed it immediately; now that he had seen it, it was the only thing
in the room.

“Yes.”

“Often?”

Sirius swallowed hard and nodded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” James asked.

“How could I?” Sirius asked.

“I asked you — I begged you to tell me. Even after…” James swallowed, tripped over the memory.

“Even after you tried to kill yourself, you wouldn’t tell me. You should’ve told me, Padfoot, I
could’ve — I could’ve done something.”

“What would you have done?” Sirius demanded. “I don’t need your pity.”

“You needed help. You needed to get out of that house.”

“And I’m out,” Sirius declared. “So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is —“
“Is that Sirius I heard?” Euphemia asked, opening the door without knocking.
“Effie!” Sirius said, breaking into a wide smile that hurt his bruised face.
“Merlin’s arse, Mum, don’t you knock?” James asked.

“Language,” Euphemia reprimanded. The ordeal with Fleamont in the hospital had aged her; her salt-and-pepper hair had gone completely white, and her hands shook a little more than they’d once done. “Jim, can I speak to you outside?”

“Sure,” James said. “Sirius, if you want something to sleep in, take anything from my closet.” He didn’t need to say this aloud; their friendship was far past that point, but he knew his mother would chastise him if he didn’t.

“How bad is it this time?” Euphemia asked, mouth pursed with worry.

“It’s bad,” James said. “It’s always bad. He’s said he’s not going back after this. They’re disowning him for good.”

“Oh,” Euphemia covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, how dreadful.”

She hesitated.

“Is he drunk?” She’d smelled fire whiskey the instant she’d opened the door to James’s room.

“Sirius? Oh, certainly,” James said. “He took the Knight Bus here, someone on there probably gave him something.”

“You just let me know if I can do anything for him, alright?” she asked.

James nodded. “Goodnight, Mum,” he kissed her on the cheek.

“Goodnight, Jimmy. Sleep well.”

When James opened the door to his room, he found Sirius sprawled on the floor, fast asleep. James lay awake another few moments longer, wondering, what happened to him? What’s going to happen? What if I can’t save him?

Ever since James was a child, he’d had this strange recurring dream of dying. It varied: once he’d been a soldier in some war, spells flying back and forth. He’d imagined himself pushing some nameless, faceless soldier aside and taking a killing curse to the chest, and woke up feeling like he was falling. Another time, he’d leap in front of a lovely girl (since he’d met Lily, she always had red hair in this dream) and face the monster that had been about to kill her. Sacrifice. He was obsessed with it, always had been. Now he wondered what he could sacrifice to save Sirius, if there was one dream of dying, of martyrdom, that could find a solution.

He fell asleep feeling like he was falling.

Sirius woke up to an argument in the Potter household.

“He’s my brother, Mum, you really think I’d just leave him there —” James was saying.

“Of course not, Jimmy, Sirius is like our son. I’m just talking about timing…”

“Who gives a damn about timing? I don’t care if this is the worst time for him to be here. He’s here, and he needs us.”

“Your father was almost killed by one of Sirius’s cousins — maybe his brother, for all we know —”

“Regulus is fourteen, he’s not a Death Eater —” James said incredulously.

“You can never know for sure, these days. All I’m saying is —”

“Dad might not trust Sirius anymore? He knows Sirius isn’t like them. We all know that.”

“Yes, yes, of course, but that’s not what I’m saying. I don’t want Sirius to blame himself for what happened to your father.”

“Why would he? It’s not his fault.”

James and his mother rarely argued like this; but their nerves were stretched thin and Fleamont was bedridden upstairs, not getting worse but not getting better either.

“Both of you are rubbish at keeping quiet,” Sirius said as he walked downstairs. His bruises were much more vivid in the morning light. They were purple and black and red where the belt had cut into his skin; they’d bled in the night and now his skin was tinted red.

“Sorry,” Euphemia and James said sheepishly. “Sirius, dear, are you feeling better?”

Sirius nodded, but he wasn’t. He had a headache that didn’t feel so much like a headache as a heartbreak.
“If me being here is an inconvenience for you, I can find another place to stay,” Sirius offered up as Euphemia made him breakfast (pancakes drenched in syrup, his favorite.)
“Don’t be absurd,” Euphemia ruffled his hair. “Where else would you be but here, at home?”
Home. His heart skipped a beat at the words, and he could only stare at Euphemia, awestruck, as she continued to cook.
“Mum, you don’t have to do that. Nat can do it,” James said, and the house elf, who was cleaning the kitchen floor, nodded enthusiastically.
“Don’t mother me,” she grumbled good-naturedly. “I’m a strong, capable witch and much as I love Nat, I don’t need him preparing all my meals.”
James chuckled in response.
“Jamie, go get your father, please,” Euphemia said.
“Are you sure? Shouldn’t he be resting?”
Bearing witness to this brief exchange suddenly made the last month of James’s behavior make sense to Sirius. The Potters had a ghost in their house, and he wasn’t even dead.
“Yes, I’m sure. He’s rested enough.”
“He needs time —“
“He’s had time. There’s no reason he shouldn’t be the picture of health.” She said aloud what she’d been suspecting. Fleamont wasn’t sick, not physically, only paralyzed by the death he’d seen. Some people were made for war; Fleamont wasn’t one of them.
“Mum…” James said.
“James. Go.”
A few minutes later, James returned, leading Fleamont by the elbow. The older wizard was wrapped in a green dressing gown, his white hair sticking up all over his head, but he was surprisingly steady.
“Sirius, my boy! Look at you, you’ve grown a foot!”
Fleamont pulled away from James to reach over to Sirius and hug him. “I heard you finally got out of that house,” he said.
“Monty,” Euphemia warned.
“No, it’s alright,” Sirius said. “Yes, I did.”
“Good, good,” Fleamont said, seeming to relax. He piled three pancakes onto his plate and began to eat. “Well, don’t just sit here, you should all eat something!”
The others seemed to unfreeze and began to eat.
"Sirius, I hope your year went better than Jim's," Fleamont said conversationally. "That situation with Miss Lily Evans, that's really something."
"Dad..." James grumbled.
Sirius managed a weak smile. "Ah, don't worry about Prongs. He'll figure something out, he always does."
Sirius had nightmares for the rest of the summer. The first night at the Potter's house, he saw them as soon as he fell asleep, his family; he saw them beating him, remorseless, he saw them stabbing him, he saw shattered glass and mirrors over his head. He saw portraits of Walburga and Orion and Regulus with snakes coming out of their eyes, noses, and mouths, he heard screams so terrible they couldn’t have come from anything human. The pounding of his own heart woke him up, and as he opened his eyes, he realized he’d been crying in his sleep. When he woke up like this, he could never really remember where he was. He knew, instantly, that he was alone, and it took him only a few more seconds to realize that he was in the Potter's house, dark and warm and comforting in the summer night. The second night at the Potter’s house, Sirius woke up at three in the morning screaming bloody murder, so loudly that the entire family heard him and ran into his room. When they found him huddled in a corner, shaking and sobbing, scratching at his scars as if he was trying to open them up again, they took him downstairs, made him some tea, and talked through the night about trivial, meaningless things until he calmed down. The next night, on his way to the bathroom to wash his tearstained face, he ran into a half-asleep James Potter, who wrapped him in a blanket, walked him back to bed, and fell asleep beside him the way they had when they were children. Every night afterwards, James would wake up a few moments before Sirius did (invariably, his timing was uncannily perfect) and lie next to him until his friend fell asleep again.

“You awake?” James asked one night into the dark. Sirius shifted and sat up. “Yeah.” “I was just thinking about something,” James said. Sirius was accustomed to being woken in the dead of night when James was “just thinking about something” whether it was their latest prank or a profound insight about the structure of Wizarding government. “Yeah?” “You’ve never told me what your parents did to you.” Sirius was silent, his jaw tense. “I can’t.” “Why not?” James asked, shifting towards Sirius in the dark.

Sirius didn’t know quite how to explain that he’d spent his entire life trying so hard not to talk about it that he wasn’t sure he could. The inside of his mind was Grimmauld Place, it was slamming doors and shattered glass and screams, and he didn’t know how to remember what his parents had done in a way that didn’t make them monsters. He would never know if they were. “Don’t you trust me?” Of course, Sirius trusted James Potter more than he trusted himself. Even when James was the way he’d been in the past few months — rattled and unsteady and too cruel to remember that there was a line somewhere that had to be drawn — he was always the one to draw that line. “Of course,” Sirius said. “I just…I can’t talk about this. I can’t.” “Can I ask you something?” James said. “Yes.” “Are you…do you feel like you did when…?” Blood. Blood and tile floors and death wrapping its’ arms around him. Healed scars and promises. “I don’t know,” Sirius answered.

“You know you’re not in this alone,” James said.

Sirius looked at him with this fire rising in his chest, he wanted to let it loose and destroy everything he could see. “You don’t know what I’m going through. You don’t know what they did in that house and I don’t want you to know!” “I want to understand,” James said softly, taking Sirius’s hand in his and running his hand over the lines of his friends’ palm. It felt less natural than it had when they were kids, but it was still James
and Sirius, Padfoot and Prongs, and even the things that felt strange between them were better than anything anyone else had.

“I just want it to…stop, I need it to stop! Prongs, he was hitting me and hitting me and he wouldn’t stop — I begged him to stop! — did I deserve it?” Sirius crying now, although he wasn’t sure when he’d started to do this, and was conscious of a dull sort of embarrassment as he sobbed into James’s shoulder. James held him tightly and didn’t let go, not even for a second. “I practically asked him to hit me. I looked him right in the face and I dared him to do it! I don’t know why I thought he wouldn’t…”

Sirius looked up at the ceiling, his bloodshot eyes reflecting the night sky. “Tell me I deserved it. I deserved it! I wanted him to hit me — I dared him to hit me! He wouldn’t look at me, he didn’t look at me!”

Sirius was aware that he was almost screaming now, that he had reached a new level of whatever emotion it was that he’d been overwhelmed with for days.

“Sirius…”

“No!” Sirius pulled sharply away from James, scrambling across the room. “I don’t want your pity.”

“Good, because I don’t pity you,” James responded, angry before he even understood why. This was the friendship they had, what all the Marauders had, running with so much passion that sometimes they didn’t really understand how they felt, only that they felt it.

“Tell me I deserved it,” Sirius growled at him.

“Of course you didn’t,” James snapped. “You’re a bloody idiot sometimes, but you didn’t deserve that.”

“I never stopped provoking them. I could’ve just kept my bloody mouth shut —”

“It’s not your fault,” James insisted.

“Regulus is going to be a Death Eater, isn’t he?” Sirius asked; the last question James would’ve expected him to ask.

“I — I don’t know,” James said honestly. “It seems that way.”

“He asked me not to leave.”

“You had no choice.”

“I could’ve stayed for him.”

“Regulus made his choice,” James said.

“I should’ve —”

“If you’re going to spend all night thinking about what you could have or should have done and feeling sorry for yourself, I’m going to sleep,” James snapped.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Prongs,” Sirius said, irritated.

“I want you to tell me why the fuck you kept going back to them all these years. This could’ve all been avoided if you just —”

“It wasn’t always bad,” Sirius interrupted. “Sometimes it was even halfway decent, it just…I wanted to believe after the first time that it was never going to happen again! Eleven years and they’d never laid a finger on me, and then I was sorted into Gryffindor and I met you and you made me realize how wrong they were, you and Remus and Peter, you made me better, and they hated that, and I hated them.”

“After it kept happening?” James prompted. “Why did you stay?”

“I thought…” Sirius ran his hands through his hair. “I thought that I could change them. And then when the Ministry decree passed to keep people from sheltering Muggle-borns…it was too late. If I left I knew I wouldn’t be able to go back.”

“And you wanted to go back?” James asked incredulously.

“You’ll never understand,” Sirius said. “They’re my parents, James. I couldn’t just…” he rubbed at his eyes in frustration. He was so tired of crying.

“I want to understand, Sirius, dammit, why won’t you help me?”

“You don’t get it! You can’t get it! You’ve never —”

“What?” James yelled. Sirius hadn’t thought James would be the first one to start shouting, although the entire exchange had been tense with the knowledge that both were barely restraining
their emotions.
“YOU DON’T GET WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE HELPLESS!” Sirius shouted at James, leaping to
his feet, facing his friend in the dark. “YOU DON’T GET WHAT IT’S LIKE TO JUST SIT
THERE WHILE THEY HIT YOU — YOU DON’T GET WHAT IT’S LIKE TO KNOW IF
YOU MAKE ANY NOISE THEY’LL NEVER STOP!” tears were streaming down his face, but
he didn’t stop yelling, wouldn’t stop until he could make James see. He pushed the owl’s cage
(empty, although he wasn’t sure it would’ve mattered if it wasn’t) on James’ desk onto the floor and
it skidded across the room until it hit the opposite wall.
“Sirius,” James said quietly.
“YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE WHEN THEY USE THE CRUCIATUS CURSE
BECAUSE THEY DON’T WANT TO GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY!” His mind flashed with
the memory of his father’s hands stained red with his blood. “YOU DON’T KNOW HOW IT
FEELS WHEN YOUR PARENTS POINT A WAND AT YOUR THROAT AND YOU KNOW
THEY MIGHT KILL YOU! YOU DON’T GET IT!”
“Sirius.”
“YOU DON’T —” Sirius swallowed, cleared his throat. “You don’t know how it feels when every
urge you get to call someone a Mudblood, every time you want to say how you really feel, every
time you feel like hurting someone — every time, you’re turning into them — every time, you’re
more and more like them, like You-Know-Who —“
It always came down to the war, every single time, no matter what. They’d grown up with the threat
of war and had been living with it for years, it had taken friends and family and classmates and raised
them to know that they would have to fight and die for it to end, that this wasn’t a possibility or a
nightmare, it was a certainty.
“James —“ Sirius grabbed James by the shoulders and shook him. “James, promise me, PROMISE
ME! If I ever start to turn into them, kill me. Kill me.”
“Sirius!”
“PROMISE ME!” Sirius kicked over James’ desk chair with an ear-shattering clatter. He swept piles
of paper onto the floor.
“Alright! FINE!” James said. “Goddammit, sit DOWN.”
“Say you’ll kill me if whatever it is, whatever part of me is still like them, if whatever it is comes out,
if I ever join You-Know-Who! I’d rather DIE than join him, I’d rather die than stand for what he
stands for.”
“I promise,” James said gravely.
Sirius froze in his rampage and looked at James, just looked at him. “Would you really ever do it?”
he asked quietly.
James frowned, a line creasing the space between his eyebrows. “No,” he said quietly, after a long
pause. “Never.”
Sirius nodded and sat down in the wreckage of James’s room. “That’s what I thought.”

After their late night screaming match, James and Sirius tried to act normal. Euphemia and Fleamont
noticed; if the screaming hadn’t woken them, they would’ve known anyway because they found
Sirius and James sleeping on opposite sides of the room the next morning.
“Why don’t you write to Remus and Peter and ask them to come over?” Euphemia suggested.
“I’m sure they’re both busy,” James said, not looking at his mother.
“Are you feeling alright, Jim?” Fleamont asked. “You’re looking…”
“I’m absolutely fine,” James replied shortly.
“Are you sure?” Fleamont leaned towards his son across the table.
There were rules in the Potter household, unspoken because they’d never needed to be said aloud.
The Potters didn’t lie to each other; when one felt something, the others knew about it. At James’s
age, most people began to question their parents at best and hate them at worst, but the Potters were
closer than ever.
When James and Sirius were fighting, James wrote home about it and asked his mother for advice.
When Remus and Sirius were avoiding their feelings for each other, James told his parents about it (in the vaguest possible terms, of course) and they responded with the words, “when you love someone, you can only deny it for so long.” But they’d reached an interesting point in their family history where James didn’t know what to say and they didn’t know how to ask.

