Summary

Sirius slowly realizes how much of his memory was frozen away in Azkaban, while Remus nobly refuses to tell him anything and Severus swoops around maliciously doing Molly's dishes and sabotaging Sirius's h/c NEWT with surly panache.

Notes

Disclaimer: Unprofitable fanwork. Cover image adapted from stockfreephotos dot com.

Warnings for pain, alcohol, scorching bits, tense-play (yes, it's intentional), AUness, language and wizards completely being completely oblivious to (or disinterested in) muggle relational norms.

Notes: Please consider this any permutation of fic, tribute, swiss cheese, divergence, noncompliance, and straight-up mild-to-wild AU that lets you suspend disbelief (anyway, hello, wands?) and enjoy the ride. Concepts from DH in particular, especially backstory, will be used selectively. This fic works from a conception of HPverse formed between HBP and DH; information from DH such as people's relative ages may not be taken into account.

This story is complete, although I'm not sure yet how many chapters I'll divide it into. It was going to be longer, but I've had a tough year and it hadn't grown in ages, so I made the call. I hope to do more with this storyline, as not every thread it raises has been tied off so
far. It is entirely possible that if people seem interested it'll be good for the old inspiration, although I can't make any promises.
In Hot Water, Feeling No Pain

"Your cousin's in hysterics," Snape answered him impatiently. This did not, in his opinion, answer the question. Snape's hands were cannibal-soup-red in the hot water, around the mottling stains of his work.

Sirius had to think for a minute about why he was noticing that. There wasn't really a why to it, though, and even the first flicker of a moment spent on Snape was more than enough.

Instead, then... his cousin? Arthur wouldn't be hysterical. Not like him in the least. Solid bloke, Arthur. Wonderful, unflappable Arthur. Nobody appreciated his beautiful girl like Arthur. Even if he wouldn't let Sirius sneak out to find out how badly she'd been squished when Hagrid had borrowed her on the last night that ever was. Cautious bastard.

"Maleficent," he was prompted, in the same impatient tone.

"Shun't call her that," he told the bastard aggrievedly. Talking to Snape, even in defense of Molly (who was an, okay, a not very good but definitely generous cook with at least two fine holy terrors to her credit, even if she was a bit of a nosy parker and a lot of a nag) was a much less valuable use of his time than thinking about his bike. It was really very rude of him, but that was ol' Sniv all over.

A flat, cool look washed over him. He wasn't particularly susceptible to arrogant sneers that could have come off his aunt's face at any time, and the lovely rosy fuzz around his head made ignoring it even easier. "It's her name. You're slurring."

He was not. Not in the least. "By hand," he pointed out, though, instead of arguing. Because, really, now that avoiding stupid discussions about his perfect diction had reminded him, why?

"By mouth," the snippy little squit quipped, and settled the wet plate into a drying rack.

"You are. The dinner plates. By hand," he repeated. "The hell, Snape?" Slow poison on his skin sinking into the ceramic or something, must be. They'd all be dead by pudding, and Sirius would have to explain abandoning Harry to James. Or, worse, Lily, the probably-harp-laden harpy.

"Perhaps, once you've stuck your head in the cistern, you'll think to wonder instead," he was snidely informed, "why Maleficent is in hysteries."

"You should try hisssssterreccs," Sirius informed him right back. "Do you good, tightarsed, buttoned-up."

"Excellent suggestion," Snape clipped off, and hurled the hot sponge at his head, where it stuck to his forehead for a moment before he caught it, leaving a spodge of vervain and rosemary scented bubbles. It dripped down his face, smelling of lemon verbena and rosemary. Molly, Sirius knew, used Mrs. Skowrer's, or Crockett's elbow grease. He tried to remember whether vervaine was used in any poisons; he was sure rosemary wasn't.
"I'll just go do that," Snape was viciousing on, as if anyone cared, "and you can finish here."

Pyrrhic victories were probably what cyanide tasted like, Sirius reflected, watching the tight, vanishing back. Such a sweet air about them, until they hit the tongue.

There was something terribly wrong here. Because usually it was Beaters who threw things at Chasers, right? He'd thrown lots of things at Sniv over the years, on and off of brooms, so maybe that was it.

No, Sniv was a hurler himself (and a biter, and a scratcher, and knee-er, and a kick-you-in-the-face-er, and a try-to-claw-out-your-eyes-er) so that wasn't it.

It was because he appeared to be up to his wrists in really quite extraordinarily hot water. Huh. He wasn't sure when that had happened, but at least the cold water tap worked, because he was pretty sure that when he stopped feeling no pain he was, well, going to stop feeling no pain. There was really something wrong with that man, although this was not news. He was quite sure this was not within human levels of tolerance.

After a moment, the heat got past the soggy layers of his brain. Jerking back, he broke a mug. When Molly came running, red-eyed he pretended to be his favorite coz making a two-pronged attempt at Remus's affections. It had seemed like a good idea when he started.

Too long later—when the storm had passed, because Black blood is strong and Molly has it, and Black tornados smooth out into peace once they've run out of roar, if they're not bolted down to fester forever—he did, actually, ask.

The answer was a new torrent: choking dust and vicious ornaments! Thieving thieves with muddy boots and men who don't mind if they live worse than pigs and this house where magic barely makes a dent! Kreacher, Kreacher, Kreacher, perversion of all the daydreams of help an elf-raised mother of seven on one government salary has had since the starry honeymoon glaze wore off.

Kreacher was foul, of course, but Sirius has never had a particular problem with doing magic in the house. Magic came as harder these days as everything else, not any harder than when he'd been in the wind, eating on four legs out of bins but getting things done.

"That's why I keep asking you to help!" she told him, strident, with a definite note of storm-winds rising.

But she wasn't his mother. Not, therefore, obligated to stand still for the new tempest, he beat a hasty retreat before getting too tempted to shut her up by telling her she could sometimes make the formalities Snape took with her name behind her back seem apt. It would be a bad idea, not least because he was liable to spoil his suave and handsome image by tripping over his tongue.

In his more honest moments, he couldn't blame Sniv for having a down on nicknames, but Molly's real one was worse than his, and why be honest about Snape? Wouldn't be appreciated. He'd tell the man to have a heart, but that would have been like telling Voldemort to calm the fuck down and smell some roses, or telling Jamie to comb his hair. Some things just were never going to happen.

Drunk again? black eyes ask later. He knows his return glare is weak, is sapped. But there's nothing else for him to do, except what Molly orders. Pointless. Useless. What she wants is pointless. Let the filthy bones of the family show bare. Let everyone see the rot at its core. Let the house wear the death of the Blacks like a banner, until it collapses under the weight of unsupported centuries. It's impossible to understand why she fights it so hard; no one could ever want to live here. If the walls were gleaming and the furniture was clean and comfortable and aired, if there
were harmless yellow flowers on every table, the evil of the house would still creep into a man's bones, pluck at his hairs one by one, turn his muscles to lead and molasses.

These days, even Buckbeak smells like mold and damp wood.

*You're pathetic*, those eyes tell him, turning away from a successful negotiation with said hippogriff. Their owner's long hand, still sticky from raw meat despite a cursory wipedown, holds a pair of vials half-full of horsehair trimmings and feathers the hippogriff had graciously groomed out himself. And, different in a way that it almost makes him smirk himself to realize he can decipher, *You're a fool.*

It's almost, almost funny, as loose-limbed and numb as he feels, but he has the idea that he's missed a message. Missed something Snape thought was important for him to catch. But who cares what Snape thinks?

"Do you think he just never eats?" he asked Remus idly, when the chair the prat had been offered stood empty again, leaving Molly pretending so hard not to take it as a personal insult to her cooking that you'd have to be deaf, blind, and Kreacher not to know what she's thinking. "Some truth to those vampire rumors, eh?"