“Yes, Dad, I’m sure, will you please leave it?” James snapped.


James shook his head. “Mum, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Yes, Dad, I’m sure, will you please leave it?” James snapped.


James shook his head. “Mum, it has nothing to do with you.”

“And who does it have something to do with?”

“Me,” Sirius said.

“Sirius, my boy,” Fleamont said, putting a hand on Sirius’s arm. Sirius’s eyes filled with tears involuntarily — how long it had been since an adult, a parent, had touched him in any sort of comforting way? “Listen to me. You’ve been through a horrible experience, but you’re going to come out of it just fine. I promise you.”

Sirius swallowed hard, tears stinging his eyes. “How do you know?”

“I’m old and wise. I didn’t get all this white hair for nothing, I earned it.” He pulled at his hair (it stuck in all directions like James’s) and smiled.

Sirius just nodded, quiet.

“Well, I have an announcement,” Euphemia said. “I’m going back to work.”

“Work?” James asked in disbelief.

“Yes, Jim, work,” Euphemia said. “Your father’s not well enough to go back to the office, and if I get my way he’ll retire for good, so I’m going to go back to work.”

“Work? Mum, I don’t even remember what you do,” James said.

Euphemia rolled her eyes at her son. “Thanks for the support, love. I used to teach at Hogwarts.”

“You did what?” Sirius asked, widening his eyes for dramatic effect. “Hogwarts?”

“Dumbledore recently approached me about taking the Defense Against the Dark Arts post.”


“I would’ve thought you’d be pleased,” Euphemia chuckled.

“Are you joking? Do you know how dangerous that job is? No one’s lasted more than a year!”

James said.

“I appreciate your support, Jimmy, but the entire wizarding world is dangerous, and I don’t intend to spend the next however many years of my life wasting away, getting old.”

“I need you to be safe,” James said earnestly.

“I’ll be the picture of safety,” Euphemia promised.

James nodded, satisfied, and raised his glass of orange juice. “To Mum, Hogwarts’ newest Defense against the Dark Arts teacher!”

Sirius and Flemont raised their glasses as well, and Euphemia’s laughter filled the whole house.

"Euphemia, will you really take the job?" Sirius asked.

"I'm going to interview for it, yes," Euphemia said. "Unless Jim would be too embarrassed by having his mother as a teacher."

"That's possible," James admitted. "However, the very thought of you telling off Snape is so appealing that I may just have to get over it."

Euphemia was partway through a response when two identical tawny owls swept through the open kitchen window and landed on their table, a Hogwarts-sealed letter in the talons of each owl. "O.W.L. results," Euphemia said, with a slight smirk, much like her son's.

"Bloody hell," James groaned, dropping his head into his hands. "Do they have to be?"

"Yes they do!" Euphemia replied, holding the letters out to James and Sirius.

"Don’t," James said to Sirius, who showed absolutely no intention of moving.

"C'mon, Jimmy, don’t you want to know?" Sirius asked.

"Don’t call me Jimmy," James grumbled, but accepted the letter from Euphemia. James and Sirius looked at each other for a moment, instantly reconciling in the way they could only because they were best friends and nothing mattered, nothing could break them apart. They shrugged, simultaneously, tearing open the letters containing their futures.
James scanned his results and shrugged. “Eh.”
“Eh?” Euphemia arched an eyebrow.
“Only joking,” an easy smile spread across James’s face. It was the first genuine one any of them had seen in a while. “See?”
“Well, Prongs, how’d you do?” Sirius asked, laughing despite himself.
“Well, other than Astronomy and Divination, which I barely Exceeded Expectations, I had straight O’s.”
“Ha!” Sirius said dryly. “My only E was in History of Magic.”
“Oh, sod off,” James said, but he was smiling.
“Congratulations, boys!” Fleamont boomed, patting them both on the back.
“I think some celebration is in order,” Euphemia said, waving her wand in a neat circle in the air, fireworks sparking out from the end of it. They filled the room, making little patterns in the air, and James and Sirius were laughing as fireworks zoomed around the room. It was a tradition in the Potter family to celebrate by filling their house up with light for a few hours at a time. The spells the Potter family excelled at were light casting spells; little bursts of light, fireworks, lanterns, bright, blinding lights that filled the whole room, and in an odd sort of way this made perfect sense.
Sirius and James raised glasses brimming with butterbeer to their success, broad smiles on their young faces. Sirius’s bruises had faded and James was beginning to come out of whatever it was that had been consuming him for weeks, and they felt for the first time since the war had started all those years ago that everything was going to be fine, if only for a brief moment.
“How d’you think Moony and Wormtail did?” Sirius asked.
“Fine, I’m assuming,” James said. “If the sheer number of hours of studying they both did is any indicator at all.”
“Studying I assume neither one of you took part in?” Fleamont chastised.
“You assume correctly,” Sirius replied, and he and James both laughed, a slight chuckle that escalated into uproarious laughter until Euphemia and Fleamont were laughing too.

Padfoot,

How did your O.W.L.s come off? Mine went fairly well, I think, although I only got Exceeds Expectations in Potions and Divination.

“Shame,” Sirius said aloud, and James glanced at him across the room without asking what he was referring to.

I’ve never seen my parents so proud. They even let me go into town to celebrate. I couldn’t believe it. The number of people who said they didn’t know my parents had a son was incredible, quite honestly. I suppose they didn’t want to raise suspicion, but I won’t lie about how decidedly unpleasant it was to discover that not only do my parents keep me locked away in the house while I’m home on holiday, but they don’t even mention my name.

Not to waffle on like the uninspired, emotional sap I’m sure you think I am, but when I got my results I honestly couldn’t believe it. I thought, for a moment before I opened the letter that I was just going to prove to everyone that werewolves can’t be normal. Did you hear Greyback turned a little girl last week? She was just a bit older than I was when he bit me. People think all werewolves are like that, that all we want to do is hurt people. I know I’m rambling, Padfoot, I’m sorry. I just…can’t believe it. I thought I almost wanted to be a monster like the werewolves who are fighting for You-Know-Who. That’s not what I want, Padfoot, Merlin, I know now that’s not what I want.

Sirius smiled at the letter in his hands.
“Whatever are you so happy about?” James asked, tossing the stolen Snitch at Sirius, who caught it out of the air. Sirius let it fly from between his fingers every so often, then caught it again, like he’d seen James do on so many occasions.
“Remus,” Sirius replied.
“Ahem,” James said, rolling his eyes. “Young love.”
“Sod off,” Sirius sent the Snitch zooming around the room before he caught it again. “If you could get a date, you’d have one.”
“Rude,” James commented, leaning back in his chair. “I bloody well could if I wanted to. I was dating Gillian Hartly for four months.”

“Thank Godric that’s over.”

James snorted. “Gillian wasn’t all bad.”

“Yes, I’m sure as the person shagging her she was quite enjoyable. But every conversation I had with her ended with me wishing I could tear out my own eyes. Also, in the four months you were dating her you ignored me most of the time.”

“I can only endure one irritating person at a time, Snuffles.”

“Don’t call me Snuffles,” Sirius grumbled.

“Fine, Fluffy.”

“Oh, Merlin, not that again. Not unless you want to be called Hooves.”

“Hooves? You never called me Hooves.”

“Yes, but I could have,” Sirius said. “Bear that in mind.”

James laughed. “So, how’s Moony? Of course he wrote me about his O.W.L.s but, y’know…”

“Don’t be daft, Prongs, Moony didn’t tell me anything he didn’t tell you,” Sirius replied.

“Really?”

“Yeah, c’mon, mate, you know Moony and I, neither of us are precisely the type for long emotional conversations.”

James laughed dryly. “That’s true. Have you told him about…?”

“My parents? No, I don’t want to worry him,” Sirius turned back to the Transfiguration essay they was supposed to be writing over the summer.

“Shouldn’t he be worried, though?” James mused, chewing on the end of his quill.

“About me? Nah, course not,” Sirius rolled his shoulders.

“Right,” James smirked, the most sarcastic he could manage. “Course not.”

He hesitated for another moment, scribbling another few sentences in his essay.

“When are you going to tell him, though?”

“Merlin, Prongs, let it go,” Sirius groaned and ran an ink-stained hand through his hair. “I’ll tell him when it comes up.”

“When does that ever come up?”

“Oh, y’know, upon occasion. Like when we’re studying History of Magic and talking about the worst criminals in Wizarding history.”

James snorted. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” Sirius said, raising his eyebrows, and James threw a pillow at him, pretending not to notice when Sirius flinched.

“You know what I meant.”

“I’ll tell him, Prongs, alright?”

“Alright, alright.” Another pause. "D’you want to invite Remus and Peter round for lunch tomorrow?"

"Alright, but no funny business from you. I'll tell them when I tell them." James grinned. "That's what I wanted to hear."

The next day, Remus and Peter emerged spluttering from the fireplace, so close together it was impossible to tell which had arrived first. They were both immediately tackled in enormous bear hugs from James and Sirius.

“You’d think you hadn’t seen us in years,” Remus said, somewhat flustered but not protesting.

“Hasn’t it been years?” James asked, and the others all chuckled.

They made small talk for the next few minutes as James and Sirius led them through the entryway and to the staircase.

“First one to the top gets to choose whether we play Quidditch outside or do something that doesn’t end in anyone falling off a broomstick,” James grunted, already sprinting ahead. The others raced after him, feet slaming against the wooden stairs.

“Ha!” Sirius declared after tackling James at the top of the staircase. “I win.”

“That was cheating,” James complained from the floor as Remus and Peter bent over to help him up.
“Sirius, have you been sleeping here?” Peter inquired as James opened the door to his room and revealed the extra bed on James’s floor (unmade, in a state of disarray that he strongly suspected would persist even if the room was tidy.)

“I have,” Sirius said, and he and James exchanged a look. Remus and Peter exchanged a look of their own, wondering if it was the right time to ask, if there even was a right time to ask. They asked simultaneously. “Why?”

“My parents disowned me,” Sirius muttered.

Peter put his hand on Sirius’s shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“Course, why wouldn’t I be?” Sirius shrugged him off. “I’ve been wishing they’d throw me out forever.”

Remus and Peter were uncomfortably silent. “Sirius…”

“In the name of Merlin’s saggy left bollock, please —” Sirius said. “I don’t want to talk about it. Now, since I won the race, I suggest we play Wizard’s Chess.”

“Why bother? Moony always wins.”

“Only because the rest of you give up halfway through,” Remus replied.

“Alright, that’s fair,” James shrugged, pulling his father’s Wizard Chess set from his wardrobe. It unfolded and the pieces arranged themselves. “Here, Pete, let’s go.”

“Me?” Peter asked, seemingly surprised.

“Well don’t look so surprised, you’re not half bad. And no one wants to start off playing against Remus, that’s just depressing.”

“Thanks, mate,” Remus said dryly.

“What am I, frog spawn?” Sirius asked.

“A nuisance, is what you are,” James said, focusing his attention on the chessboard. “Merlin, Pete, you’re killing me!”

Peter grinned unapologetically.

“Yeah, Pete, have some remorse,” Sirius teased, and Peter’s ears turned pink, but he continued to mercilessly claim the black pieces James was really not particularly focused on protecting.

“Fuck,” James declared as Peter checked his king. “Peter, you’ve gotten good at this. And by that I mean you’re not distracted by Moony and Padfoot, who appear to be on the verge of finding a broom cupboard to snog in.”

Remus and Sirius both had the good sense to look vaguely embarrassed, but Sirius did not remove his hand from Remus’s thigh.

“Padfoot, don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to distract me from asking questions about your family,” Remus said, though he didn’t shift away.

“Distracting you?” Sirius asked, sliding closer to Remus. “Of course not.”

“Yes, you bloody well are,” Remus rolled his eyes.

“Language, Moons,” James chastised, and Remus rolled his eyes.

“What do you mean I can’t be in your wedding?” Lily asked incredulously. The problem was this: Petunia had, over tea one morning in the grieving, silent Evans household, informed Lily quite calmly that she was no longer going to be taking part in Petunia’s wedding the following month to Vernon Dursley.

Petunia was examining color pallets and did not respond. “Oh, Lily, won’t you let it go?”

“Let it go?” Lily echoed. “Absolutely not! I’m your sister.”

“You’re a witch, Lily. Vernon is normal. He doesn’t want to associate himself with you.”

“He didn’t seem to have much of a problem with me before he found out,” Lily snapped back. A drunken Vernon had once attempted to grope her, to which she had responded with only slightly more kindness than she would’ve afforded James Potter, which was to say she’d hit him in the jaw as hard as she could.

Petunia glowered at her sister. “It’s nothing personal. Vernon doesn’t want a witch in our wedding.”

“I just don’t understand why you had to tell him,” Lily said quietly.

“He deserved to know.”
“Oh, I see. You were afraid if you didn’t tell him, he’d find out,” Lily said. She felt herself filling, again, with this overwhelming anger. It wasn’t so much an urge for destruction as a helplessness, a fire that had been burning in her chest all her life.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Petunia snapped, at last pausing her color choosing to look at her sister. “I did what I had to do, and I let Vernon make the final decision.”

“I’m your sister,” Lily implored. “You don’t even want me at your wedding?”

“If it will shut you up, you can go to the wedding. But you can’t stay for the reception.”

In another world, a world without Hogwarts, Lily would’ve been Petunia’s maid of honor, and Petunia wouldn’t be marrying a man so aggressively mundane that there was very little else remarkable about him. Their mother might have even been alive to see her daughter marry.

“Mum would tell us to stop fighting, you know?” Lily said sadly.

Petunia’s face froze, her mouth forming shapes as she attempted to force words out. “Mum’s dead, Lily.”

Lily turned away from her sister and glanced at her father’s bedroom door, which was now constantly closed. She strongly suspected he was sleeping away his grief, and she only worried that he was never going to wake up. “I know.”

“Leave it, Lily, before I uninvite you to the wedding altogether.”

Lily’s green eyes narrowed to slits. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’ll do what I must,” Petunia sniffed, gathering her piles of wedding planning notes in a neat pile on the coffee table.

Lily closed her eyes and stood up, taking a deep breath. In the past, she would’ve taken the dog down to the park, or walked down to the river, or called Snape’s house. Now she had nowhere to go.

She walked around the Evans’ family little house to the empty flowerbeds and sat. Although she wasn’t doing it on purpose, flowers began to poke their way through the soil, bloom magnificently, and fade again. She knew to expect a letter from the Ministry for doing this, but she couldn’t bring herself to care anymore.

The news that Mary MacDonald had been killed came to the Potter family, Sirius included, before it came to anyone else. Fleamont Potter got the news from a coworker, who’d heard it directly from the department in the Ministry of Magic that dealt with Voldemort-related deaths.

“Mary MacDonald?” James repeated, as if hoping the words would rearrange into the name of a stranger. What he knew about Mary MacDonald was that she was a Chaser, like him. They were friends, they’d been friends since they’d made the team in second year, although outside the Marauders James didn’t really have friends, he had friendly acquaintances. She had short blonde hair and freckles and she always covered her arms, although her scars did not look self-inflicted, they spelled out a word that had been whispered after her in the halls for years. Mulciber was always lurking around every corner, and he seemed to organize his paths through the school around running into her and intimidating her nearly to tears. Mary had once kissed Peter, his first and only kiss. Mary was always smiling, always, always, even when she wasn’t. James missed her already. “Are you sure that’s the name?”

“Yes,” Euphemia said sadly. She had just woken up, and her greying hair was wild around her face. She looked like James, Sirius thought, and was somehow saddened by this.

“Mary,” Sirius said. “How did she… “

“They think it was a few soon-to-be Death Eaters,” Fleamont said. He seemed genuinely exhausted, his shoulders slumped, his eyes half-closed behind his glasses.

“Students?” James asked, although it wasn’t really a question.

“Most likely.”

“Mulciber,” Sirius growled under his breath, so only James could hear him.

“You don’t know that,” James said, although his blood was boiling with fury. Sirius arched his eyebrows, but allowed Euphemia and Fleamont to continue their conversation. It was early in the morning, they were eating their breakfast and reading the paper, and they were
grieving for Mary MacDonald. How many more dawns would they spend grieving?
“It’s a shame,” Euphemia said sadly. “A waste of a young life.”
Was there a young life that was not wasted? Was there a way it could have been spent that was not a waste?
James had so many questions.
“Poor Evans,” James said. He stammered slightly over her name, he was sick with the idea of her hating him.
Sirius nodded his agreement. “This really has not been a great year for her.”
“Why?” Fleamont asked, seeming genuinely intrigued.
“Her mother died, she got in a very public fight with her best friend, and now one of her other friends is dead.” Sirius said this the way he had been raised to, as if it was happening to someone who had never lived at all.
“You should send her flowers,” Fleamont suggested off-handedly to James.
Sirius sniggered at James’s stricken expression. “I am almost entirely responsible for the aforementioned fight with her best friend.” James replied.
“James,” Euphemia chastised.
“Her best friend is that Snape fellow you both complain about so much?” Fleamont asked.
James clenched his jaw and nodded.
“Send her flowers anyway.”
James sent her flowers. Not lilies, not roses, as he knew she was allergic to both. He sent her sunflowers, after having his father, who excelled at Herbology as well as Potions, grow some in their garden. His note simply said, I’m sorry.
When Lily Evans, all the way in Cokeworth, received his flowers, she did not throw them away.
Their first day back at Hogwarts, the first day of their sixth year, the Marauders knelt together in a circle on their floor around the Marauders Map, where Lily and Marlene’s names hovered close together, footprints stuttering across the floor, stopping, little black ink trails of their grief appearing and fading. Mary’s name wasn’t there.

“That’s not going to be us,” James said with conviction, although he wasn’t quite sure what ‘us’ was going to be.

Peter was crying into his hands, and his blue eyes were bloodshot, but at James’s words he looked up and began to scan the map carefully, tracing it with his finger. “Mulgiber’s not at school,” he said, and saying the Slytherin’s name made his face contort.

“He wasn’t on the train,” Sirius said. “I was looking for him.”

He meant he’d been looking for Regulus. He knew Regulus, whatever he was becoming, wasn’t capable of cold-blooded murder, but he needed proof that his brother was still there, still the same person.

“You think he won’t come back?” Remus asked. He hadn’t cried for Mary MacDonald, although he’d known her relatively well. He couldn’t feel anything but horror, that a girl could be killed for nothing but being Muggle-born. She wasn’t the first, and she wasn’t the last, but she was the first that they’d known personally, and the war felt real.

“I would’ve if I were him,” Sirius said. “Nothing makes you look more guilty than not coming back to school.”

“I doubt he cares,” James said harshly. “I could…” he stopped, choking on the words ‘kill him.’ “I could…”

“I know,” Remus said, and James looked at him in surprise. He’d never seen Remus angry, not really. He’d seen him hurt and betrayed, and that seemed to be a similar thing, but it wasn’t. Remus never allowed himself to be angry, but now his fists were clenched and he was almost shaking with it, the fury that Mulciber could thoughtlessly take Mary’s life and then leave,

“We should make a Marauders’ pact,” Peter said, sniffing.

“That we’ll never kill each other? Seems obsolete,” James said. “None of us are capable of what Mulciber did.”

Each of the Marauders looked down at the thought of that, of being capable of killing anyone. Sirius thought he was, that it would take very little to make him a killer, that he was born soulless and heartless. Remus knew that he wasn’t, but the wolf was. Peter didn’t know, but he thought, if it was the right thing, if he was doing it for the others, he would. James would only kill for the greater good, and he didn’t even need to think this for it to be true.

“No,” Peter said. “That we’ll be friends until we’re dead.”

“We will be friends until we’re dead,” Sirius said, because for all they knew they might be dead very soon.

“So you’ll swear it?”

Sirius nodded, and put his hand over the map. The others followed suit.

“I solemnly swear,” James began the pact, because he was always the one to start things.

“I solemnly swear,” the others repeated.

“That the Purveyors of Aid to Magical Mischief Makers, i.e. the Marauders, i.e. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs, will be friends until Death himself shows up to drag us all into the afterlife.”

“Prongs, you don’t believe in the afterlife.” Sirius reminded him.

“Neither do you,” James replied. “Now, repeat.”

With some murmuring, they repeated what he’d said, looking each other straight in the face.

“I can’t believe she’s dead,” James said. “God, she was a better Chaser than I was.”

He seemed to be convinced that this was an appropriate way of remembering her. The others, because they loved him, did not reprimand him, because it was not for a lack of sensitivity that he
didn’t talk about her lovely smile or cheerful personality.
“I knew,” Peter said. “I knew what Mulciber did to her.”
“Did to her?” Remus asked.
Peter blanched. “You’ve seen her arms, James?”
James nodded. He was a Quidditch captain first, and he’d run into the showers before practice one
day to shout his game plan at his teammates, barely acknowledging the fact that they were all in
varying states of undress. In all honesty, he’d been so engrossed in Quidditch that day that when
he’d seen Mary’s scars, he hadn’t really noticed. “He did that to her,” he said. Maybe it should’ve
been a question, but he believed it instantly.
“I could’ve…told someone.”
“No one was going to help her,” Sirius said bluntly. “Dumbledore may be great, but he has no power
when it comes to the school board.”
“I should’ve…” Peter trailed off, his sloped shoulders shaking. “I…I could’ve…”
“Bloody hell, Pete, stop,” Sirius said. “Yeah, you should’ve done something. But she’s dead. She’s
fucking dead, and there’s nothing any of us can do.”
“I’ll kill him. Mulciber.”
The voice had not come from any of them, but from Lily Evans herself, who was standing steadily in
their doorway. They hastily stowed the map under James’s bed and stood up, facing her.
“Lily,” James said hoarsely. He was fairly certain this was the first time he’d ever called her by her
first name. Marlene, hollow-eyed, stood behind her.
She repeated it. “I’ll kill him.”
She did not look sad, though her eyes had the soft, far-off look of one who’d been crying for a very
long time. She looked furious.
“Mulciber?” Remus asked.
Lily nodded, her soft pink mouth setting into a firm line. “Remember the attack on Hogsmeade?”
The Marauders nodded simultaneously.
“We want that,” Marlene said. “We want to be a part of it. We know you do, too.”
“You’d be willing to work with James and Sirius?” Remus said, equal parts admiration and shock.
“You’re going to fight You-Know-Who?” Lily asked instead of responding.
The Marauders exchanged a stunned look and nodded simultaneously.
“We’re with you,” Marlene and Lily said in unison, and there was a strange silence where Mary’s
voice ought to have been.
“Quite a change from constantly making excuses for Snivellus,” James sneered.
Lily’s face went stiff. “You’re joking. Are you joking?”
“What?” James asked.
“My best friend died. My mother died! And you still think everything in the world is about you and
Sev — I mean, Severus? Are you joking?” There was something satisfying about it, feeling her voice
trembling in her throat, hearing herself begin to shout, as if she’d been holding herself back from this
for months.
Sirius and James gave each other a look.
“Don’t!” she shouted. “Don’t look at me like you think I’ve gone mad!”
James’s expression said that he very much thought that, but he nodded.
“Stop!” she shouted. “Just STOP IT! Will you let us help you or not?”
“Of course we will,” Remus said, with a silencing look at James and Sirius. “As soon as we figure
out how we’re going to stop You-Know-Who, we’ll let you know.”
“No,” Marlene said. “We’re going to help you figure it out.”
“We work better alone,” Sirius explained, with one of his elegant shrugs.
“I suppose you’ll just have to learn,” Marlene replied venomously. “We’re going to get revenge. For
Mary.”
“Mary wouldn’t have wanted — “ James said.
“Oh, DON’T!” Lily shrieked, furious. “Don’t say what she would and wouldn’t have wanted! It
doesn’t matter now, anyway!”
“Alright,” James said meaningfully. “I just…”
“Just don’t,” Lily said.
“Hey, at least she’s speaking to you now,” Sirius said. “That’s always a good thing.”
James snorted, although he knew it wasn’t the time to be making jokes. “Always an improvement. You see, I’ll wear her down eventually.”
Sirius smirked.
“Oh, stop,” Lily cried. “How can you be so…glib?”
“Glib?” James repeated.
“Good, solid word choice, there, Evans. Glib.” Sirius repeated gleefully.
“Flippant! Nonchalant! Lackadaisical!”
“Lackadaisical?”
“Yes!” Lily jabbed her finger in James’s face. “It’s like you don’t have any bloody feelings!”
“I have feelings,” James said in what the others had taken to calling his “Evans-voice,” which was at least three octaves lower than his actual voice, and was very pleasant and rational and all of the things that, for all intents and purposes, James was not.
“When? You don’t seem to care about anyone!”
“You know I want to stop You-Know-Who.”
“You don’t!” Lily shouted. Tears, despite her efforts to stop them, had begun to roll down her face, and she wiped at them angrily with her sleeve. “You just want to be a hero!”
“That’s not true,” James said. “I want to do what’s right.”
“How can you say you want to do what’s right when you hex everyone you see? When you hated Severus from the moment you saw him? When you’ve been tormenting me and my friends since we were eleven years old and now Mary’s dead? How, exactly, is any of that doing what’s right?”
“Stop,” Remus said firmly, stepping in between Lily and James. “You’re not being fair to him.”
“How?” Lily challenged, tears in her green eyes. Her face was drawn up in a red-cheeked snarl that was really far more intimidating than it had any right to be.
“You know James to be someone he isn’t,” Remus explained, but he did not explain what James was. How did he explain that James had been the one to draw them all together, that James had stuck by him without question when they found out he was a werewolf, that James was, although cruel and selfish at times, capable of overwhelming amounts of love and selflessness? How did he make Lily, who had hated James for years, realize that what she saw and what James was were not the same?
Lily shook her head. “What he did…”
“No one is trying to make you forgive him,” Remus said.
“I sort of am,” James piped up.
“No one asked, Potter,” Remus said, with just enough of his good-natured grin to let James know he was joking.
“So?” Marlene asked.
“Yes,” Remus said, just as Sirius said,
“We’ll consider it.”
“We will?!” Remus asked.
“We will. Extensively.”
James caught on instantly, and he and Sirius stood on either side of Lily and Marlene and lead them towards the door. “Good day.”
“Oh, no you don’t!” Lily fumed. “You don’t get to publicly humiliate me by providing ‘help’ that I didn’t ask for and then say you’ll consider it! Me and Marlene want to make a difference. Let us!”
“Could we stop you even if we wanted to?” Peter offered up.
Lily softened at this. “I doubt it,” she replied calmly. “Well?”
“Yes,” Remus said when James and Sirius were silent. “Absolutely. We’re going to do this.”
Lily smiled. “Thank you,” she said, her eyes glimmering again, and she and Marlene were gone.
“Mary would’ve stopped them talking to us,” James said. “She would’ve told them they were being
“You sound like you’re going to cry, Jim,” Sirius said.
“What if I am?” James asked, swallowing with some difficulty. “What if Mary MacDonald was just a person and she didn’t fucking deserve this, and she didn’t deserve to die, and I don’t care!”
“You don’t care?” Peter asked.
“I don’t care that Lily Evans is speaking to me when I certainly don’t deserve it! I don’t care that she wants to help us stop You-Know-Who, if we can! I care that Mary fucking MacDonald was a sweet, Muggle-born girl and she was a bloody brilliant Quidditch player and she was incredible and like everyone on that team, she was like my family, and I miss her! And I don’t have any right to miss her, not at all! BUT I DO! And I know this isn’t really about THAT, it’s probably more about Sirius and how he won’t tell ANYONE anything and how I’m so BLOODY scared of the answer! I KNOW that I’m being ridiculous and VERY loud and I’m SHOUTING and I should very likely STOP!” he ripped the blankets off his bed and threw them on the ground, and when that was somewhat satisfying he tore down the curtains around it as well.
The others made no moves to stop him, simply regarded, silent.
“It’s just NOT FAIR!” he shouted. “SHE WAS JUST A PERSON! SHE WAS SIXTEEN BLOODY YEARS OLD! She would’ve LIVED! She would’ve LIVED, sod and blast it, she would’ve LIVED, and she’s DEAD and Mulciber KILLED her for NO REASON AT ALL! AND WHILE I’M SHOUTING,” he said, waving one finger somewhat threateningly in the air. “WHILE I’M SHOUTING, WHICH I REALLY SHOULD DO MORE OFTEN, I’D LIKE TO SHOUT AT ALL OF YOU!”
He threw more blankets and pillows on the ground, knocking over his roommates’ still packed trunks and spilling clothes and books onto the floor. He tore apart their dormitory, everything he could reach clattering to the floor.
“FIRST OF ALL!” he began, methodically tearing pages out of a book he no longer needed.
“SIRIUS BLOODY BLACK!”
Sirius would’ve laughed had James been yelling at anyone but him. There was absolutely nothing threatening about James yelling, he was too much like his father to be really threatening at all. His shouting was never motivated by hatred, always by emotion, and there was a difference.
“WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO TELL SOMEONE WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU? AND WHILE I’M ON THE SUBJECT, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? WHAT MADE YOU LIKE THIS? YOU KNOW YOU’RE NOT ALRIGHT, AND HAVEN’T BEEN IN A WHILE. WHY WON’T YOU LET US HELP YOU?”
Sirius was silent.
“I’M NOT JUST SHOUTING TO HEAR MY OWN VOICE, YOU KNOW!” James yelled, knocking yet another book onto the floor.
“I’m scared,” Sirius confessed quietly, looking defiantly into James’s eyes. “I’m scared, I don’t want to admit that…that what they did made me different. I don’t want to admit that I don’t know who or what I am.”
“Right,” James said angrily. “Right, well. Thanks for that. That wasn’t really an answer, but, thanks.”
“You’re welcome,” Sirius said coldly.
“I CAN’T DO IT! MY DAD ALMOST DIED! EVANS HATES ME! SIRIUS LEFT HIS PARENTS AND WON’T TALK TO ME AND I CAN’T DO IT! I’VE HANDLED EVERYTHING ELSE IN MY ENTIRE LIFE! I CAN’T HANDLE THIS ANYMORE! IT’S JUST… IT’S NOT FAIR!” he stopped his rampage in a sudden, cold movement, standing up straight with his fists clenched hopelessly at his sides. Then he broke down crying, grabbing Remus, who was standing closest to him, by the shoulders and sobbing. “WE’RE GOING TO DIE, AREN’T WE? WE’RE GOING TO DIE, MOONY, I KNOW WE ARE!”
“We’re going to be alright,” Remus said, quite calmly.
“No,” James took a deep breath. “We’re going to die, but we’re going to die doing what we have to do, what’s right. I swear we —” he sat, ran a hand through his already very messy hair. "Well,
anyway."

Lily Evans believed strongly in love. She believed in it when Benjy Fenwick broke up with her in fourth year, she believed in it when she forgave Severus over and over again, never asking for anything more but his friendship, being willing to ignore his feelings for her, being willing to ignore what he was becoming, the creeping darkness, for the sake of their friendship. She believed in it when her mother died, leaving her family ruined. She believed in it when Petunia chose Vernon over her own sister and essentially disowned her, she believed in it when James Potter tried to defend her honor as if she were an object, as if she couldn’t protect herself. She believed in it when Mary MacDonald died and when she knew exactly who to blame, but she still didn’t blame him. Lily Evans expelled love with every breath, and in return she received it, in small amounts, small enough that she didn’t notice. But the first year who looked admiringly at Lily’s shining Prefect badge and the House Elf in the kitchens who made extra Treacle Tart because everyone knew it was her favorite, they were breathing it too. They loved her as much as she loved everything, although Lily sometimes felt the warm glow of affection within her shifting, burning, becoming something that was more like anger. It was always love underneath, though, she knew that much.