"He's a House head, Sirius," Remus answered mildly, most of his attention on Molly's platters in a way Sirius didn't like to think about, a veiled intensity in his eyes that calculated to the square centimeter how much food he could take without leaving others hungry or drawing attention.

One of the lesser reasons Wormfood had to have his head on a pike was so Sirius could have access to his own damn vault again. The Weasleys couldn't afford to support HQ, and Dumbledore's stipend always felt stretched, just-barely-enough. He was probably pinching it from the school's budget, which might have been another reason for Snape's attitude, as if that needed more fuel. Must be nice to be a Dark Lord with filthy-rich supporters. "He has to help supervise meals in the Great Hall."

"There are thirteen of 'em plus Dumbledore!" Sirius protested, meaning the faculty entire.

Remus only shrugged, asking rhetorically, "Have you ever seen Severus take anything less than seriously?"

" Aren't you tired of making excuses for him?" he demanded.

There's a flash in those pale eyes as Moony turns to look at him. For a moment, he feels an urge to cringe, show his throat, creep up and touch noses, and he doesn't know why. But then Remus grins (tiredly) at him. "Very," he says, and effectively distracts Sirius from the weariness behind his threadbare face by snitching a whole baked potato off Sirius's plate.

"Oi!"
Memories in monochrome

Chapter Summary

In which the keeper of the keys may have unlocked one of the bedrocks of victory. Or, fighting with ol' Sniv is an awesome distraction.

Chapter Notes

To remind you, this fic is not DH- or interview-compliant. Information given by the author after HBP, like Narcissa's age and EVERYTHING IN ANY FLASHBACK EVER, is taken with an entire salt lick.

Cold clammy air, making the heavy swelter of too many blankets welcome, darkness without a trace of parasitic fog resting gently on his eyelids like a cool compress, and Sirius still twitches with unease in his sleep.

*Stiff, heavy cloth cutting into his hands, its darkness protruding between his fingers like blood, and, oh, if only. Fingers warm, digging into bones like dry sticks, a birdlike heartbeat. The air thick with misery, dull with endings.*

*You going to tell me you actually cared about him?*

*Why waste my breath.*

*But that's what you want me to think! Go on, you slippery, lying bastard, tell me you loved him; I'll rip your throat out.*

*What an incentive. Maybe I'd brave it if I gave a fraction of a solitary damn the size of a speck of fly dirt what you—*

*GO ON, TELL ME, YOU—*

He reaches for the vanishing tail of the dream—blessed, blessed dream that bewildered but showed him no one's rotting, accusatory corpse. But it bleeds through filthy, ragged black curtains into rowing through treacle until every muscle aches and he's sifting foul algae through his teeth like a whale, easily, like breathing, until the algae settles into equally foul morning residue. The loose pulse of ocean drums pulses into a prosaic morning head.

It's nothing to how he feels ten minutes after Snape tosses him him a vial each of billywig poison and doxy sedative in one of the bedrooms and tells him, with a how-o-god-how-has-my-life-come-to-this look, "You could at least clean something useful." The resulting-from-the-result hexes aren't the problem, although Snape, whenever he's succeeded in provoking other people to attack him (which is almost always), has fought like a cornered wildcat the whole time Sirius has known him, ever since… Ever since…
In any case, it's not the hexes, it's the Look Remus gave him afterwards, the note in his fast, low voice as he pulls Sirius away.

Seeing Arthur give Snape a similar treatment might have helped more if Snape hadn't gotten stridently, gesticulatingly grousy at the man, flapping like a great black hen in that billowing, melodramatic way that Sirius only ever sees squawked at Arthur and Dumbledore these days.

It had used to be Lily who got that treatment, when they were little. Later, it had been Sweet Cousin Narcissa, Evan Rosier, Hagrid, and (on one memorable occasion he nonetheless can't quite seem to recall at the moment, but would be sure it had involved Rosier tousling Snape's hair if that hadn't been, eyurgh, unthinkable) the entire Slytherin Quidditch team.

He secretly suspects it's the closest the sad, sorry sod ever comes to being silly. Especially since both Arthur and Dumbledore react half the time, as Arthur does now, as though they can't decide between thumping him, ruffling his hair (bleurgh), stopping his mouth with a sweet, and apparating into another room to laugh into a pillow where he can't hear.

"Did Snape get in a fight on the train?" he asks Remus abruptly.

This is evidently a good tactic. Although it gets him a wholly new and different look, an insultingly concerned one, the suddenness of the switched tracks utterly derails the soft monsoon of reproach. "He doesn't use the Express, Sirius."

"No, I mean in first year." Remus's expression politely demands to know how he was expected to have divined that. "I was trying to remember the first time I saw him beg someone to beat him up." And had had just the most fleeting of impressions: brasswork and springy, tough, scuffed leather, walls rounded upwards.

"Feeling nostalgic, are we?" Remus asks lightly, something curiously intent around his eyes.

"Well, they all blur together," Sirius deflects airily. "Always the same, innit? Hiss, flail, hex, try to take your face off like a giant girl-viper."

Remus looks carefully at him for another moment, and then answers, "He did."

"With us?"
One more odd look, this time as though Sirius has confirmed something. And Sirius can't blame him; the moment he said it, he knew that he'd had no 'us' on that train, had had no real 'us' at Hogwarts for weeks, until he'd settled properly into his House, until James had believed him sincere. "With Malfoy."

That leaves Sirius's jaw hanging. Everyone has known for, it seems like, forever, that there's something strange and strong and really not quite right between Snape and Lucius Malfoy, something far more disharmoniously tangling than the friendly (but rocky) truce Sirius and Lils had eventually settled into when she'd gotten engaged to his best friend. Yet, of all the thousand possible objections, the one that pops out is, "Wasn't he a prefect our first year?"

The scene blooms behind his eyes as Remus says, "The kind who teases little girls, yes." Threadbare robes that reeked of moth-repelling rosemary, mint, cloves, and inexpert alterations from a long-ago witch's cut, the sagging hem of the right sleeve tremouring almost imperceptibly.

Everything but the smudged-ivory fingers swallowed like a small, faded charcoal shadow against the larger, inkier plush of Malfoy's obviously custom-made robes. A slice of greenish face, too young to be exactly hawk-nosed but already bony and hollow-eyed, sick with determination and dread, burning with waxy intensity and no trace of the trademark derisive sneer. Maybe he hadn't seen one before Sorting, not one worth copying.

That same face, splotchily reddened with effort and humiliation, propelled to the door for more terrorizing by an elmwood wand, bruised eyes full of hatred, terror, and a brooding, internal fury. Absolutely no trace of shock or surprise.

An intent little girl's face behind him, hands absently fixing one disarranged platinum lock, Black-grey eyes full of pleased calculation.

Sirius's senses swim with memory, with the mild shock of knowing he's remembering it in black and white not because it's a Padfoot memory but because it so very nearly was.

But Remus is going on, "I used to wonder what would have happened if Lily hadn't told Hagrid, or he hadn't told Severus he'd definitely make Gryffindor while Severus was still embarrassed at how badly that went."

And, again, just… too many things wrong with that to process. Most of them are so wrong that the only one he can focus on is his extreme skepticism that Snape has ever felt anything as mellow as 'embarrassment' in his life. There's that: the way his switch toggles between Generalized Irritation and Blood Feud That Lasts Beyond the Grave, with very little in the way of intermediacy or diversion. Then there's the irrational conviction Sirius has just developed that the blazingly unhinged child had not stumbled innocently into trouble but had, if anything, felt he was getting off more lightly than expected.