“Lil,” Marlene said. Lily stood just outside the Marauders' dormitory, her fists clenched. “Yeah,” Lily smoothed her red hair away from her face. “Can I ask you something?” Lily nodded. She was so aware that Mary should’ve been there that she couldn’t think of anything else. “Do you like James Potter?” “Like? I tolerate him, barely,” Lily said, leading Marlene away from the closed door to the Marauders' dormitory. “He must be somewhat likeable, I suppose.” “Oh,” Marlene said. “But…” Lily did not dislike James Potter. She disliked his behavior, but Remus, whom she trusted absolutely, insisted that this was all it was. Behavior. That this James Potter and the real James Potter were somehow not at all the same. “Remus likes him,” Lily replied calmly. “He does. I don’t understand how he can…” “Mar?” “Yeah,” Marlene replied, sinking to her knees beside Lily. Yes, they had other friends. Yes, other people grieved for Mary. But Marlene and Lily had been like Mary’s sisters, and now she was dead, and they didn’t know how to be alone. “I just…I’m so tired.” “I know,” Lily wrapped herself in her favorite blanket and slumped downstairs to the over-stuffed couch in the Gryffindor common room. She lay there, staring into the flickering fire, missing Mary and her mother and even Severus, but not crying, just sort of breathing in and out with this horrible sadness inside her. “Lily?” Remus asked. He was on his way to the kitchens to make some tea when he saw her there, trembling on the couch. He quietly moved to sit next to her, and she grabbed his scarred hand with both of hers. “Remus, will you tell me something?” Remus nodded, regarding her with a deep understanding. “Remus,” Lily said, gripping his hand with astonishing strength. “Are you a werewolf?” “I…” Remus paled very fast, his heart racing. “I…” he couldn’t lie to Lily Evans. She was grieving and miserable and he couldn’t bring himself to lie to her. “Yes,” he said, finally, and Lily breathed in very quickly. “I am.” “Oh,” Lily said. She dropped his hand, and he thought he might cry. “I’m sorry,” Remus said, bowing his head. “No,” Lily shook her head. “No, thank you for telling me.”
“I…”
“It doesn’t matter, Remus,” she said.
How could this be happening again? How could he be so lucky that the friends who knew were willing to accept him, to still love him despite what he was? “It…”
“No, it doesn’t.”
“But I’m a monster.”
“You’re not,” Lily said, grabbing his hand again. He wasn’t sure when he’d started shaking, but now he couldn’t stop.
“Do you even understand what I am?” Remus asked, sounding deeply resigned.
“I…” tears were gathering in his eyes, but he wiped quickly at his eyes. “Thank you.”
“Don’t thank me,” she said, smiling, confused. “Thank you for trusting me.”
Remus almost laughed.
"Are you going to be alright?"
Remus nodded without hesitating. Yes, he had the Marauders to ground him, and he was going to be alright.
“You said that I don’t understand Potter,” Lily mused, staring into the fire. “What kind of person is he, really?”
“Pardon me?”
“You said that what I know of him and what he actually is are different. So, tell me what sort of person he is.”
“James is…” Remus smiled. “He’s selfless. He’d do anything for us.”
“Potter? Selfless?”
“He…he crosses the line sometimes. He gets so angry that he forgets what he’s doing. But he’s still James, even when he’s the way he’s been recently. He’s the best person I know.”
“Really?” Lily asked, disbelieving.
“Yes. Absolutely.”
“That doesn’t seem like Potter.”
“Yes, well, he acts differently around you.”
“Why…?”
“Because he likes you.”
“Please, no he doesn’t,” Lily rolled her eyes. “He’s made my life hell for years.”
“He’s trying,” Remus said. “Please, for his sake, will you try, too?”
Lily hesitated. “Try what, exactly?”
“To understand him. Just try.”
Lily nodded.

“You said WHAT?” James demanded. “And she said YES?”
“Er…yes,” Remus nodded, backing slightly away from James.
“Do you know what this MEANS?” James asked.
“That Lily Evans is absolutely idiotic?” Sirius guessed.
“No!” James said, laughing. “No, it means I have a chance. I could kiss you, Moony!”
“Please don’t,” Remus said dryly.
“Yeah, I wouldn’t want to have to fight you for him,” Sirius said.
“I’d win,” James said smugly.
“You wish,” Sirius replied, and both Remus and Peter laughed.
“Wait, Remus, tell us what happened,” Peter said.
“I was talking to Lily,” he left out, purposefully, that she knew he was a werewolf. “And she asked me to tell her what James was really like —“
“A prat?” Sirius suggested.
James chuckled at this. “Did you say that?”
“Of course not,” Remus shot him an exasperated look. “I told her what a model citizen you are and
she seemed to be willing to give you another chance.”
“She never gave me a chance to begin with,” James grumbled.
“Better late than never?” Peter suggested, and James just nodded.
“Thanks, Moons.”
“Anytime.”

Their sixth year introductory Potions class started out with Slughorn at the front of the class, displaying a cauldron full of a steaming liquid.
“Welcome back, welcome back. Welcome to your first N.E.W.T. level Potions class. Did everyone have good summer holidays? Wonderful! Now, who can tell me what this is?” he gestured to the cauldron behind him.
Lily and Remus raised their hands simultaneously.
“Yes, Miss Evans,” Slughorn said, smiling, it seemed, extra warmly at her. She smiled back, although she didn’t feel like smiling.
“Amortentia,” she replied, stepping closer to the cauldron.
“Can you tell us what it does?”
“It is a love potion,” Lily said. “The most powerful love potion in the world, although it cannot create love, only infatuation. It smells like the things you love most.”
Slughorn moved aside so his students could smell the potion.
Lily took a deep breath, unsure what to expect, and was stunned when she breathed in and it smelled like cinnamon, leaves, the leathery, sweaty smell of Quidditch. The tantalizing scent of warm butterbeer and the wood of the benches in the Three Broomsticks. Dirt and something almost like rain, like water running underground. “Oh,” she said, very softly.
“Are you blushing?” Marlene whispered to her.
“No!” Lily said.
“You have your James Potter face on,” Marlene replied.
“My what?” Lily demanded. That was it, she realized. The Amortentia smelled like James Potter. Other things, too, like her mother’s perfume and the burning wood and cold stone smell of Hogwarts. She smiled slightly, stunned, but feeling as if everything had just fallen into place.
“You get this face when you think about him. Angry, yeah, but something else too. Mary and I used to talk about it.”
“You did?” Lily asked softly. She could still smell James very strongly, although she had stepped far back from the Amortentia.
“I didn’t!” Lily said, but it sounded like she’d meant to ask a question instead.
“You did,” Marlene said gleefully. “You love James Potter!”
“Be quiet,” Lily hushed, going red. “Of course I don’t.”
No matter how much she fought it, she thought she did. Their corresponding Patronuses. Her smelling him in the Amortentia. It meant something; she knew it meant something.
Lily Evans believed in love, but she also believed in fate. Perhaps, just this once, the two were not mutually exclusive.

Across the room, her face still hot, she caught James Potter’s eye. He was mid-laugh, a crooked grin stretched across his face, and it settled into a smirk as he gazed at her. It was the same smile he’d directed at Severus that first day on the train, full of amusement. His face had changed, become older and sharper, his eyes wiser if not any less full of joy. He was still James Potter — He was still James Potter! she dropped her gaze instantly. He was James Potter, insufferable bully! He was James Potter, and she despised him. Except she didn’t. His effect on her had been constant for years, and she’d fought it again and again, although she could slowly feel herself losing her convictions, her prejudices against him.
“He does have nice arms,” Marlene said understandingly.
“I’m not thinking about his arms!” Lily said, scandalized.
“Oh, so you’re thinking about something else, then?” Marlene said, but only because Mary would
have, and because Mary was dead.
“I most certainly am not!”
“Evans, you’re blushing,” Sirius said, appearing on one side of her.
“I noticed, too,” Peter piped up. “Your face is almost as red as your hair.”
“Which is really more of a burgundy,” Remus pointed out, and the three of them all laughed at their old joke. James pretended not to see Lily.
In the Amortentia, he’d smelled Quidditch and rain and the scent of the air under the full moon. Sirius’s wet-dog scent, Remus’s persistent smell of chocolate and old books, Peter, warm, like flowers and pastries. But he also smelled something softer, like the smoke from the fire in the common room, like spices and mint, and strawberries. It was Lily Evans. He knew it before he knew that he did, and he suddenly couldn’t breathe.
“I am not blushing,” Lily said defensively, although she was, extremely visibly.
“You are,” Sirius said, grinning.
“I’m sorry, Black, I don’t recall the day where we became friends,” Lily said coolly. “So I’m not sure why you’re pointing out anything about my physical appearance.”
“You don’t recall,” Sirius said, although something in his eyes flickered when she called him by his surname, “because it hasn’t happened yet. But just you wait, Evans, it will.”
“In your dreams,” she replied.
“Unfortunately for you, you have never once starred in one of my dreams,” Sirius replied calmly. Slughorn seemed to be mid-demonstration of a new type of potion he was teaching them, but no one save for Remus, Peter, and Severus seemed to be paying any attention. Severus was furiously scribbling in his potions textbook.
“Unlike Professor Dumbledore.” Lily replied, remembering a joke she’d once overheard James tell Sirius.
“Pardon me?” Remus asked, turning around.
Sirius laughed. “Oh, Dumbledore’s alright, but everyone knows it’s McGonagall who holds the key to my heart.”
“I feel I ought to be somewhat offended by that,” Remus replied, although he was laughing.
“Perhaps,” Sirius replied cheekily, before Slughorn shushed them both.

“Pads?” Remus asked into the chilly autumn night. The darkness was soft and blue in their room, corners faded into black, everything fuzzy and indistinct.
“Yeah.”
“All of you,” he answered, gesturing to James and Peter as well as Remus. He’d also smelled his family, vaguely cold and metallic, with something like dead flowers underneath, but he didn’t say that. “You in particular, I suppose.”
“You suppose?” Remus asked, although he knew what Sirius meant.
“I suppose you don’t want a lengthy declaration of my love for you?”
“I suppose not,” Remus replied. “Although I might find a sonnet-based testament extremely romantic.”
“I would rather be hit in the face than write a sonnet, for you or for anyone,” Sirius replied.
“In all fairness, you’d rather be hit in the face than do most things,” Remus replied, and Sirius threw a pillow at him.
“Stop,” Sirius said, dragging out the word. Remus grabbed the pillow and wrapped his arms around it tightly, pulling it against his chest. Very soon afterwards, his breathing steadied and softened, and he was asleep.
“Sirius?” Peter asked across the room, his voice soft and childlike from sleep. Sometimes it seemed like Peter was growing more slowly than the rest of them, at least in his own mind. While the others sprouted up from the ground, tall and proud, Peter remained, struggling behind, still a child, still small and awkward and unsure.
“Yeah, Pete?” Sirius asked.
“I was thinking about something.”
“Thinking? That’s new,” Sirius replied.
“Oi, I did almost as well as you on my O.W.L.s,” Peter replied. This was true, he’d surprised them all with his success, although he’d barely passed Transfiguration.
Sirius just laughed. “What were you thinking about, Wormy?”
“You’re willing to die,” Peter said.

Sirius shifted in his bed, uncomfortable. Willing to? “I wouldn’t phrase it that way.”
“I meant, willing to die to stop him. You-Know-Who. It’s all you think about. Making everything equal. Proving you’re not like your parents.”
“I’m not like my parents,” Sirius said viciously, although he felt like them, felt their cold “pure” blood running through his veins.
“I know,” Peter stammered, shifting towards the side of his bed to be closer to Sirius. “I just —“
“What?” Sirius demanded.
“What’s it like?” Peter asked finally, meeting Sirius’s eyes in the dark. “What’s it like to be willing to die for what you believe in?”
“It’s like…” Sirius replied cautiously, then stopped. “It’s like waking up every morning in your own grave.”

Peter was silent, sitting on the edge of his bed, hands folded anxiously in his lap. “Padfoot?”
“Yeah,” Sirius said, his voice softening with sleep.
“Padfoot, are you…”
“Am I what, Wormtail? Spit it out.”
“Are you alright, really? Be honest?”
“No,” Sirius said. It was relieving to say it aloud. “I am most certainly not alright.”
“Sirius, please…”
“Oh, don’t worry,” Sirius said. “I’m not going to off myself, if that’s what you’re thinking about.”
“Sirius…”
“I mean, it’s not like I’d even get a funeral now that I’ve been disowned. And is it even worth it if my mother isn’t crying over my grave?”
“You’ve been disowned?” Peter asked.
“I assume so,” Sirius said. “Regulus sent me a letter, which I doubt contains any sort of brotherly sentiment, and is more likely proof that I’ve been burnt from the family tapestry.”
“You haven’t read it?” This, more than the disowning, was surprising.
“Nah,” Sirius replied. “Not yet.”
Chapter Notes

this chapter is dedicated to Artemis who is the actual sweetest person alive and gave me the Marauder's Map which I now keep on my desk so I remember to write, thank you so much!

The letter from Regulus sat unopened on Sirius’s bed for several hours before he was prepared to open it.
“Merlin, Sirius, you’ve been looking at that letter for ages,” Remus said. “You don’t have to read it.” Sirius snorted, but he didn’t remove the letter.
“I could read it for you,” Peter offered.
“Absolutely not!” Sirius replied, flopping onto his stomach, staring directly at the letter. The ink blurred in front of his eyes, becoming unreadable, allowing him to forget who the letter was from.
“For fucksake,” James said. “Why d’you have to read it? What could he possibly say?”
“With any luck, that my parents have died tragically,” Sirius said, crumpling the letter in his fist.
“Oh, Sirius, don’t,” Remus said, although he wasn’t really trying to stop him with any amount of significant effort. There was really no point in trying to stop Sirius doing anything.
“The way I see it,” James declared. He hadn't made one of his ‘the way I see it’ declarations in quite some time, and felt that the words were foreign on his tongue. It'd been too long since he'd said them.
“There’s no point to reading the letter. It’ll only upset you.”
“I’m not the Minister of Magic, Prongs, there’s no need to act as if I’ll lose my mind at any moment.” Sirius said.
“Are you implying that people treat the Minister as if he’ll lose his mind at any moment?” Remus inquired.
“Oh, certainly. Why else would anyone allow him to continue pretending You-Know-Who doesn’t exist?” Sirius said, lighting a cigarette and blowing out a puff of smoke.
“Won’t you stop smoking now that you haven’t got parents to upset?” Peter asked.
“It is a very Muggle habit,” Sirius conceded.
“What’s wrong with that?” Remus asked.
“Nothing,” Sirius replied, blowing smoke into Remus’s face. Remus looked at him and tried not to cough. “Anyone?”
“Nah,” James said. “I’m quitting.”
“You’re quitting? Really?” Sirius seemed impressed. He held the letter from his brother in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, and seemed to be seriously contemplating setting the letter on fire.
“Well, Evans is on speaking terms with me now, and she hates it when people smoke.”
“Really?” Peter asked.
“Her mother died of lung cancer, dimwit,” James replied.
“Dimwit? What are you, a first year?” Sirius asked.
“Perhaps,” James said.
“Things were much simpler, then,” Remus mused, although this wasn’t entirely true. Sirius nodded. “Wait, Prongs, you’re quitting smoking because of a girl who barely speaks to you?”
“Ah, but barely is the operative word,” James replied. “ Barely can become ‘sometimes’ and ‘sometimes’ can become ‘often’ and ‘often’ can become ‘always’ and that, lads, is what I’m counting on.”
“You’re insane,” Sirius said. “Absolutely stark raving bonkers.”
“Yeah?” James asked, leaning his head back against the wall. “Yeah,” Remus, Sirius, and Peter said in unison. “Sirius, put that out and either read that letter or don’t,” James snapped. “Thanks, Mum,” Sirius said dryly, and tore open the letter. “See, I was trying to put an emphasis on ‘don’t,'” James said. “I’ve got to,” Sirius said, his voice pained. “Don’t you see I’ve got to? What if he never speaks to me again after this?” “I see that you believe you’ve got to,” Remus put his hand on Sirius’s arm. Sirius shrugged him off, scanning the letter. His brother’s handwriting had a different slant to it now, it looked more like his mother’s.

Sirius,

I’ve spoken to Mum and Dad, and they’ve made it clear that you’re not coming back. I tried to make them wait to burn you off the family tapestry, but they didn’t. Your name is gone now, so I suppose there’s no going back. Uncle Alphard, of all people, keeps on defending you. Course, he was disowned years ago, and he’s only allowed round the house now because he hasn’t got anywhere to go. He’s an old sod anyway. I did try to tell Mum and Dad to give you some time, but they won’t have it. I’m very sorry, Sirius, about this of course, but I’m really the most sorry that I don’t think I shall ever be able to speak to you again, according to Mum and Dad’s wishes. They want to make sure you don’t “corrupt” me. I’ll miss you — I miss you already.

Yours,

Regulus

Sirius nodded as he crumpled the letter in his fist. It was no worse than he’d expected. “So?” James asked, and Sirius became aware that the Marauders had been watching him as he read. “They’ve burnt me from the family tapestry,” Sirius said. He accepted it with resignation, having anticipated much worse. Perhaps a bonfire, incinerating his room as his family danced around the flames. “I’m only glad I’ve had the good sense to put a permanent sticking charm on everything in my room, in case my mother wanted to make it look like I never existed.” “You seem…surprisingly alright,” Peter observed. “I am,” Sirius said, then nodded. “I am alright.” “What did he say?” Remus asked. “Nothing I wasn’t expecting. He, of course, is never allowed to speak to me again.” “Pads,” James said. “What? It’s not that bad,” Sirius shrugged. “I’m really not in the mood to have a nice discussion about ‘feelings.’” “Marauders don’t have feelings, I suppose?” Peter guessed. “No,” James and Sirius said in unison, and looked at each other, surprised. Recently, they’d fallen out of sync, not very much, but just enough to be noticeable. “But, Sirius, are you sure you don’t want to talk about it — “ “Quite,” Sirius said. “Quidditch, anyone? James? Haven’t you got tryouts this morning?” “That I do,” James said. He had a clipboard ready and three backup quills for his backup quill, and he was nearly shaking with nervous energy. “Oh,” Peter said happily. “That’s exciting.” “Little too much excitement for our Wormtail, I think,” James teased, and Peter laughed. Sirius still wasn’t angry, even though he thought he should have been. He shoved the letter under his bed and didn’t look at it again, and all day, there was a slow rage burning inside him, rising up from the pit of his stomach. By the time he got to the Quidditch pitch, he was furious. “Ah, Sirius,” James said. “Wonderful. Everyone, this is our Keeper, Sirius Black.” “We know,” Arnold Pierce (Seeker) said unnecessarily. “Er,” a pureblood, red-haired second year whose last name was probably Weasley said. “Hasn’t Sirius Black been disowned?” “Wouldn’t you like to know?” James snapped. “Well, I’d never ask,” the boy stammered. “Of course. But, er…don’t you need parent’s permission
to play on the Quidditch team?"
“No,” James replied.
“But…his parents…”
“Have absolutely nothing to do with his ability to play Quidditch,” James said. “Now, if it’s not too
much inconvenience, can we actually move on to tryouts?”
“It’s just… I think I heard someone saying that he wouldn’t be allowed on the team anymore.”
“Nonsense,” Sirius replied.
“Actually, Mr. Weasley is correct,” McGonagall said curtly. She seemed to have appeared from
nowhere, and Sirius briefly considered the possibility that she’d walked across the pitch in Animagus
form. From the stunned look on the red-haired boy’s face, it was more than just a possibility.
“How so?” Sirius inquired.
“While your family situation has no bearing on you being allowed to play Quidditch, your
considerable… history of violent reactions has culminated into a ban from Quidditch.”
“A ban,” Sirius repeated.
“From Quidditch?” James demanded. “You can’t do that! We need Sirius.”
“I’m sure you will find a replacement, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said.
“You can’t just throw me off the team!” Sirius protested.
“I can,” McGonagall said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Black, but the staff vote was unanimous.”
“Unanimous? You voted me off the Quidditch team.”
“Given your circumstances,” McGonagall said. “We thought it was the best decision.”
“Right,” Sirius said, furious, gripping his broomstick with both hands. “Right, well, of course. If you
thought it was the best decision, professor.”
“I’m very sorry, Mr. Black. My hands are tied.”
Sirius looked at her, very hurt, and she shook her head, wondering why she felt such extreme pity for
this boy. Sirius didn’t exactly conduct himself in a way that inspired pity.
As the Quidditch team watched, Sirius stormed off the pitch, broomstick in hand.
“Black,” Lily said as he passed her in the corridor. Her arms were piled high with Arithmancy
textbooks (her worst subject; Remus was helping her study.)
“Don’t,” Sirius snapped “Don’t call me Black!”
“Alright,” Lily said calmly.
“Actually, it’s not!” Sirius said. “Absolutely nothing is alright,” he hit the wall as hard as he could
while Lily looked on, unimpressed.
“Is breaking all the bones in your hand going to make you feel better?” she asked.
“Likely not, but I’m going to do it anyway,” Sirius replied, and hit the wall again. There was a
cracking sound in his hand, and he bit his lip to keep from crying out in pain.
“You’re going to break your hand,” Lily informed him, grabbing his arm as he raised his fist to hit
the wall again.
“Don’t touch me!” he shouted, and she didn’t even flinch, just regarded him with those shiny green
eyes.
“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?”
“No,” Sirius replied. “I’d like you to walk away and pretend this didn’t happen.”
“Shall I tell Remus that —”
“No!” Sirius said, and Lily was stunned to see that he sounded desperate, his eyes wild.
“Thanks,” he muttered.
“Oh!” Peter’s voice echoed down the corridor.
“Peter,” Sirius said, with a mixture of relief and irritation.
“I was watching tryouts with Remus.”
“I know,” Sirius said.
“I’m really sorry about —”
“Yeah, well, it happens,” Sirius shrugged.
“James sent me to fetch you.”
“Is that what you do now, Wormy, you run errands for Prongs?” Peter looked down, hurt, but he couldn’t bring himself to say anything. “Just…come back.”

“Why?” Sirius asked. “I’m not on the team anymore.”

“Are you even upset about that?” Peter asked. He had an uncanny way of finding the root of people’s emotions very quickly.

“Not very,” Sirius admitted, mounting his broomstick. He rose into the air, although it was against the rules, but a quick glance at the Marauder’s Map told him there was nothing to worry about.

“Here, catch.” He tossed the map at Peter. “Mischief managed,” Peter said, frowning. The map cleared instantly.

“Padfoot —”

“Will you give it a rest, Peter? I’m fine.”

“Merlin, do you think I’m an idiot?”

“I certainly hope you don’t want me to answer that honestly,” Sirius joked, and Peter frowned.

“This is about the letter.”

“What letter?” He thought of it, lying under his bed. He’d wanted to burn it, but what if it was the last he ever heard from his brother?

If Peter had been as brave as James, he might’ve said, I don’t appreciate your insult to my intelligence, or something equally clever and biting. He didn’t say it for a variety of reasons, the primary one being that he was scared. Instead he said. “The letter from your brother.”

“Ah,” Sirius said, as if he’d somehow forgotten this. “Of course.”

“You read it,” Peter repeated.

“So I did,” Sirius said, hovering just above the ground on his broomstick, lazily floating forwards as Peter walked down the hall.

“You seemed alright.”

“I was alright. I’m not now.”

“That’s a shame,” Peter said, in what was a vast understatement.

“It’s not, really,” Sirius replied as they reached the Quidditch pitch, sitting in the stands and watching as James shouted, seeming to enjoy the process of shouting much more than he was enjoying the process of watching a group of Quidditch hopefuls flail around on broomsticks.

“You’re sure you’re alright?”

“Merlin’s —“ Sirius ran a hand through his hair. “Yes, James, I’m fine.”

“I’m not nearly as ridiculous as James,” Peter said, with an affectionate look at James.

“That’s because no one is,” Sirius replied. “OI! PRONGS!”

“What?” James roared back.

Sirius blew him a kiss. “GOOD LUCK, MATE!”

James rolled his eyes and sighed so dramatically it was visible across the pitch. “LOVE YOU TOO, PADFOOT!”

The newly formed Quidditch team was too intimidated by James to laugh.

“Alright,” James said. “Thank you all for trying out. I’ll have the final decision posted by tomorrow. Ordinarily, Mary or Sirius would help me with that, but —“ he stopped, forgetting Mary was dead, and then remembering all at once. “But due to certain circumstances, that won’t be possible. You’re all dismissed.”

“Well?” Sirius said. He rose lazily to his feet from the stands, while Peter leapt to attention.

“The first years were dreadful, as usual,” James said, not looking at the notes on his clipboard. “I really don’t know why they try out.”

“They’re certainly not trying to appeal to your good nature, as you haven’t got one,” Sirius said.

James didn’t reply. “Arnold was the obvious choice for Seeker, again, and David McKinnon tried out for the team —“

“Marlene McKinnon’s brother?” Peter asked.

“Yeah. He wasn’t bad, actually. I’m thinking of making him our third Chaser. Anyways, as I was saying, I think most of the people who were on the team last year will be allowed to keep their spot, but...”
“Not me, obviously,” Sirius replied bitterly.
“Pads, for Merlin’s sake. You didn’t even like Quidditch that much.”
Sirius looked affronted. “That much? That much! Quidditch, my dear Prongs, holds a place in my heart that no other activity could ever fill. I am simply devastated.”
James sighed, lying down across the stands with his clipboard balanced on his chest. “I take that to mean you don’t give a damn?”
“I give more than one damn,” Sirius replied.
“Doubtful,” Peter replied, and both James and Sirius laughed, surprised to hear Peter making fun of Sirius. He always seemed careful, overly cautious of accidentally crossing some line. What James thought about Sirius was that he didn’t really have any lines which could be crossed.
“Yeah, alright. I give half a damn. Being generous, that is,” Sirius said. “Satisfied?”
“Sure,” James replied, now examining his clipboard with uncommon focus. “Kingsley for Keeper, do you think?”
“Yes,” Peter said enthusiastically.
“No,” Sirius said.
“Ah, Pads, you’re just jealous.”
“Even if I were, I should never admit to such a thing,” Sirius replied.
“He’s jealous,” James said to Peter.
“Sod off,” Sirius replied curtly.
James stood up. “I’ll sod off, but you’re still bloody jealous.”
“Thanks for your input, captain,” Sirius said dryly, leaning against Remus’s shoulder.
“Well, I’ve got to make a list of people who’ve made the team,” James said. “I’ll see you lot later.”
“You can always do it here,” Peter pointed out, showing no inclination of moving any time soon.
“Nah,” James said. He mumbled some excuse about being tired, but James, as they all knew, never ran out of energy. It was Sirius he was avoiding, and this was evident to everyone except Sirius.
“You’re sure?” Remus asked, and something about how worried he sounded made James sit.
“Merlin, Moons, you needn’t look as if anyone’s died —“
Mary. Mary MacDonald had died. How could he have forgotten? The loss ripped a hole through his chest, sudden, blinding pain, but then it was gone again, because she was still just Mary MacDonald, and he’d known her for years, but he didn’t know her middle name or her favorite color. She was good at Quidditch and she was very sweet and she defended him to Lily and he didn’t miss her, not exactly, but he missed the knowledge that things were going to be alright.
The Marauders were untouchable; this was a fact within Hogwarts. They were clever — they pulled pranks, they made jokes, they aced classes, and they couldn’t be hurt. They were all hurt now, though. They were more than hurt; they were damaged.
“I’m sorry,” James said, mostly to Peter. He was sorry about Mary, of course, but more than that, he was sorry that he hadn’t had the chance to hex Mulciber while he still could.
“For what?”
“Sorry I didn’t hit Mulciber harder that one time,” James said, clenching his fists.
The others laughed.
“Sorry I didn’t hex his sorry arse into the ground whenever I had the chance,” Sirius said.
“You did do that,” Remus reminded him tactfully.
“Yes, but there’s always more that could’ve been done.”
“We knew what he was planning,” Remus said heavily. “We heard him say it out loud, why didn’t we —“
“No one believed us,” James said. “They didn’t want to believe us.”
Remus nodded, biting his lower lip.
“Dumbledore didn’t mention her at the feast,” Peter observed sadly.
“The Ministry’s passed a decree that school officials like Dumbledore aren’t allowed to condemn anyone for killing Muggle-borns,” James said. “My dad wrote to tell me this morning. It’ll be in the Prophet tomorrow.”
“You’re joking,” Sirius said.
James shook his head.
“Merlin,” Sirius said. “The world really is going to shit.”
“Yeah,” James sighed. “Yeah, it is.”
The four of them sat in silence for another moment before standing to walk back into the castle.

“The Slug Club?” Sirius asked in disbelief.
“Well, that is what...a few of my students have taken to calling it,” Slughorn said. “Is that something that would interest you? You have shown quite the aptitude for Potions.”
“Is Evans in the Slug Club?” James inquired.
“Miss Evans is, in fact, and has been since her second year. I would’ve asked the four of you much sooner, but you were a bit too mischievous back then.”
“Aren’t we now?” James asked.
Slughorn looked flustered, his very large mustache quivering. “Mr. Lupin is a Prefect. I can only assume your mischief-making days are quite over.”
Sirius looked affronted. “I guarantee that they are not —“
“They are,” Remus interrupted. “Very. Thank you for your invitation, professor.”
“We’ll have a dinner next Friday evening,” Slughorn said. “I do hope you’ll attend.”
“We certainly will,” James said grandly. He was beginning to stand up a bit straighter. No matter what had happened or what was going to happen, they were still the Marauders.
“Have a nice day, Professor,” Remus added politely. James and Sirius were already halfway out of the room, with Peter following close behind.
“The Slug Club,” James said, as though he couldn’t quite believe it.
“I certainly will not be there,” Sirius said. “Regulus is in the Slug Club.”
“Padfoot,” Peter said softly.
“No, I won’t hear it,” Sirius held up a hand. “He’s said he’s not to speak to me again, and I’m just not going to make it difficult for him.”
“First time he’s ever said that,” James remarked. “Alright, alright, we’ll go without you.”
“Thank you,” Sirius said, and added a long-suffering sigh for good measure.
“Git,” James muttered, furiously scribbling on his clipboard.
“You know what we haven’t done recently?” James asked.
“Drop it, Moony, no one else is listening,” Sirius said.
“Alright,” Remus sighed. “Alright. What have you planned?”
“It’s very simple,” James said. “It involves Dumbledore, a large quantity of flowers, and a bet Sirius and I made in second year.” He whispered something to Peter that Remus couldn’t quite make out.
“You never are!” Peter gasped.
“How exactly is that going to work?” Remus asked skeptically.
“The bet was —“
“To harass poor old Professor Dumbledore?”
“I wouldn’t consider Professor Dumbledore ‘poor’ or ‘old,’” Sirius said.
“Intimidating’ and ‘intense’ are the words that come to mind,” James added. “But yes. The first one of us who gets completely rejected by Dumbledore loses the bet and will be forced to run bare-arse naked across the Quidditch pitch.”