Far too much to process, and he doesn't even want to. It's more comfortable to flip off a, "Spat right on poor old Hagrid's boots, didn't he?" and steer Remus towards better distractions. Getting thrashed at Wizard Chess: the Drinking Game is a price he's willing to pay.

"Enabler," Snape jabs Remus, whose face closes up over a more than alcoholic flush and a flash of helplessness. But it's on the bat's way out.

And no one wakes his mother up. So, as days at Grimmauld go, it's not such a bad one. Just unutterably disturbing.
Mr. Classroom-go-boom

Chapter Summary

In which Severus is pwned by sad bunnies. Er, badgers.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: whumpage, language, tenseplay (last time I'll warn for that), divination (relax; it'll be over soon).

Chapter title in tribute to excessivelyperky's The Birthday Present.

OH AND! Severus's opinions about stay-at-home-mothers exclusively reflect his really stellar Slytherin talents in the diplomacy department and not the opinions of the author don't hunt me down plztkthx.

While stuck inside for months, stewing, with nothing much to do but obey an officious cousin or dull the nightmares and the roar of OUT, OUT, OUT with drink, probably the one thing you can do to drive yourself the craziest the fastest every day is read the paper.

So, naturally, Sirius did. Obsessively. Every column. Even the adverts, definitely the comics even if he didn't have context for the jokes, and especially, in even cold-war time, the obituaries. Everything.

**SCORPIO:** This is a week for recovering lost things and not recognizing what's right in front of you. Take advantage of your boss's good mood! Make some time to look up old friends and re-examine old ideas.

**CAPRICORN:** Take heart: the week will end. In the meantime, try to relax, rest up, and take one moment at a time. A calm, mindful, observant attitude may be your best helper. New challenges may bring up old wounds, but patience will see you through, if you stay in the moment.

**PISCES:** A loved one's troubles may tempt you to get involved, but staying out of the middle will be best for your mental health. Preserve your strength for future challenges and remember why your friends are your friends. Have faith, or even enjoy the ride!

"So," Remus had summarized with a bit of a smile, looking over his shoulder, "I should really stay out of the way when you try to hit on Emmy Vance again. With a recording Omniscope."

"No, save the 'scope for Sniv," Sirius had grinned, pointing. "Enjoy the ride, it says here; can I get on, too?"

"Why not," Remus had chuckled, looking a little depressed around the eyes.

The ride started in a burst of green floo-fire. It was not, in fact, funny.
It should have been. At first he'd thought it was, and he couldn't quite manage to feel sorry for the man, but... well... he hadn't seen Snape unconscious since school, and it had looked very different then. Back then he'd looked slack, like anyone else, but with a hint of scowl, and you could see that he was going to come up hexing and spitting like a wet cat, and quite possibly biting.

Now he looks... exhausted, with grooves worn into his face. Free of the voluminous black teaching robes and thick-soled boots that it had taken Sirius days to stop snickering to himself about in odd moments last year, he looks his actual scrawny size in the belted blue Infirmary gown. Not vulnerable, exactly, but blasted and sanded down like some old ruin. Still scowling, but more miserable than hostile, all burn-shiny-pink with grey undertones and bruised-looking with scorch marks and splash marks. His hair is limp and singed and damp, and that yellow-green oil-slick sheen it usually sports has been replaced by the blue highlights that really black hair (like Sirius's own) gets.

He still looks like he'll come awake snarling, but now it's the look Moony gets when there aren't any humans around to attack but the one inside him. He looks at least sixty—which, Sirius realizes suddenly, he always does, but his completely unwarranted hauteur usually stops everyone noticing. The three of them aren't even pushing forty, really, which is a more horrible than a hopeful thought.

"What happened?" Remus asks Dumbledore, who's carried Snape through the floo with Snape's arm draped around his shoulders and is now easing him into a mobilicorpus. He sounds a little awed.

"Fifty billion fucking points each from fucking Ravenpuff," is probably what Snape growls slurrily without waking up, his painstakingly acquired WWN accent and venomous civility eaten alive by the old northern burr. Manchester or Cumbria or someplace like that, only more pinched. He remembers Narcissa being indignant about Snivvy and his lack of floo having to take the overnight all the way down to London just to take the Express north again to Scotland, remembers scowling as she and Rosier and (later) Reg filthied themselves by drilling an embarrassed but determined Sniv with variable patience, out on the grounds, surrounded by green grass and the notebooks spilling over with crabbed handwriting they were doubtless getting access to in exchange.

Cissy, he recalls, had at least got the boot in by making him read out Nature's Nobility for his accent's sake. This seemed to have become something of a joke for Sniv and Reg in later years, though, complete with Slughorn-plummy tones and pious gesticulation. It had gotten them...what? Thumped? Hexed? Dissension in the silver-green; James had been delighted; but what had happened?

He has a flash of memory though; of hearing that voice speak in that way, of delighting in the little climber's roots showing. It is on the funny side, the way his native voice is nearly a dark poisoned-silk echo of Hagrid's bluffer, cheerier, more westward tones. He can't remember, though, why that thought had felt, before, so viciously satisfactory.

Dumbledore coughed in amusement, patted Severus's limp hand reassuringly, and told him, "Naturally, my boy," adding, to Remus, "I do hope that didn't take."

"Why's he here?" Sirius asked, summoning belligerence. It helped, even if the object of his vitriol doesn't seem to have been Harry, for once, that Snape even wanted to lash out at helpless schoolchildren in his sleep.

"Ah, well, we've had a bit of a to-do, you see," Dumbledore gave every sign of explaining, although you couldn't rely on that with him. "The infirmary's quite full, and he can't rest in his rooms due to the state of the dungeons. Obviously this is not the ideal location, but I can hardly
send him home, since no one lives there during term."

Sirius swallowed that unhappily. He'd have liked to say it's wasn't fair that he should be saddled, without even being asked, with providing hospitality to the one person he hates almost as much as Pe—as Wormheart (Voldemort is a dark pall over Britain in a weird pseudo-reptilian body who Sirius has never met personally, too sick and alien and foul to be hated as one hates people), but he had offered up his home to the Order. No matter how much repellant the thought, Snape is a contributing member. In a last-ditch attempt, "If Madame Pomfrey can't look after him, shouldn't he be at St. Mungo's?"

"Alas," he was informed sadly, "we can't rely on the Mark remaining quiescent during his stay. Even if we could, I'm afraid too many of the older healers and management personnel remember the effects of his earlier work in the last war. He isn't treated well there, no matter how many of the interns and younger mediwizards have learned to respect him." There was a moment's pause, as everyone mentally translated respect him into soil their pants at his very shadow.

Dumbledore added, reflective and twinkling, "It's also possible that he may have annoyed some of the hospital's in-house brewers at the last meeting of MESP. The Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers," he explained, seeing Sirius's blank look.

Oh, just possible. Looking willing to be diverted, Remus asked, "What did he say?"

Dumbledore coughed again, and told them, "According to an old friend, he waxed a trifle bitter and unpatriotic, more than a trifle publicly, over the latest census." In response to Remus's look of rapt and expectant amusement, he went on in gently entertained despair, "It seems that Britain, with very few exceptions, has only turned out one Potions Master every twenty to forty years since industrialization, and that over ninety percent of new professional potions makers this year—and, indeed, significant percentages of new tailoring, interior-decoration, and catering workers—are empty-nest witches making a second or third career of skills they've practiced while spending eleven or more years exclusively as homemakers."

In response to everyone's baffled looks, "I gather he derided the national character of our children as devoid of steadiness, patience, and discipline—this, naturally, was tailored to appeal to their mothers, many of whom were present in the capacity of commercial brewers, in a request for instruction made to the Chinese chapter. I'm afraid it's likely that the rant on the folly of women who think they can let their hard-learned skills languish to be picked up unrusted later and the husbands whose laziness and presumption encourages wives to so waste themselves didn't help as much as he may have hoped it might."

Remus was stifling a laugh behind his palm by this point, and choked out, "Oh, dear."

"I'm told I owe Alessia Medici a bottle or ten of Pomona's cider for saving him from the lynch mobs," Dumbledore agreed, twinkling. Sirius made a face in disgust as they silently laughed uproariously together from behind bland faces. "Again." He shook his head, adding, with a gentle smile, "MESP does seem to bring out the worst in him; he's always complaining their entry requirements are negligible and their peer-review system is lax."

"Myuchull bluddy admrashun ssiety'f plonkers," Snape slurred. "Mos' inept ssiety'f 'splosions waiting t'happen."

Dumbledore patted his hand again, and otherwise ignored him. "I understand him to be a perfect gentleman at the International Association of Master-Brewers. Of course, all but eight of their members are over seventy-five."
"Did the, er, Chinese chapter at least agree to help him?"

"Alas." Dumbledore hadn't just sobered, but was looking actually disappointed. "It seems they were all agreed in crediting their success to a stronger and more respected tradition of herbal medicine and their students' dread of disappointing their parents."

This drew a new, albeit much quieter, line of cursing from the slumped Slytherin. They all watched him curiously for a while, but he didn't seem to be going to stop anytime soon. Eventually, it became clear that he was complaining about the parents of everyone he'd ever taught, ordered possibly chronologically or by egregiousness, but not alphabetically. They all looked at each other in a silent mutual acknowledgement that he could potentially go on this way until doomsday and ought to be ignored.

Sirius sighed, and muttered, "Well, I'm not bathing his fevered brow," in defeat over the stream of vitriol. It was starting to sound like the last thin streams of molasses pouring out of the bottle, ever more quiet and sluggish.

"Perhaps not," Dumbledore conceded serenely, containing his twinkle. "I shall send… let me see, not Dobby, no, and the regular castle staff would only be disturbed… I could send Winky; family-raised elves do fade serving whole communities. However, she wants supervision, and I understand that the wine cellars here are fully stocked."

Sirius saw no reason to react to that.

"In return for her help, please keep her out of them and keep Kreacher away from her, will you?" When he assented, Dumbledore thanked him with another one of those 'my boys.' He never could understand why that usually seemed to deflate Snape into mollified grumbling; it always made him want to growl.

"But what happened?" Remus insisted.

"Do you know, we're still not entirely sure." Dumbledore took his little rimless spectacles off to clean them (not, thank Merlin, with his beard, as they'd once speculated, but with a handkerchief that was an only moderately violent blue-violet with pearl-grey doves zipping over it in enchanted flight). "He was summoned last night, and it does not seem to have been an entirely restful meeting." Remus winced, while Sirius shifted restlessly. "In fact, he thought there might be a sequel to it; keep an eye out, will you?"

"But, to return to the matter, last night would have been the late Mr. Diggory's birthday, and his House decided to hold an extended celebration in his honor. I suspect that firewhiskey may have been involved. Pomona tells me that she warned Severus in advance that his fourth through seventh-year classes were not likely to be in top form; at this point I can only speculate that she underestimated the difficulty." His cornflower eyes lose their starriness for a moment and chill over, as does the room. "I shall know more before long."

Sirius and Remus look at each other, sharing a moment of profound gratitude for having had nothing to do with it. That look wasn't as bad as the last time Sirius had seen those eyes harden more in anger than in sorrow, but once was more than enough. Truth be told, he can't even remember what he'd been thinking, to have opened himself to this wizard's anger even in ignorance, let alone the rest of it.
Little Boxes (Chasing the Mayfly)

Chapter Summary

In which Sirius is a very brave little doobie. Until he's, you know, not.

By the time Dumbledore finished arranging things to his and no one else's satisfaction, Kreacher had been relatively (if not properly) cowed. Winky had showed up and terrified everyone with the prospect of tiny chronic yellow-green anxiety tantrums, and Sirius had managed to slink away. Having people around usually cheered him right up, but the fuss was all about Snivellus, which completely ruined it.

Maybe not completely. He did feel more energetic than usual, and being hacked off at the unwelcome presence in his house made him feel like attacking something, fast and hard. Since Snape was swinging between incoherent and unconscious at last report, tormenting him wouldn't do. Potentially hilarious but bad form; Remus would be resigned, sad, and headachy at him. He might as well make Molly happy, he concluded, and aim his irritation at the house.

He decided to take a crack at his old room. If he could clean that out, they could move Snape into it. Sirius couldn't stand even thinking of all the time he'd spent in that room, and his hatred for it might have left it especially toxic. More, sleeping in a bed that used to be his and that he'd wanked in (presumably; he can't seem to recall any specific instances just at the moment) would brass ol' Sniv right off, not to mention all the posters and the red. Then he could stop thinking of Snape resting peacefully in a guest room like a guest. So there was really no downside.

Except that when he broke his parents' seal and unlocks the door for the first time in fifteen years, it was nothing he expected, apart from the cobwebs and dust and mold crawling up the walls. His old things were less packrat's-lair-despoiled than the rest of the house, although they were covered in wand slashes, and looked like they'd been hit with acids and shrivelling hexes.

They probably had. His mother's temper hadn't exactly spontaneously generated posthumously. At least it was only heaps of black, stinking dust and grime, and no dead animals on the floor or small red eyes hiding in dark crevices, in here.

Instead of the more unsettling 'decorations' scattered in other rooms, this one was full of boxes. Battered, dust-choked cardboard boxes, faded, discolored with long-dried rain, sealed with the cheapest spellotape. Each was labeled, under the half-inch of dark grey dust, in the uneven, slightly jagged, down-sloping writing that meant the Remus who had been holding the quill had been even more exhausted than furious.

Sirius backed away. To grab a drink and some company. Because this could be almost fun, with the right company, looking through his old stuff. And not at all because of any feelings like something was battering with a sledgehammer at a thin membrane between his waking mind and a living nightmare. Just for fun.

"Oh," said Remus, and that was all. Just Oh, and that look again, that speculative look that used to mean will this be a brilliant prank or will we all end up expelled, but Sirius knew it meant more right now. And then…
Over the years, Remus had asked him a thousand questions that all start the same way. Padfoot, are you sure that's a good idea? Are you sure it was Chapter Twelve? You're sure you can pull this off, are you? I don't know, Sirius, are you sure about this? Check the map, are you sure Mrs. Norris is still in the 'puff dorms? Are you sure? Are you sure? Listen, you berks, if you get this wrong I could kill you, are you sure this will work? Sirius, are you sure?

It generally meant, Sirius, I'm almost positive you're wrong about this, by which I mean almost to a certainty of ninety-nine point many many digits, and in ten minutes you'll be amazingly sorry you didn't listen, and the silence where I'm not saying I told you so will be as knives, Sirius, as knives in tender places.

This time, he said, "Are you sure you want to do this?" But, this time, what he meant was, I've been dreading your doing this. I want you to. It will hurt me, and it will hurt you. Be ready.

And because, for once, Remus wasn't being an earnestly-condescending know-it-all, Sirius (after the knee-jerk, superficially flippant, "Why, did you whiz on my Quidditch posters?" and the I'm-really-not-kidding look that he got back) looked away, and thought about it.

Finally, he looked back with a shrug, tried on an insouciant grin to see if it still fit, and breezed, "Can't wait to find out what you packed away for me, Moony."

Because he didn't know.