“Merlin,” Remus said faintly. “What a horrible idea.”
“I think he meant to say ‘brilliant,’” Peter said.
“Alright, alright. How are Peter and I involved?” Remus asked.
“You’re going to help, of course,” Sirius said.
Remus didn’t protest. “Right. Of course.”
“First we’ll need,” James said brightly. “Flowers.”
“I’ll go down to Greenhouse Three!” Peter said brightly.
“And an audience,” James added.
“When do we not have an audience?” Sirius inquired, gesturing to the three first years who were trailing behind them up the stairs. “Off with you!”
“What’d you say to them to get them to worship you?” Remus asked, laughing.
“Nothing,” Sirius said, feigning innocence.
“I’ll ask,” Peter offered. First years were often starstruck by James and Sirius, but found Peter — quiet, short, unassuming Peter — quite approachable. “Oi!”
“Yes?” one of them asked.
“They get smaller every year,” Remus said fondly to James.
“Why are you following Sirius around?” Peter asked, kneeling down slightly to be on the same level as them.
“We heard,” one of them said. “That he’s going to stop You-Know-Who.”
“Single-handedly?” Peter asked, amused. “Well, then. That is interesting.”
“We want to help!”
“Padfoot, I think you’re starting a rebellion,” Peter teased, and Sirius rolled his eyes.
“Tell them I’m not stopping You-Know-Who,” Sirius called down the staircase.
“He’s not. We’re not. Not yet. But we want to.”
“And — and you’re the ones who — who did all those pranks last year?” another first year asked.
“That’s us,” Peter said proudly.
“Oh,” the smallest of the three first years said. “That’s…”
“Incredible?” James guessed.
“Brilliant?” Remus suggested.
“Amazing?” Sirius added.
“Yes,” the three first years said in unison, and scampered away.
“They’re cute,” Peter said, in much the same way one would call Bowtruckles cute — in a slightly awed and equally afraid way.
“Cute isn’t the word I’d use,” Sirius muttered.
“And what word would you use, Pads?” James asked.
“Well, that depends, Prongs,” Sirius said. “Under which circumstances am I describing these children?”
Remus and Peter exchanged a look that clearly indicated, they’re at it again. They were both so unbelievably glad of this that they could barely manage to be exasperated.
“Any and all circumstances,” James replied.
“Well, in that case, I’d call them ‘horrifying’ at worst and ‘irritating’ at best,” Sirius replied, and James laughed, the kind of laugh that was too big for his body and spilled over, filling up the others’ chests.

The day of James’s first Quidditch practice with his “new and improved” Quidditch team, only Peter was sitting in the stands, sipping on a charmed-by-Lily-Evans mug of hot chocolate. Remus was patrolling the halls with a loud and giggly Hufflepuff named Calliope.
He heard a distinct shuffling inside the broom cupboard to his left, and an even more distinct ‘woof’ echoing from inside.
“Calliope, mind if I inspect this one on my own?” Remus asked mildly.
Calliope nodded, surprised. She liked Remus — most people did — and in her eyes, he was all the positive parts of the Marauders with none of the noise. “Yeah, sure.”
Remus cautiously opened the door to see Sirius, with the roguish look in his eyes that meant that he’d just been in Animagus form. “Moony,” Sirius said.
“Padfoot, I’m on patrols right now, I haven’t got the time —” Remus said.
Sirius lunged towards him and kissed him.
“I’ve got to help Calliope inspect the third floor,” Remus protested.
“Shut up,” Sirius growled against Remus’s lips.
“I actually do have to —”
“Alright,” Sirius said, kissing Remus’s neck. He untied Remus’s tie and threw it at the floor.
“Sirius…”
“Look,” Sirius said. “I’m upset about Regulus, and Quidditch, and James.”
“Which is why you’re making attempts to ravish me in a broom cupboard, I assume?” Remus asked dryly, not sounding particularly interested in getting out of the situation.
“Ravish seems like a strong word,” Sirius said, stripping off his shirt. There was a mottled bruise over his back from where his father had beaten him that was beginning to fade, slowly, and Remus gently traced his fingers around it, making Sirius shiver. “And as far as attempts… is it working?” Remus kissed him in response.
The door to the broom cupboard swung open, and there stood James (Calliope hovered slightly behind him) resplendent in his Quidditch gear, undeterred by Sirius and Remus’s states of undress.
“Oi,” James said.
Remus was blushing so profusely he feared steam might begin coming out of his ears.
“Moony, there’s no need to look so embarrassed. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”
“We weren’t — er,” Remus said, scratching at his arms beneath his sweater. “That is —”
“I don’t particularly care,” James said, without a hint of cruelty. He meant it. “I have a question.”
“How’d you even know we were in here?”
“Map,” James said, gesturing to it.
“Don’t intend to do so,” Sirius said, pulling his shirt back on. Remus envied Sirius’s calmness; he still felt very flustered. “But if you insist.”
“I don’t,” James said. “But only because Calliope and I have struck up a very interesting conversation about Muggle politics, and I don’t want to make her feel uncomfortable by witnessing our strange Marauder rituals.”
“Do we have rituals?” Remus asked. “I wasn’t aware.”
“You do,” Calliope said, grinning. “Everyone thinks it’s really strange.”
“Really?” James asked, intrigued.
Remus, very aware that he was speaking to Calliope and that his shirt was half unbuttoned, decided not to ask her for details. He was still half-hoping she’d somehow forgotten that she’d seen him enter the cupboard ten minutes beforehand, where he was now standing, guilty, hand entwined with Sirius’s. If Sirius’s mere presence in a room didn’t pin him to one spot and leave him breathless, he might’ve tried to walk out and pretend nothing had happened.
As it was, he stayed and pretended everything was fine, subtly inching his hand towards the floor, where his robes lay crumpled and so very obvious, he thought. He was lucky to be allowed to be at school at all, with the way things were — how could he go about flaunting his relationship with a pureblood?
“Merlin,” James said. “Remus, you needn’t look so obviously ashamed of yourself.”
“I am — not,” Remus managed.
Sirius’s hand was on his lower back. He would really like James and Calliope to leave them to their broom cupboard misadventures, but he thought he would die of the embarrassment if they were to
ever find out that he’d even thought that for a second.
“My dear Moony,” James said, tying Remus’s tie for him. "Your face is turning purple." Calliope
looked momentarily confused, and again, Remus remembered that what he had with the Marauders
was not ordinary. That friends — particularly male friends — weren’t supposed to be as easy and
comfortable and affectionate as the Marauders were. He thought maybe the reason they let people
admire their mischief-making from afar instead of letting in more people was that being around other
people reminded them how extraordinary they were.
Then James pulled him to his feet, talking amicably to Calliope about Quidditch strategies, and the
thought disappeared.
The room had been decorated with Slughorn’s photographs of his past prized students. In a picture from 1973, Lily Evans and Frank Longbottom stood at the center of the group, their arms thrown around each other’s shoulders as Severus jealously looked on. In another, a handsome young man stood beside Slughorn, grinning. In another, Lily and Snape were brewing a potion, smiling at each other. In yet another, Regulus and Snape were laughing, Regulus seeming more like Snape’s brother than he was like Sirius’s. If Sirius had been there, this would’ve angered him, and by proxy, James was angry as well.

“James, Remus, and — what was your name again?”

“Er…” Peter blushed.

“Peter,” James said for him.

“Ah, yes, that’s right,” Slughorn said disinterestedly. “I’m so glad you could all make it. Please, please, sit down. Is Mr. Black — the elder Mr. Black, not you, Regulus, that is — going to be joining us tonight?”

“I don’t think so, no,” James said.

“You see what this is, don’t you?” Remus whispered to James.

“The seventh circle of hell, I imagine,” James remarked casually as Slughorn waved his wand and food appeared on all their plates. Lily ran in and sat down next to James, her face flushed.

“Never mind?” Peter guessed.

Slughorn was already eyeing the Marauders as if he wasn’t sure whether he’d meant to invite them.

“Miss Evans,” Slughorn said, beaming.

“Sorry I’m late, sir,” Lily said, smiling. “Hello, Potter,” she said, her smile fading.

She felt eyes on her, and on her other side was Severus, who had appeared as if from nowhere.

“Severus,” she said.

“That’s a first,” Peter whispered.

“What is?” Remus asked.

“Oh,” Peter wasn’t often asked to elaborate on his ideas. “Lily saying James’s name more nicely than she says Snape’s.”

“Still not very nicely, though,” Remus observed.

“You think they’ll ever get there?”

“I’d bet on it,” Remus said.

“Really? How much?”

Peter and Remus were the least wealthy of the Marauders, so Remus had to take a moment to calculate. “Five galleons.”

“I don’t have five galleons,” Peter complained. “I haven’t even got one.”

“It’s our Prongs’s future we’re betting on, it should be a substantial bet.”

“Would you stake your life on it?” Peter asked. Recently, he’d found himself becoming obsessed with what he would bet his life on, what he would die for. His friends, he always thought. He’d die
for them if he had to, he hoped.

“Yes,” Remus said cautiously. “Yes, I think I would.”

Peter didn’t press him to be more decisive. Instead he asked, “how long? How much longer until they finally work things out?”

“My bet?” Remus asked. “James isn’t ready. He’s not ready yet, and she’s not ready to forgive him, and I guarantee that it’ll be quite some time before they’re ready, but once they are,” he paused, smiling at James across the table. “Once they are, that’s it. There won’t be anyone else.”

Peter just nodded thoughtfully and took a bite of his dinner. “So,” Slughorn said, leaning across the table towards Severus. “Our very own Mr. Severus Snape has been hard at work modifying deadly potions to be medicinal.”

“Are we sure it isn’t the other way round?” James whispered to Remus, with a venomous look in Severus’s direction.

“Prongs,” Remus chastised, without much motivation behind his voice.

“And he’s been very successful thus far.”

“Really?” Peter blurted out, and Slughorn gave him another look like, ‘why are you here, again?’

“Yes, actually, Mr…”

“Pettigrew,” James said for Peter, who looked as if he might burst into tears from the shame. “Peter Pettigrew.”

“Right, of course,” Slughorn replied. “Anyway, as I was saying, Severus has been developing medicinal potions with the same properties as deadly potions. For example, the Draught of Living Death has been modified to temporarily put patients to sleep in order to cast spells on them that cannot work on the waking mind. Obviously, it’s still in the testing phases, and may never come to fruition, but it is an applaudable feat.”

Some people clapped politely. Because Slughorn was watching, Lily clapped as well, and so did Remus and Peter. James did not.

“Does anyone else have anything they’d like to share? Mr. Potter, I heard that Quidditch tryouts are going very well this year.”

“Yes, Professor,” James said in his ‘James Potter’ voice, the one he pulled out only on special occasions, like when talking to adults who wanted nothing more than to be charmed by him or to adoring Quidditch fans or first years living in fear of the infamous Marauders’ pranks. “We just recruited Kingsley as our new Keeper, actually.”

“Kingsley!” Slughorn cried, as if he’d somehow missed the six foot tall giant of a boy sitting three seats down from him (which was of course impossible.) “My dear boy, how very exciting for you.”

“Yes, Sir,” Kingsley rumbled, and Marlene giggled.

“Marlene,” Lily hissed. Marlene McKinnon may have been less intense than the late Mary MacDonald, but she was certainly not the type that anyone would have called, “giggly.”

“Yes, yes, how very exciting,” Slughorn repeated, his eyes sliding across the table in search of his next victim. “Mr. Lupin! You did very well on your O.W.L.s, as I recall.”

“Yes, sir.” Remus nodded. He didn’t stutter, although he could feel his face going red. “Almost all O’s, sir, except for Potions.”

“Ahh, I did notice that you did not reprise my Potions class at N.E.W.T. level. Rather a shame, but I suppose I shall see more of you now that you are a part of the Slug Club…”

“Yes, sir.” Remus said, dipping his head, although he couldn’t imagine why Slughorn would want him in his club, whether the professor knew of his condition or not.

“But it was Mr. Snape,” Slughorn said, gleeful, suddenly. Snape looked as if he might have blushed if he weren’t smirking and looking exceptionally pleased with himself. “Who scored the highest O.W.L. marks for Slytherin house.”

There was another polite round of applause. Lily clapped, and Severus looked at her searchingly before turning back to his dinner.

“However, he did not win the title for best O.W.L. marks in his year. That went to Mr. Sirius Black, who could not be with us today.”

“Good job, that,” Peter remarked to James, who let out a dry, somewhat tortured-sounding chuckle.
“Yeah,” James replied. “He might’ve flown across the table.”
“Does he know he has the highest marks in our year?” Remus asked, sounding, very much in spite
of himself, jealous.
“Certainly not,” James said. “If he did, he’d skip classes for a month to make up for it. I can’t control
the masses, but if a Marauder is to tell him, that Marauder should and will be expelled from our
group indefinitely.”
“Calling it a group implies that it’s an exclusive club,” Marlene said.
“Hullo, McKinnon. Don’t recall inviting you to join our conversation,” James said, somewhat
rudely, although the difference between James and Sirius was that Sirius was always aware when he
was being rude.
“It very well could be,” Peter replied.
“It is,” James said brusquely.
“It is not,” Remus said, with a meaningful look at James and Peter. “Anyone is welcome to become a
Marauder.”
“Anyone?” Peter pulled a face.
“Not going to lie, there’d be a ridiculous orientation process and several illegal activities involved,
which would deter even the most devoted of our followers.” James said calmly.
“Is there something you’d like to share with the table, James?” Slughorn asked, not unkindly. He had
poured himself a large glass of mead and his face had gone ruddy.
“Not at all,” James said, as Slughorn continued his conversation with Kingsley about Quidditch,
dragging in various other students at the table at times.
“Alright, alright, well, let’s raise a glass,” Slughorn said, raising what had to be his third glass. “To
your present and continued success.”
The Marauders raised their glasses with obligatory solemnity, secretly grinning at each other all the
while.

“We’re back,” James declared. Sirius was lounging in his casual yet graceful way on his bed, his
arms stretched up over his head.
“How’s old Sluggy?”
“He’s narrowing us down,” Peter said glumly. “Seeing which of us he wants to invite back. He kept
forgetting my name!”
“Don’t be offended, Pete, everyone forgets your name. Even we did, the first few months we knew
you.” Sirius shrugged, inviting Remus to sit on one side of him and James on the other, with Peter
lying across his feet.
Peter shifted uncomfortably at the memory. He liked to pretend he’d always been one of them, in the
same way James and Sirius had clicked immediately and fallen into place, together. “Right, ‘course,”
Peter said, remembering being thirteen years old and crying when James and Sirius had said things
like that, and realizing that it barely bothered him at this point. If everything they said to each other
made him that upset, he’d spend every waking moment in tears.
“Anyway, how was it? Did he discuss all your accomplishments? Did he shower you with praise
and glory?”
“Most of the above,” Remus replied, and Sirius grinned, nestling his head in the crook of Remus’s
neck.
“Well, Prongs,” Sirius said, glancing over at James. “Was Evans there?”
“Yes,” James said. “And while she wasn’t exactly showering me with love and affection, there was
some...thawing.”
“Infinitesimal thawing,” Remus commented, and Peter laughed his soft, bubbling laugh.
“I’m sure,” Sirius said, not at all reassuringly.
“There was,” James defended. “You just wait, you faithless bastards. You’ll be at my wedding
rueling the day you doubted my ability to wear Evans down.”
This earned raucous laughter from the others, who quite honestly thought this was the funniest thing
any of them had ever heard, whether it was true or not.