Remus hesitated, and then that inconvenient streak of native honesty forced its way out of him. "I didn't do it for you, Padfoot," he said quietly.

Sirius looked at him. That was an answer begging a question if he's ever heard one. But did he want to ask it?

No, he decided, in the end. No, he could imagine. Moony had wanted closure, or the feeling of locking him away into a box and packing him off back to the parents he must not really have hated so much after all, or had just felt that it was one of those Things One Does. "Well, never mind," he said, exiling awkwardness with useless force. "Come on."

He hadn't been ready. All those things, things from the old flat. Some of them had made him smile a little with returning rushes of humdrum days when he'd felt like a god with the kingdoms of the world at his feet waiting for his lazy summons, but hadn't known it. That was taxing enough, remembering how alive and how good he'd felt back then even on his worst days, but it wasn't the worst. Not by far.

Neither was the way he'd try to get Remus to clue him in on a knickknack, the way he'd say, "Hey, look at this, remember this?" and get only a sad, wary smile and an, "I remember it, Padfoot," no matter how much he jiggled his questions in the unpickable lock of Remus's memory, so that Sirius knew he was withholding deliberately. Or wanting, desperately, to know what he was keeping back, while being too well warned by that this is too important to challenge you into it look to dare press.

The worst wasn't seeing table settings with the crazed marks crawling over the porcelain that meant they had been thrown at the wall and repaired a few dozen too many times, not knowing why, or at whom, or why they hadn't been replaced. Not unfurling pictures of bands whose music he couldn't remember, and bands he suddenly did remember, on seeing the posters,. Not catching snatches of music in the echoes of old hearing, knowing once or twice that he hadn't liked them much even back then. Not finding old clothes (and linens) that still looked good to him, folded neatly and unfaded, even if probably no one would be caught dead in them in this decade, fashion being the
mayfly it was.

Wanting to wear them again, to become that boy again, but knowing before he made a fool of himself how shrunken this today's body would turn them, how pathetic he'd look? A raw spot, but survivable. Knowing that wearing his father's hated clothes at least left him with his dignity intact in the eyes of others (more or less; at least as much as he'd ever had), left him looking like someone Snape would at least take seriously enough to insult—had him looking like a Slytherin, like a Black, but not like a washed-out, dried-up old has-been with faded blue tattoos under glaring bright muggle cotton? Nothing more than an added insult to injury, a chafing and rueful awareness he could let pass through himself.

The worst wasn't the old books and magazines, either. Not having the first clue what was in them, however much of a jolt that realization gave him, at least assured him of new reading material, however dated. Nor the battered cooking things, bought secondhand or transfigured, even though the sight of them brought back taste and texture to his tongue, and the memory of some person unknown pitching a very long and very cranky and (judging by the way he felt about it now) very amusing, fond-making fit about how a transfigured saucepan would not be reliable over heat and would probably destroy the kitchen. Maybe Lily in a hormone flux? It was the kind of thing she'd fuss about when she was irritable and too tired to be angry at the war, at the fear, at the things she was really angry about.

It wasn't even the box with what must have been his gifts to her, Harry, and James. Salvaged from Godric's Hollow and thrown into the box in a jumble, it was the one box that hadn't been organized with precise hands, the one label that was written in a hand not merely dully, exhaustedly furious, but hot and savage. That was bad, though. He had to stare at those for nearly half an hour before he could move again to tidy them away, hand brushing tentatively over a hard-used matching pair of Swiss witch's knives, a cardboard-paged book with no words, just colorful, fuzzy animals crawling fetchingly over every page and making adorable noises that fell on his ears like violent cheese-graters.

It might have been the quilted blankets, in their rich, somber, autumn colors, which were as carefully repaired as the cups and plates, worn down by far more meticulous magics than he would ever, he knew, have been bothered to spend on them, no matter how poor he got or how disgusting or ragged they became. It might well have been the poor frayed sheets, which had been viciously laundered with a harsh soap that had laid them threadbare and bleached their chocolate color in streaks, but which still carried about them the ghosts of… cedar? Sandalwood? Juniper? Something. Something that smelled so good he wanted to wrap himself up in them, make new secret underclothes out of them, dive into them and never come out. Something that rattled the cage of this mind and set that membrane against the grim, grey, unreassuringly toothless darkness pounding again, that sickening assault that was no more than the twinge of a headache, and was so much more dreadful.

None of these was the worst, and they were all terrible. It might have been the sheets, might so easily, those sheets that made him long for mummification in the coffin of a sweet, warm bed he didn't know, except that they were wrapping up a leatherbound book.

Except that the moment he sees the first corner of its battered cover he's halfway to the door like no lion has ever leapt, dragging Moony with him with a load of cheerfully manic babble about grabbing some lunch and Rome not being razed to the ground in a day, even if Carthage had been. Except that Moony looks so utterly unsurprised.
And That Is Why

Chapter Summary

In which Severus wakes up and puts on his robes like a good boy. Or, more to the point, a very bad one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Only moderately well fortified, he'd gone up to pick a fight with Snape after lunch. Just to settle his nerves.

Vexingly, the man was fast asleep, breathing quietly labored where Sirius wanted it full of blackmail-worthy snores issuing in sticky bubbles from his giant nose. His limbs were in a moderate jumble, when Sirius wanted him stretched out or and folded up, like a vampire or a corpse. He lay as though someone had just spilled him onto the bed and twitched a blanket over him without looking how it, or he, had landed. Sunlight was pouring through the open window onto his skin. This, to complete Sirius's dissatisfaction was, while cheeringly undead-pale, not scorched.

As Sirius watched, a series of twitches went through the sleeper. He turned fitfully onto one side, and then the other. The thin Infirmary robes pulled taut against the muscles of his back and shoulders, better described as wiry than absent, as he turned. In one of his wakeless curling motions the blanket fell away and his left sleeve rode up.

Morbid fascination caught Sirius as he stared at the blackened skin standing stark against deeply reddened flesh. This began to look, as he observed, as though it might begin to smoke any moment, burning against the cursed mark as it hadn't against the light. He knew it hurt, knew it, not merely as a matter of common sense but known, and spiteful temptation only wrestled duty for one endless split second.

In a lightning movement (which, if he were to admit it, left him feeling rather proud of himself: constant vigilance this!), he drove a hand into the join of Snape's mattress and headboard for the wand he was positive was there, and jerked it out.

The wand was black, long, and thin, straightly-carved and glossy with Asian symbols of some sort on a rectangular base. Looking at the thing only made him certain that it ought to be rosy-pale grey and unvarnished, taper-tipped with the subtest hint of a unicorn-twist, wood-turned at the hilt like a chess piece stretching out lazily on holiday. He could see the pale wood, could see the black flecks remaining from where Sniv had tried to dye it a less fawnlike color with quill ink and been denied by the wood, over and over.

Although even wizards less paranoid than Snape would stand still to have bones broken before letting someone else get a hand on their wands, Sirius's extraction got no reaction. Not even a twitch, let alone a snarl and clawed fingers going for his eyes. Snape was seriously out.

Tentatively, ready for the man to do that freaky wandless magic of his and try to burn Sirius's face off with his bare hands like he'd used to during scuffles, Sirius bent down. He shook Snape by the
shoulder, first tentatively and then insistently, and finally hit him with an ennervate. Snape's wand worked better for him than the one he'd stolen off that auror. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"Wake up. Oi, wake up. I mean it. Up! Oh, for Merlin's sake. Hey, SNIV, gerbils are eating your toes!"

One wet-pebble eye peeled lazily open, regarded him blurrily. It looked even blacker than usual against unusually pinkish skin, in good light, the crooked teeth far whiter, if not blindingly so.

And he was seeing those crooked teeth because they were set in a crooked smile. A semi-conscious, utterly out-of-it half-smile, twin brother to shy but impossible to mistake for it. "'Lo," Snape rasped lazily, and reached up to him, sleepy and sun-warmed satisfied and in no hurry, to finger a curl of his hair.

Sirius gaped at him for just long enough that the relaxed brows drew together in puzzlement and frown-lines appeared almost to their usual depth, and then said, "Snape, get up. You're being called."

"You're calling me up?" Snape asked, puzzled by this and starting to worry, and also, without seeming to realize it, flexing and bunching his left wrist and hand.

"No, that is," Sirius said, with far more patience than the man deserved ever. Maybe even almost as much as Remus would probably think called for in this situation. He pointed.

Snape followed his finger with that hazy gaze. There was one long, dreadful moment, and suddenly he snapped into focus. His body language, even semi-curled up on the bed under a plainly-knitted maroon blanket (courtesy of Molly; the color rather flattered him, actually, cast living tones across his ink and paper face) made the pale robes echo of dark woolen armor. The change in his face to pinched from open peace did nearly as good a job on his hair as three days without a wash. He jerked the blanket back from the pale hospital robes, and surged out of bed.

Falling on his face didn't seem to faze him much, although said face burned furiously and glared Complete Annihilation at Sirius for being present at the event—or at his blurry wakening, or, possibly, for breathing. It was always hard to tell, with Snape. "My wand," he gritted.

"Didn't feel like getting hexed for an act of charity," Sirius said easily, meaning to infuriate, and tossed him the wand while holding his own on Snape. Just casually; just in case.

But Snape was ignoring him, clawing his way up the bedstead to his feet and lurching towards the loo. There was a pause, a muttered curse, and a spell so quiet Sirius couldn't hear the words. The toilet flushed, the water ran, and a word that sounded like 'habeeyay' made it through. He opened the door, now wearing a white, buttoned shirt, painfully ironed-looking, with a black waistcoat and trousers and a dark green leather shoulder-holster. He was, apparently on automatic, pulling a filmy black robe and a pale mask out of thin air.

"You can't," Sirius felt impelled to say, against his every instinct. "In the shape you're in-"

"In the shape I'm in," Snape snapped, impatient and slightly muffled, "he might be willing to concede I wasn't late because of dawdling." His attempts at getting into the robe with arms scorched and apparently noodle-feeble from whatever was the matter with him while still leaning stiffly against the doorframe, were... Okay, they were achieving success, yes. It was cringe-making to watch, though.
"Look, you really can't-"

"Shut it, ignoramus," Snape bit off, slamming down the creeptastic silvery mask with its subtle wash of etchings over his beaky nose. He clapped his hand over his brand in a dark billow of disarranged sleeve, and vanished into black smoke.

Which is why Sirius is sharing a bottle of firewhisky with Buckbeak. Because no matter how many sad and knows-too-much looks Remus gives him, he's not going to ask if his friend knows any reason why the sight of Snivellus's hatchet face sleep-softened or the smoky curl of his drowsy serpent's tongue should make Sirius think, even just for a split second, that the appropriate way to wake up a venomous Slytherin is with his mouth.

He's not going to ask him if Snape had been sleeping with Regulus, either. That pleased, unfocused welcome, that warm—Merlin, that *demure* look, those fingers brushing his hair, hovering by his grey eyes, over his lips… this glass in his hand, hovering in front of his mouth. A much more pleasant thought.

Chapter End Notes

The spell Severus used to dress himself, as some may have guessed, was 'habillez.'
Hic Sunt Serpentes

Chapter Summary

In which Voldemort's sense of humor is excellent news!

Chapter Notes

Although Here There Be Dragons is the commonly-known phrase, it was more usual for maps and charts to put Hic Sunt Leones (here are lions) to mark terra incognita.

The loss of even Snape's unconscious presence had somehow made the house ten times as stultifying. Without, unaccountably, making it feel brighter or fresher in the least. Sirius was just about ready to add this outrage to the infinite list of minor grievances he had against him that added up to detestation. Then he realized that it was only because there was just so little else going on that even something to loathe was moderately interesting. This, in fairness, was more Dumbledore's fault than Snape's.

It occurred to him that yes, there was something else to do besides scrub things or think about Snape; he was just avoiding it. And surely anything else must be more pleasant? So he went up to stare at that book in the blankets again, and managed just enough nerve to free from its covering nest—

— a photo album.

He finds himself in the kitchen, being unrelentingly cheerful with an agreeable but mildly alarmed Bill Weasley (in with research for Dumbledore he doesn't seem to want to share with anyone else), with only the vaguest recollection of having come down any stairs.

When Snape came back, he was in agony, and this time it was so funny that Sirius had to explain, between wheezes, "No, no, see, even if I liked you this would be pffsnorglesnorg."

Snape gave him a heartfelt you-are-right-scum look, and shouted at the ceiling, "Will someone who is not completely pissed off his hic! please help me upstairs?"

Sirius sat down on the stairs weakly, eyes streaming, and managed, "They're all out." Remus was away On Business, as they'd carefully not-exactly-agreed to call it, and the Weasleys were off on actual business—upkeep on the Burrow, in Molly's case. No one else from the Order had any business in Grimmauld at all, including Sirius.

"I know," Snape returned—almost cheerfully, for him. "I wouldn't have asked, else. Out of the way, Black."

"Volde-ow!" He rubbed his arm where the stinging hex had landed.
"Don't be an ass," Snape told Sirius witheringly, emphasizing his left arm with a motion and trying to get past him, but ruined the effect with another hic!aargh.

"Oh all right, He Who Must Not Be Nosed. He gave you the hiccups for being late? Classy."

"No," Snape snapped, "broken ribs. And heavily hinted that your esteemed cousin was allowed to do something involving paroxysms. It seems he's getting bored with the cruciatus; I've just been telling the HeadmasthicGODDAMNIT."

Sirius tried not to laugh for a second before wondering why he was bothering. "Really vital information there, Sniv," he chuckled.

Snape gave him another withering look. "Yes, in fact, it is, you flea-bitten sot, although I'm hardly surprised you haven't the imagination to see it. Move."

Sirius, needless to say, stayed put. "I'll see it if you explain," he offered.

But the look Snape gave him then shut him up, although not literally: his jaw sagged a bit. This was beyond any of the usual glares or schoolyard bluster-snark or daggers of paranoid suspicion he usually got. This was space-cold evaluation, utterly detached, so probing that it made Sirius's head throb. Judge and jury, with the shadow of the noose teasing the distance.

Then Snape hiccuped again, but Sirius didn't feel so much like laughing. "Anyway," he pointed out, "shouldn't you be seeing the Pomfrey instead of crawling back here to lie on your arse?"

This got him a mostly-normal glare. "There's no need to trouble her," he clipped off. "Poppy's a mediwitch, not a curse-breaker. She's not up to one of your cousin's original hexes."

"What about before?" he pointed out, noting that Snape hadn't mentioned the matter of broken bones, which the Pomfrey was perfectly 'competent' to heal in a heartbeat. "You weren't exactly in Quidditch form when you left, Snivvy."

"Go choke on a Beater's bat," Snape suggested, in a snarly-sweet tone that made Sirius sure there'd been no change there except for possibly some pepper-up or self-ennervation. Which might or might not be in imminent danger of wearing off.

"Right." Sighing, he scooted pointedly towards the banister, now that he knew depriving Snape of something to lean on would make a useful point of leverage. "So for how long will you be darkening my doorstep? And what are those snakes of yours going to do if the dungeons are in such bad shape?"