“Today’s the day, Moony,” James said, rather than waking Remus like a normal person.
“The day for what?” Remus asked tiredly, rubbing his eyes.
“The day! Flowers have been ordered from Hogsmeade! Plans have been made! Today is the day of the Dumbledore prank!”
“Merlin,” Remus said. “Does it have to be?”
“Oh, I think so, Moony,” Sirius said, grinning at James. “I certainly think so.”
“Merlin,” Remus repeated, pulling his bedsheets over his head. “Peter, wake me when it’s over.”
Peter shook his head, grinning. “Absolutely not,” he said, because watching James and Sirius come up with their ridiculous ideas was, for him, more entertaining than just about anything else in the world.

“Moony, if it makes you and your Prefect sensibilities feel any better, you barely have to be involved. I just need you to help me organize three hundred roses in the exact shape, pattern, and colors of Dumbledore’s favorite hat.” James said, as if he was doing Remus a great favor with this.
“You and that hat,” Sirius said, ruffling James’s hair.
“Dumbledore and that hat!” James protested. “He wears it at least twice a week.”
The hat in question was deep blue and velvety, sprinkled in little glittery stars, and almost as tall as Dumbledore’s beard was long, and had been the subject of many, many of the Marauders’ pranks.
“You can’t perform a simple reorganizing spell by yourself?” Remus asked, knowing full well this stood no chance of deterring James.
“My capability is not in question here, my dear Moony, but rather my timing.”
“Which has, in the past, been remarkably terrible.” Sirius commented, and James smacked him in the back of the head.
“Shut up,” James said lightly. “Yours is no better.”
“I never pretended it was,” Sirius replied. “So, Moons? Will you do it?”
“No,” Sirius, James, and Peter said in unison.
“Didn’t think so,” Remus rolled out of bed and followed the others down to breakfast. “Now, enlighten me as to where these flowers will be delivered?”
“Right outside the castle,” James replied. “Where McGonagall makes us wait before we go to Hogsmeade. It’s your day to watch the Map, anyway.”
Remus nodded. The parchment was neatly folded in the pockets of his robes, and whenever he held it, he was always somewhat surprised by it. He was still awed by it, even more so than he was by his friends becoming Animagi for him, because they’d created the map all together, from nothing. It had flaws, and it didn’t always work, but it was magic and they’d made it, start to finish.
“Right, Remus said. “And I expect you won’t be providing me with a viable excuse for the presence of three hundred flowers?”
“Well, you can’t expect us to do all the work for you,” Sirius replied.
“Of course,” Remus said, laughing.

Remus loitered outside the castle, checking his watch every so often, pausing in his pacing to mutter his annoyance at James and Sirius, but when a thestral-drawn carriage approached him, his complaints ceased, and he sighed at the massive amounts of dark, glittering blue flowers in front of him. He could see the thestrals, now, and was suddenly aware that he didn’t really know why, that he didn’t know when he’d first seen death.
“Everything paid for?” he asked the thestral. He assumed it was; it would’ve been an unusual stroke of cruelty for James to force Remus to pay for their prank. “Right.”
He pulled James's mirror out of his pocket -- Sirius had the other, and had nicked it from James so that Remus wouldn't be overwhelmed by guilt. Where his own reflection should’ve been, he saw Sirius's handsome face, and smiled. "Oi, mate," Sirius said. "Did you get the flowers?"
“Yes, Sirius,” Remus said, with some relief. “Where am I taking these?”
“Great Hall, of course,” Sirius said distractedly, his eyes briefly flitting up from the mirror. “There’s no one in there, right?” Remus pressed.

“Well, Filch,” Sirius said. “But Peter’s taking care of that.”

“How?” Remus wanted to know. Somewhere behind Sirius, he thought he heard the distinctive shrieking of Peter coupled with the horrified yowls of Mrs. Norris. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“I do love how nonchalant you’ve become about our blatant rule-breaking,” Sirius said, in what would have been an affectionate tone if he weren’t clearly being sarcastic.

“I am being as nonchalant as the situation will allow,” Remus replied and put the mirror back in his pocket.

He turned towards the pyramid of flowers, taking a deep breath before levitating all three hundred roses into the air. They followed along behind his head as he walked, refusing to make eye contact with a single confused passerby.

“Remus, what on earth are you doing?” Calliope, the very friendly Hufflepuff who seemed to invariably catch Remus at his most embarrassed, asked.

“Official business for Professor Dumbledore,” he said, not looking at her. This, he tried to reassure himself, was not exactly a lie. Technically, the business he was involved with did relate to Dumbledore, if not directly.

“Oh, alright!” Calliope said brightly. “Oh, and tell James hello for me!”

“Will do,” Remus said, ducking his head and continuing on his rose-scented way, petals falling and leaving a trail behind him.

“Lupin?” Snape asked, sneering.

The usual sense of panic accompanied by the sight of Snape’s face was dulled slightly by the knowledge that Remus had the power to drop three hundred roses on Severus’s greasy head.

“Severus,” Remus said pleasantly. “Are you on rounds this morning?”

“I am, in fact,” Severus said.

“Calliope just went that way, if you’re — “

“I saw her,” Severus said calmly. “She said you were… ‘acting on Dumbledore’s orders’?”

“Y-yes,” it was taking all of Remus’s concentration to keep from dropping the flowers.

“Listen very carefully,” Severus said, stepping close to Remus. “If whatever it is that you’re doing has anything to do with Lily Evans and the reason that she won’t talk to me, I swear to Merlin I will make you suffer for the rest of your miserable, pathetic, disgusting little werewolf life.”

Remus’s breath caught in his throat at the word ‘werewolf.’ “You can’t — “

“I don’t think a creature in your position can tell me what I can’t do,” Severus said, the end of his hooked nose dangerously close to Remus's face.

“Dumbledore — “

“Dumbledore doesn’t have the power to stop me,” Severus said.

Remus gently let the flowers fall to the floor and looked at Severus. “Don’t threaten me, Severus,” he said, impossibly softly, seeming so much older than he was. He didn’t want to have to be brave. He didn’t want to have to be the monster that he sometimes thought he was. He didn’t.

“And what? You’re going to stop me? You might be brilliant, but you’re a soft touch, Lupin.”

Remus inhaled deeply, levitated his flowers, and walked away.

“Walk away, Lupin,” he told himself aloud as he made his way towards the Great Hall. “Just walk away. You’re not going to accomplish anything by getting into fights with Severus Snape.”

“What’s this about Snape?” Sirius asked, appearing seemingly from nowhere.

“Ah, nothing,” Remus said. “I brought the flowers.”

“Excellent,” Sirius grabbed Remus’s hand and kissed it. “Nicely done.”

“Are Prongs and Wormtail in the Hall?” Remus asked.

Sirius nodded. His eyes were bright and focused, but perhaps not fully on the prank.

“Care to help me with these?”

Sirius nodded, waving his wand. The flowers began to file one-by-one through the doors to the Great Hall.
“Ah,” James said. He was sitting cross-legged on one of the tables in the vast and empty Great Hall. “They’re lovely. Nice work, Moons.”

Remus couldn’t help but smile — things were just like that with James and Sirius, sometimes. “I didn’t do anything,” he muttered.

“That’s exactly what we’ll tell McGonagall if she tries to give out detentions,” James said, as if he was doing Remus an enormous favor.

“Thanks, mate,” Remus said sarcastically. “Much appreciated.”

“No need to take that tone with him, Moony,” Sirius said.

“Yeah, Moons, only trying to ease your Prefect conscience.”

“Stop, both of you,” Remus said. “Prefect Remus isn’t here right now. He’s on vacation somewhere in the Bahamas, not getting involved with any unwarranted mischief making in the slightest.”

“Send him our love,” Sirius commented, and James laughed delightedly.

“Moons, what do you say? Help me with this?”

Remus, Sirius, James, and Peter lifted their wands in unison, and the room was filled with flying, spinning flowers all arranging themselves into a large cone shape, remarkably similar to Dumbledore’s hat.

“Ah,” James said. “Good work, boys. Now there’s the small matter of making all this disappear until Dumbledore arrives for dinner.”

“Small?” Peter echoed, daunted. One complicated spell per day was usually more than enough for him. Prank-wise, he preferred more practical approaches, like flooding bathrooms or filling desks with frog spawn.

“Minor, nearly.” James dismissed. “C’mon.”

“Er.” Remus said. “Prongs, not to question your mischief-making genius, but how exactly are we planning on doing this?”

“I’m certain that we’ll figure it out as we go,” James said, which was his favorite way of telling the Marauders that he already had a plan and was neglecting to tell them.

“Oh, Prongs, you’re thinking that —” Sirius began, everything clicking into place.

“Yes, exactly —!” James said. “And —“

“Brilliant —“

“I know, isn’t it —“

“And we could —“

“That’s what I was thinking as well!”

“Isn’t that —“

“Bloody brilliant, old McGoggles would be proud —“

“Will be proud, more like, once she sees —“

“Yes!”

“What?” Remus and Peter asked in unison.

“One, two, three,” Sirius and James said in unison. “Wingardium Leviosa,”

The piles and piles of flowers rose into the air, nearly touching the ceiling. “Wait — James, you aren’t —“

James pulled the invisibility cloak from the pocket of his robes.

“Prongs,” Remus said, with a long-suffering sigh. “You don’t really think this is going to —“

James levitated the cloak up over the flowers and, with a mild sticking charm, fastened it to the underside of the flowers. “It’s going to work,” he said confidently, grinning broadly. “Look.”

And yes, from directly beneath the invisible flowers, it almost looked like there was nothing there.

“Now what?” Peter asked, awestruck as he always was by James and Sirius’s brilliance.

“Now, my dear Wormtail, we wait,” Sirius replied.

“Here?”

“It’s only an hour. I’m sure we can occupy ourselves somehow.” James paused. “And before you ask, Sirius, that doesn’t involve snogging Remus, because we’re not third years throwing themselves at each other, and we’re better than that.”

“We are not.” Sirius said indignantly.
“Well,” Remus said. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”
James and Peter groaned in unison.
“Oi,” James said, remembering. “Is it just me, or is Snape looking oilier than usual today?”
Peter glanced at the closed doors to the Great Hall. “Haven’t seen him.”
“I passed him on my way to Astronomy,” Sirius feigned a shudder. “I swear, his hair was dripping.”
“The greasiest hairdo award goes to Snivellus, to no one’s surprise,” James said in his best
Quidditch-commentator voice.
“You’d think he’d at least take a bath every once in a while,” Peter said. “He’s a Prefect, and Prefect
bathrooms are glorious — not that I’ve ever nicked the password off Prongs, or anything, of course.”
“Of course,” the others echoed in unison.
“I know,” James said. “It’s almost as if he’s given up on life since Evans dropped his sorry arse.”
“Surely you’re not referring to the same incident in which she said she’d prefer the Giant Squid to
you?” Sirius asked dryly. “As I recall, that ended no better for you than it did for our Snivelly.”
“At least I still bother to wash my hair,” James said. “And my face, for that matter. He’s grown a bit
of a beard, have you noticed?”
James’s chin, in the past months, had grown a slight stubbly beard, which the others decided not to
mention.
“Yes,” Sirius said at length. “It’s spiky and horrid, and if I didn’t loathe the idea of touching Snape’s
greasy face, I would pluck every one of those hairs out myself.”
“There should be a petition,” James said.
“For Dumbledore to enforce personal hygiene regulations? I second that motion,” Sirius said.
“But Sirius, that might force you to cut your hair,” Peter said.
“I’ll cut my hair when the great McGiggles herself threatens me at scissor-point, and only then,”
Sirius replied, as if he’d thought extensively about this.
James snorted.
A distinct peal of laughter echoed from beyond the doors, and Mafalda Hopkirk pushed her way in,
flanked by a few of her friends. She blushed, as usual, when she saw the Marauders, and even more
when she noticed they all had their wands pointed directly at the ceiling.
“Oh!” she cried, a thought having just occurred to her. “Are you doing another prank?”
“Perhaps,” Peter replied.
“Can we help?”
“No,” James said.
“Absolutely not,” Sirius added.
“But you’ll see soon enough.” Remus said, as kindly as was possible with the given circumstances.
Students began to fill the Great Hall, and the Marauders exchanged one of their Looks.
“Now?” Peter mouthed.
“Great Merlin, Peter, not yet. Dumbledore’s not even here,” Sirius hissed across the table.
The teachers filed in and sat down all at once, signaling to the students that they could start eating.
“Now?” Peter asked anxiously. “I’m hungry!”
“Alright, fine, now,” James said. “One, two, three..”
They lowered their wands at once, and three hundred blue roses came crashing to the floor with an
almighty sound that made the chandeliers swing from side to side.
James summoned his broomstick from his dormitory, and it flew into his hand after a moment as he
strode towards the flowers, mounted his broom, and sped directly ahead towards Dumbledore. He
stopped in midair, just in front of Dumbledore, and held his wand next to his mouth as an amplifier.
“Professor Dumbledore,” he said.
“Yes, Mr. Potter?” Dumbledore said, already chuckling slightly.
“Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?”
The Great Hall burst into laughter, and James grinned with just one corner of his mouth.
“I’m flattered, Mr. Potter, but,” Dumbledore laughed, and as James made brief eye contact with
McGonagall she tried for a stern, disapproving look, which was entirely unsuccessful. “I’m afraid
you’re just not quite my type, shall we say.”
James glanced from side to side at the hysterically laughing Great Hall, clapped a hand over his heart, and fell backwards onto a hat-shaped bed of roses. The Marauders materialized around him and carried him away from the scene, glitter and midnight blue petals trailing in their wake.
"It’s Halloween, mates!" James declared, on a morning which was very specifically not Halloween.
"It’s not, actually," Remus said dryly, not looking up from his homework. He waved his wand and his tea, levitating next to him, drifted over to his mouth so he could drink it.
"I know that," James said, sounding affronted. "It's next week."
"And, shockingly enough, not today," Sirius mused, much like Remus, not giving James the time of day. "I do wish you'd shut up about it. Our Halloween prank has been in the works for months."
James glared at him. "I meant," he said, with an air of one very much put-up-on. "Does anyone have ideas for Halloween this year?"
"Other than, I assume, covering every available surface in chocolate frogs?" Sirius asked.
"I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear that," Remus said.
"Don't let your badge get in the way of a bit of fun," Peter complained.
"My idea of fun happens to involve conforming to school rules," Remus said. The others snorted.
"Alright," Remus admitted. "It's really more disobeying authority in a slightly less obvious way."
"Actually, I wasn't talking about the prank," James said, a gleam in his eyes. "I was thinking more along the lines of costumes."
"Ooo!" Peter's hand shot into the air. "We could be ghosts!"
"We could be...the founding four of Hogwarts?"
"We could be pumpkins?"
"Pumpkin Pasties?" Peter asked hopefully.
"No, Peter, just pumpkins," James clarified.
"Oh."
"We could be merpeople?" Remus suggested.
"You're joking, you don't want to tick off the merpeople. They'll eat you," James threatened. Remus barely flinched.
"That's not true, they're very nice." Peter said.
"One bit your arm, once!" Sirius said.
"It was self defense!"
"Your arm turned green!"
"It was self defense!"
"We could be..." James hesitated. "Merlin, I think I may be out of ideas."
The others gasped in unison. "You never are!" Peter said, genuinely stunned where Remus and Sirius were sarcastic.
"Alas," James said. "I'm stumped."
"I'm not," Remus said, his mouth twisting into its usual wry smirk. He leaned over to whisper in Sirius's ear.
"Moons, you are just asking for trouble, aren't you?"
"Well, I never ask for it. Usually, you lot throw it at me."
"That's fair," Peter said diplomatically.
Remus laughed.
“So? Lupin, what’s the plan?”
Remus told them.