"My students have been disseminated into the other houses for the duration," Snape returned, dourly eying the diminishing space between him and his potential support. "If you care, which you don't. I have a temporary classroom which is almost acceptable for office hours and teaching theory. You needn't be concerned; the fifth-year boys are in Hufflepuff. I'm not sure Minerva's even bothered to tell her hellions; difficult to credit though it is and as much as it may disappoint you, it seems to have had nothing to do with them for once."

"Why the hell does he keep throwing those two together, anyway," Sirius demanded, not particularly of Snape, mood darkening as he thought more about Snape's squitty little snob of godson than his own wonderful and amazing and perfect (except for being constantly on the verge of burning himself out with excessive seriousness) one.

"Because wouldn't it be nice if everyone was hicsnarl—if everyone was nice," Snape droned piously, and called, "Winky!"
When the little elf had taken Snape upstairs, the paired spasms and expletives were safely muffled behind a closed door, and his mother had been hexed silent again, Sirius Made A Decision. If Snivellus could go through a floo and then stand on his own two feet with broken ribs and exchange nearly-civil banter without particularly sniveling, he could certainly go up and leaf through a stupid photo album.

Then he decided it wasn't the same thing at all and it would be a much better use of his time to get a start on some of the guest rooms. Winter break would be coming up soon, after all, thank Merlin.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding Severus and his ribs, since a ffnet reviewer brought it up...

Terrifyingly, his lack of reaction isn't as unrealistic as one might suppose. A few years ago, there were a series of gas main explosions on and around my street. One of my neighbors got hit in the ribs with a flying hubcap. A couple of days later there was another explosion and our busybody ex-super hauled everyone out of our apartments until the firefighters said, "WTF are you guys doing, your complex is not on fire, it's below freezing, go back to bed and, uh, don't bother trying to light your stoves for a day or two." Everyone was shivering hard, and this neighbor was chatting like he was fine and wouldn't let anyone give him a jacket or anything.

In summation: men are sometimes ridiculous. Especially when they think they have something to prove.

I don't think I was actually thinking about that story when I wrote this. I hope not. That man and his wife named their brown and white cats Brownie and Whitey, poor things (yes, respectively, and no, not ironically, or in a tribute to their sweetness), and I refuse to write about people like that. Even perfectly nice people who occasionally shared their fresh catnip.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Shaking Remus down for information is always ever so useful.

When Remus was back (and fed, and showered, and fed, and rested, and in the process of being fed again), Sirius put the first of the things that were bothering him to him. There were of course all kinds of things that were bothering Sirius generally, but he was mostly trying to tune or buzz them out. This one, though, had him curious.

"So is there any reason why it should be earth-shatteringly important that Mouldywart's doing other things to rag off on his Shorts Eaters than just feeding them crucios, or is Snivvy being self-important again?"

Remus blinked at him, but finished his bite of apple before asking, "What?" So Sirius explained. When Remus was finished giving the general direction of Snape's room concerned looks and had been hauled back onto the subject by main force, he said, "I don't know. He really thought it was important?"

Sirius shrugged. "Seemed to. Said I was unimaginative for not seeing why, but," he shifted a little, frowning, "he gave me this look when I asked."

"What kind of a look?" This in a dubious tone. He couldn't blame Moony; Snivvy gave him looks more or less continuously.

"Like he thought I was" pete Wormbreath "one of them in disguise and he was going to have to kill me."

Remus performed a double take which would have been highly satisfactory if Sirius had been kidding. He actually did another when Sirius's flat, somewhat perturbed tones registered. "Oh," he said finally, soft and surprised. "He thinks it's very important."

"That's what we're getting hung up on?" Sirius demanded, annoyed. "What the fuck right does Snivellus have to look at me like that? He's fucking one of them!"

"Oh, I'm sure the Headmaster wouldn't ask that of him," Remus smirked so seraphically that Sirius had to snort and throw a carrot at his head. It was tiny; and came out of a bag of similarly tiny ones. Obviously the world had taken a tragic and wrong turning out of loneliness for him. At least they came pre-pared.

"Come on," he pressed.

"Well, you know Severus; he's... often overly cautious."

"You mean unbelievably paranoid," Sirius couldn't help translating, but he had the feeling that Remus was being evasive.
"Well, yes," Remus agreed.

Sirius pointed at his face. "That's your Oh, Good, I'm Getting Away With It, Now If I Can Just Keep Looking Innocuous Until Flitwick Sees Something Shiny look," he accused.

"Is it?" Remus asked, with a masterful blink of quizzically innocent astonishment.

"Yes, it is! What aren't you telling me, Moony?"

"Oh, where to begin…"

"Moony…"

Remus sighed. "If I tell you," he says reluctantly, "you have to swear on Harry's life not to go rushing away to kill anyone. Or at all." Sirius stared at him, rattled. Remus stared back, implacable, one eyebrow slightly raised. Sirius glared. Remus said, "I mean it."

Because, of course, no one ever says I'm serious to any of the four of them. It had been Pe—a nameless walking piece of scum in a dead man's body's only joke for a good three months, once upon a time many lifetimes ago, and hadn't taken anywhere near those three months to get very, very old, even to eleven-year-olds (Snivvy had sneered back, And I'm Spartacus once or twice, before settling for giving them the flat-eyed I cannot even be arsed to roll my eyes at your boring nonsense look. Sirius hadn't been able to bring himself to ask anyone about it, even though Snivvy didn't usually repeat himself unless he was quoting or howling threats. Even though he'd had the disgruntled feeling that the brat had been relying on him not being able to bring himself to ask).

"Moony," he repeated, meaning: what the hell.

"You want to know why Severus might think you're not to be trusted even where more than his life is concerned," Remus elaborated patiently. "Well, there's a reason, and not a terribly feeble one, I'm afraid. And it has to do with that Halloween." Sirius couldn't help but flinch a little, but Remus continued on, inexorable. "Just discussing it at all would make you angry, never mind giving you new information, and I want your word you won't go do something stupid."

"I won't do something stupid," he parroted obediently. Remus was probably right, after all. Best to leave a loophole. There might be necessary things to do.

Remus glared at him, and repeats, "On Harry's life, Sirius."

He glared back. "I really doubt it's that important," he scoffed.

"All right, then," Remus said amiably, and picked up the paper.

Sirius lasted a record three minutes before it itched him to bursting. "All right! I swear."

"What do you swear?" he was patiently coaxed.

He rolled his eyes, and droned, "I swear I won't go kill anyone."

"You swear you won't go rushing off, period?"
He scowled, since Remus hadn't lifted his eyes from his paper, but tried to sound casual so as not to sound defeated. "Sure."

Remus nobly refrained from giving him a biscuit, but gave him instead a serious look, putting down the editorials he'd been frowning at the while. "It must have made you furious that we didn't push for a trial," he said quietly. "You must have felt betrayed and abandoned."

The world chokes, goes bitter and cold and close, and grey about the edges. He can even hear what Moony isn't saying: You must have thought you deserved it for trusting Wormtail and getting them killed, forshrugging off your duty onto that weak piece of filth, for refusing what James asked of you, for refusing to risk yourself, for letting your temper help him blow up that street and those Muggles.

A hand covers his, a point of warmth, and he levers his eyes, with great effort, to a somber face. "I'm sorry, Padfoot, but the fact is, we didn't just assume you were guilty. The Ministry did, but we had reason to believe it, until Wormtail showed up on the map."

Sirius can't force the question out of his mouth, but Remus answers anyway. "Some of us investigated, Padfoot. We really did. We looked hard, and for a long time. But he was better at planting evidence than the Ministry ever bothered to find out."