“This is brilliant,” James said. “Actually brilliant.”
“I know,” Remus said proudly.
James was practically glowing, beaming in his werewolf costume. It was hardly realistic, they’d agreed that it couldn’t be. After all, just because they’d done three lessons on werewolves once in third year didn’t make them experts, and they wouldn’t want anyone to think they had any experience as far as werewolves were concerned.
“I can already see Snape’s beady little eyes popping out of his head,” Sirius laughed.
“Are we sure that —” Peter asked, because he couldn’t stop seeing the worry behind Remus’s eyes.
“Yes,” Remus interrupted. He felt dangerous in a novel sort of way, dangerous in a freeing way.
“We’re sure. I’m absolutely certain.”
“Alright,” Peter said cautiously. He was always so aware of it, when he was being annoying, when James and Sirius were questioning his worth the way he questioned it every day. “Sure.”
They showed up to the Gryffindor Halloween party that night in full costume. Lily, of course, who knew Remus’s secret, laughed aloud. Others observed the Marauders’ costumes with cautious amusement, each privately feeling as if they’d been left out of some sort of inside joke.
“No fire whiskey this year?” Sirius asked, sounding somewhat disappointed.
“Not on your life. Last year was a disaster,” Kingsley rumbled.
“Oi, Kingsley,” James said jovially. “Isn’t this your last Halloween at Hogwarts?”
“So it is.”
“You wouldn’t happen to want to join in on our Halloween prank, would you?”
“I am Head Boy,” Kingsley said, although no one at any point in his young life would have described him as a boy. Even as a child he’d been so unfailingly stoic that people had been calling him ‘sir’ for years. “On principle alone, I stand against pranks of all variations.”
“Right you are,” Sirius said with a grin.
“It could be a secret,” James persisted.
“All variations, Potter,” Kingsley repeated slowly, as if James might not have heard him the first time.
“Just as a gesture,” James added.
“A token of our appreciation for all your hard work,” Sirius cut in.
“Right,” Kingsley said, cutting his eyes at Marlene, who was sitting beside him and beaming.
“Thanks.”
“He’s not going to take us up on it, is he?” Peter asked.
“I very much doubt it.” Remus replied.
“Your optimism never fails to astound me,” Sirius said dryly. “He’ll take us up on it.”
“They always do.” James said.
“Who’s they?” Remus asked. “No, really, when have we ever done this before?”
“I dunno,” James and Sirius said in unison, and Remus sighed.
“Of course not.”
“Pumpkin juice?” Lily asked Remus.
“Er, yeah, thanks,” Remus accepted a glass from her. “What…exactly, are you supposed to be?”
Lily was wearing what appeared to be a giant sunflower.
“I’m honoring my mother and Mary,” she said, with her kind of grace, that spoke of sadness but only in the moments when they weren’t really paying attention. “They both loved sunflowers.”
“So do I, now,” James whispered to Sirius, who rolled his eyes.
Marlene looked momentarily sad, her features rearranging themselves around her grief. This was the first Halloween without Mary MacDonald. This was the first, and every Halloween after it would be the same.
After telling a story about Quidditch practice to Gillian Hartly’s much more attractive friend, Dorcas
Meadows, James pulled out his wand and began casting little bursts of colored lights in the sky. The Halloween feast had ended, his stomach was warm and full, and yet there was this curious longing inside him, thick and sticky, like molasses.

“Prongs,” Sirius said. He was sprawled out on the couch with Remus practically in his lap, but his eyes were following James and his flirting. “You alright, mate?”

“Fine,” James said. “I'm fine. I just… I need a moment.” He was up the stairs to their dormitory in an instant, dynamic, quick as ever.

“It's Mary,” Lily told Remus. “She would be here. That's what the problem is.”

“How do you know there’s a problem, Evans?” Sirius asked dryly.

Lily flushed, but held her ground. “Potter doesn’t touch his hair when he’s upset. He hasn’t so much as ruffled it all night.”

Sirius and Remus exchanged a significant, unmissable look.

“What was that about?” Lily asked.

“Nothing,” Sirius said.

“Nothing at all,” Remus added.

“Peter, what was that about?” Lily asked. Peter was carefully carving a pumpkin, not really paying attention.

“I'm sure I don’t know,” he said cheerfully. “I imagine it was about you and James.”

“What about me and Potter?” Lily arched a dangerous red eyebrow. There was more fire, more bravery, more energy in that one eyebrow than Peter thought he had in his whole body.

“The fact that you’re madly in love, of course,” Sirius said. Peter breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“We are — what! We are not in love! Madly or otherwise!” Lily said, from calm to furious in an instant.

“You are,” the Marauders, sans James, said in unison.

“I — well, Potter’s — he’s insufferable!”

“So are you,” Marlene said.

“I am not!” Lily said, although a little smile was quirking up around her pink lips.

“When it comes to Prongs, you are,” Sirius said.

“No one asked you, Black!” Lily snapped, and Sirius grinned.

“Oh, she’s lost it now,” Peter said.


“She does blush quite fantastically,” Remus admitted.

“Makes you wonder what other things she does fantastically, doesn’t it?” When Peter only stammered out a yes, Sirius scowled.

“See, if Prongs were here, that would’ve gotten a terrific laugh,” he said. “I suppose I’ll have to settle for Pettigrew, though, because our Moony won’t lower himself to the level of crude humor.”

“That’s not quite fair,” Remus said diplomatically.

“It’s true, though,” Sirius persisted, and Peter nodded fervently.

Lily sighed and rolled her eyes, but she didn’t say anything. Her face was burning hot, red, embarrassed, and she couldn’t imagine why she kept letting them get to her, these boys who, despite what they might think, were really no better than anyone else.

“She’s a pretty one, isn’t she?” Sirius was remarking, when Lily’s face had stopped burning enough for her to focus on the conversation. “If Prongs wasn’t hopelessly obsessed with her, I might go for her.”

“Thanks,” Remus said. “Nice to know.”

“Moons, please, you know you’ll always have my heart,” Sirius grinned.

“I’m certain that talking about my physical appearance is just riveting,” Lily said, her jaw clenched in that angry-embarrassed way of hers. “But wouldn’t it be more productive to change the topic to something else?”

“I love it when she gets angry,” Sirius said to Peter.

“Just leave her alone, won’t you?” Remus asked.

“It’s all in good fun, isn’t it, Evans?” Sirius asked.
Lily nodded, blushing again. “ Depends on your definition of fun.” Surely there was no purpose in being angry when Remus wasn’t making much of an effort to stop Sirius’s taunting. Surely it was really all in good fun. Surely if it had been serious, Remus, her friend, would have told Sirius to quit it with much more force.

James returned a few seconds later, his eyes slightly red.

“You alright, mate?” Sirius asked.

“Brill,” James replied.

“Potter, have you been smoking?” Lily asked incredulously.

“So?”

“Nothing, I suppose,” Lily said.

James was looking at her and she could feel it. She could feel his eyes on her face, in her hair. It was simultaneously worse and better than every kiss she’d ever had. He wasn’t even touching her, but it felt like he was.

James looked away and lit another cigarette.

Lily stood, her hands shaking. “ Smoke all you like, but please don’t do it in front of me,” she said, storming up the stairs.

“Potter, you prat,” Marlene said, snatching the cigarette from his hands. “ Her mother died of lung cancer, like, less than a year ago.”

“Yeah,” Cindy, one of their other roommates, said. “ Honestly, Potter. Use your brain if you’re so in love with her.”

“I am not in love with Evans,” James said defensively. “ She’s insufferable! Annoying!”

“Beautiful,” Peter said. “ She’s beautiful.”

“I detest her,” James growled. “ She can never just mind her own business.”

“Neither can you,” Peter, Remus, and Sirius said in unison.

“ She’s not even — I don’t — she’s irritating. She cares too much about rules.”

“Merlin, you really don’t know Lily at all, do you?” Marlene asked.

“I do,” James said. “ I know she thought it was hilarious when we were punished for bewitching every attendance list to say McGonagall’s name over and over again.”

“That was a moment of brilliance on our part,” Sirius mused.

“Oh, no, she didn’t think the bewitching was funny. She just thought it was hilarious when McGonagall called you out on it.”

James scoffed.

The prank took place at the stroke of midnight. The Marauders, as hidden as they were able to be underneath the Cloak of Invisibility, set about lining the floors of the castle with chocolate frogs (with help from some overeager first years, who were, as in past years, obsessed with the Marauders and all that they stood for.)

"Filch is on the third floor," Remus said, glancing at the map.

"So?"

"One floor down and he'll see our work before it's complete." Remus warned.

"Peter! Diversion?" James snapped his fingers for Peter, who was lying on the floor trying to extend a still-packaged chocolate frog into a hard-to-reach-corner.

"Of course," Peter said, checking over his shoulder before shifting into rat form and scurrying away. The others were cautiously silent until they heard Filch's cry of "Damn and blast it, you --"

"Alright, we're clear," Remus gave the alert to the first years, who continued on their way with their schoolbags filled to the brim with chocolate frogs.

Less than an hour later it was done -- rows and rows of chocolate frog cartons piled upon every surface of the second floor of the castle.

"Are we ready?" Peter asked nervously.

James checked the time. "Let's go to bed, mates," he said. "We've got to time this perfectly for tomorrow."

"For when?"
"For, my dear Remus, the very moment that the love of our lives Minny McGee walks down these stairs."
"She won’t like that," Peter commented.
"So?" Sirius and James asked in gleeful unison.
Remus and Peter exchanged a look. "Nothing. Let's do this."
They all huddled closer under the cloak -- it was more awkward than it had been in past years, with James's elbow frequently colliding with Peter's nose, and Remus and Sirius standing so close together that it was hard to tell whose feet belonged to who.

"Shut up, Prongs," Remus groaned, rolling over onto his back.
"What, I’m just saying. Isn’t being bisexual kind of like being a werewolf?"
"Seeing as I’m both, not really," Remus said, raising his eyebrows.
"No, I’m intrigued. James, explain your thinking," Sirius said.
"I mean, it’s kind of like — y’know, you’re ‘normal’ and you like girls some of the time, and sometimes you only like blokes, and you’re like —"
"A horrible, murderous, slavering monster?" Remus said. He could joke about it more than he’d been able to when he was younger, but his eyes still went flat and grey sometimes when he talked about it, how he really felt about himself.
"Well, Merlin, when you put it like that it sounds terrible," James remarked.
"It does, doesn’t it," Remus said, his mouth twisting. He knew James hadn’t meant to insult him, knew James wasn’t even thinking about it, but it still stung. He wondered, briefly, if it would ever stop stinging.
"Jim, I think you may have hurt our Remus," Sirius said, and Remus’s frown went deeper. Things were always worse when Sirius and James were on the same side of things.
"Nonsense. Lupin’s made of sterner stuff."
"You sound exactly like your mother," Peter said gleefully, and James threw a pillow at him.
"You take that back, Pettigrew. You take that back this instant."
"Still sound like your mother," Peter said.
"I’m hurt," James said.
"You shouldn’t be. Your mother’s ten times the man you are," Sirius said, and James threw his book at him.
"I expected better from you, Padfoot," he remarked. "Is that how you talk to your own brother?"
"Nah," Sirius said. "When I talk to my brother it usually involves a great deal more swearing and shouting, to be completely honest with you."
The other Marauders executed one of their perfect, simultaneous eye rolls.

"Bet you ten galleons that —"
"Unrealistic. I can barely afford candy from the trolley witch. Next?" Remus said, as calmly as was possible, although his eyes shifted away from Sirius’s at the mention of money.
"Five galleons says that —"
"The most you’ll get off me is five Knuts. Maybe," Remus interrupted yet again.
"Fine," Sirius sighed. "Five sad, rusty Knuts say that James is going to try to charm that Snitch he’s throwing to sing songs to Evans."
"Interesting," Remus replied. "Five Knuts says that when he does, he’ll do what he always does: panic and make Evans angry."
"Oh, I’m not betting on that," Sirius said. "Only a fool would bet in favor of James Potter."
"That’s harsh," Remus remarked.
"But not inaccurate," Sirius said.
Peter, who never would have even jokingly said an unkind word about James, was silent. "Five Knuts says that she’ll see the truth and fall madly in love with him?"
"You’re never going to win that one," Sirius remarked, wrapping an arm around Remus's shoulders. "I know," Peter said miserably.
“It’s alright, Pete. Someone has to believe in them.”
“Why?” Sirius asked.
“Because Prongs has been pining after her for years. He’s too stubborn to let all of that mean nothing,” Remus said.
“He could start by being nicer to her and her friends,” Peter recommended under his breath.
“Highly unrealistic,” Remus commented.
“I don’t see why,” Peter persisted.
“Yes, but that’s because you spend all your time watching Prongs and none of it actually learning,” Sirius replied, leaning back in his seat.
Peter was silent, and Sirius’s trademark smirk lit up his face.
“Cat got your tongue, Wormtail?”
Peter paled. “C-c-cat?”
Remus looked between Peter and Sirius, almost too rapidly to be noticeable. A small smile was playing at the corner of his mouth.
“Pardon?” Sirius asked.
“What? Nothing!”
“Did you just —” Sirius let out a breathy chuckle and slapped his knee. “Merlin’s blue bollocks, Petey, don’t tell me you’re afraid of cats.”
“I — no! I’m — well, I wasn’t —” Peter was stammering, sweat beading on his round face. “I wasn’t! But you know, rats are small, and Mrs. —” he shuddered. “Mrs. Norris is just so evil.”
Remus snorted into his book, doing a relatively bad job of pretending not to listen to their conversation, and watched as he won the bet. James had fumbled a catch in front of Lily and was doing his best to play it off as purposeful (failing horrifically, of course.) Remus pocketed his money with a sense of vaguely misplaced pride.
"Oi," Lily said, more at James than directly to him. He was trying to throw the Snitch at her head, but it didn't seem interested in flying that way, and continuously flitted around her shoulders, leaving him to grab desperately, tense and careful that he wouldn't accidentally brush even something so innocent as her arm. "Haven't you ever heard of leaving a girl alone?"
James seemed to hesitate. "Er...no."
"Really, Prongs," Sirius said under his breath. "She left the world of comebacks open, and you went with, 'er...no'?"
"Interesting," Lily replied, making eye contact with the air slightly to the left of James, but not with him. "You ought to try it. It's much more fun than pestering the same girl incessantly year after year. It's been five years, Potter. Aren't you tired?"
"Not in the slightest!" James said brightly. "Any chance you'll take me up on a trip to Hogsmeade this year?"
"God, you are insufferable," she said. "No, I will not."
"Ah, c'mon, Evans," he said.
She smiled and shook her head. "Not this time."
"Perhaps next time then?" James said, unperturbed.
"We'll see," she said, and in an instant she was up the hill on her way over to Marlene and the rest of her friends.
"Are you blushing?" Marlene giggled.
"I most certainly am not!" Lily said, although her face had gone a terrific red. "I...I don't know what you mean."
"Merlin, you're not actually considering it, are you?"
"I..." Lily shook her head. "No, of course not. He's a tosser, anyway. Everyone knows about that awful business with Gillian Hartly."
Marlene seemed to consider this for a moment. "You should say yes."
"To Potter? Can you imagine what such a thing would do to his ego? He'd be insufferable."
"He already is," Marlene commented. "See, you could hardly go wrong."
"Don't try to talk me into this," Lily said.
"He wrote you over the summer, didn't he?"
"Once or twice. Condolences, mostly."
"He sent you flowers."
"How do you know?"
"Severus told me he saw the flowers through your window and knew that they had to be from Potter."
"How would he know that?" Lily asked, feeling a combination of regret and discomfort at the mention of Severus.
"Because he tried to steal them and the vase stung his hands. That reeks of Potter, doesn't it?"
"Yes," Lily agreed, somewhat resignedly. "Most things in this place do."

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