"Guess we taught him well," he says, barely intending to, dry-mouthed, wishing he hadn't promised. He reaches for something to drink. There's only tea and pumpkin juice, but it'll have to do. "Well done, Marauders." A few unsatisfactory orange swallows later, he asks, "Who's 'we'?"

"Me, of course. Severus. Frank and Alice, until they ran up against Bellatrix." Sirius cringes. "Benjy, too, until-" The cringe deepens, and Remus has the mercy to stop. "One or two others. Aberforth kept an ear open, and Elphias Doge..." he shrugs. "Well, Elphias tried to help. Mostly the four of us."

"Why would Snape...?" he trails off, deeply interested in his spicy juice.

Remus hesitates again. He shrugs uncomfortably, says evasively, "Why does Severus do anything? Of course, he had a stake in your innocence," he adds, as though relieved to find a lifeline of useful truth. "Once we were sure that he had an opposite number, he'd said too often and too publicly that it couldn't be you not to look incompetent or suspicious after it all happened."

He tosses Sirius a light look, trying to tease him, and says reflectively, "I think my favorite was, 'That musclebound, pea-brained, mirror-mesmerized bonehead is too impulsive to learn subversion if Lucius Malfoy put him under hypnosis and read him an illustrated manual.'"

He's managed Snape's resonant drawl very well, for someone whose voice is a good octave milder even lowered to its hoarse limit, and Sirius manages a weak smile for him. But it can't last. He asks grimly, "You'd think he would have known about Wormtail."

"I know," Remus says quietly. "But they didn't all know each other. I gather these frequent, er, gatherings of everyone with a Mark are a new development, too, and he wasn't exactly inner-circle in those days."

"Cried on your shoulder, did he?" Sirius drawls facetiously.

*GO ON, TELL ME YOU LOVED HIM! TELL ME YOU*
... Just shut your hole, Black. Just... just keep it shut. You don't know anything, not one, not the first, not a single thing. You don't know what words mean, you ignorant, arrogant, reckless, careless, thoughtless—What if I did love him, what if I did? Do you have to paint everything sordid?

"We talked some," Remus says mildly, and Sirius breathes again, tries to unlock his throat and look at his friend. Tries to shove Snape's voice, cracked and choked and wavering with furious grief, out of his imagination. "He took... things... harder than you give him credit for, Sirius."

"I don't care," Sirius snaps—not just his voice, but something inward snaps. Oath-bound, he hurls himself out of the chair to go attack a guest-bedroom. Via the whiskey cabinet, because otherwise he's not going to be able to focus on anything but punching... well, walls, if he's lucky.

When he gets upstairs, though, the door is cracked open. The Door. The Door, behind which is That Book. And the overpowering sense of dread makes him angry, furious, has him raging through the grey, clinging forebodings as only a Black Gryffindor can rage, spoiling to tilt against terrors.

He gets as far as the first page.
Magical light flares around the doorframe, quiet and, to those who can read such things, elegantly wrought. The tip of a stolen wand dips cautiously through a knothole in the door, slips a redundant sleeping spell in. On the bed, a restless form slumps deeper into its slumber, long limbs tumbling flat, arms washed silver-white by moonlight, and the door swings open.

A man enters like a thief, tallish and slim-hipped, bony shoulders built for absent breadth, slinking around the walls. There's nothing to keep between him and the bed, but it's clear he wishes there were. He hesitates at the cloak-rack, but slips around it in the end, wand trained on the supine sleeper. Reaching the cabinet, he regards it for endless moments with an expression of morbid curiosity and depthless dread. Finally, with an air of not wanting to at all but being quite unable to prevent himself, he lifts the crisply folded black woolen jacket atop it to his face. Breathes in.

Grey eyes fall closed in the dark, as though their thick lashes are too crushing a burden to be borne, wasted shoulders slumping under the same sudden weight.

A loud hiccup, chased by a mourning, wakeless, whimpering little groan, sends the intruder stiffening. Down goes the jacket, with all due care. The door closes, the wards on it are reconstructed, and the man goes to raise as many sheets to the wind as he can possibly manage, chasing a return of forgetfulness.
A Cunning Plan

Chapter Summary

Next: Sirius has a plan as cunning as a fox what used to be Professor of Cunning at Durmstrang University but has moved on and is now working for the Department of Mysteries at the High Commission of International Cunning Planning.

( Severus does not pat him onna head.)

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: swottery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snape was the kitchen, all sallow and greasy and therefore far less disturbing again. This time he wasn't doing anything helpful to others, thank Merlin. Of course, helping Molly could be considered more in the light of self-preservation than philanthropy, Sirius realized. He immediately felt much better about the whole dish-washing incident.

Not that Snape actually walked the self-preservation slither he talked up so vehemently.

—Right, shutting that line of thought down right now.

Regardless, instead of being useful to anyone he was standing over a head-sized cauldron. He was looking rather desperate and oxygen-deprived behind his stoical expression, and holding himself stiffly enough to show his ribs were taped to creaking point. Sirius watched agile fingers fly, telling himself he was trying to stir curiosity in himself, knowing he was fleeing it as fast as he possibly could.

Eventually, Snape turned to tilt an annoyed eyebrow at him. You did have to admire all the implications attendant on the silent message of don't you have something better to do oh no wait of course you don't that Sniv could fit into a single weary twitch of one muscle.

"What the hell kind of potion uses pickles?" he asked, amused, as though he couldn't guess.

Snape glared at him, the withering look saying you know bloody well it's a hiccups cure, Black, and I will visit unspeakable torments on you if you make me say it out loud.

"Come on," he insisted, "pickles."

Snape sighed, interrupting himself with an eruption, a hiss of pain, and a look of profound annoyance. Despite his very evident belief that to do so was to waste his time, he still couldn't seem to resist lecturing the ignorant on his favorite subject.

"Vinegar," he says, "and cucumber, which is not only cooling of its nature but lunar, and thus, with proper preparation, invokes a measured rhythm. A scruple of powdered lavender jade to target the
smooth muscles, and two of clear quartz for smooth channels of bodily energy. One split hair of
sphinx mane, for its still, spare, endless, and exacting patience. Four ounces of lemon pulp,
combined in an earthenware mortar, for stability, with redcurrant, either crushed or in a pure
unsweetened jam, and a distillation of gentian root.

"The entirety decocted in a silver size H cauldron, or white-gold if you can afford it and don't trust
your precision, in four size C ladles of water added separately, stirred thrice widdershins four times
deosil over a blue-streaked flame fueled by methanol or ethanol-marinated wood but not copper
chloride, every four minutes. Set to simmer once the liquid is purple with silver crests and
removed from heat once reduced to a half-liter. Four drops of this on one ungranulated crystal of
unbleached cane or beet sugar of sufficient size to take them after each attack until there cease to be
any. Any more questions?"

"Must people just eat the sugar lumps," Sirius noted.

"Useless," Snape clipped off dismissively, which Sirius suspected was best translated as I already
tried that and met with dismal hiccuppy failure. "Maleficent buys bleached sugar with additives to
keep it cubed for tea. Besides, this isn't alcoholic or naturally spasmodic, this is your cousin's
hic'damnhertohellagain sense of humor."

And it's so very hard to have an opinion, when darling cousin Bella's sense of humor is visited on
Snivvy. "Or you could bend over a chair and swallow upside down."

"Mm." This conveyed whole worlds of yeah, that would happen.

"I could scare you."

"You so consistently do."

"It's your ribs, right? That's why you don't want to bend over."

Snape slid him a dirty look. "There is no time at which I would not be disinclined to do that."

Half of him wanted to jeer oh yeah, bend over, baby, but no no no no no not funny anymore not
going there. "Why didn't the Pomfrey fix them before you left?"

Snape looked sour, but Sirius just kept looking at him, bright eyed and unmotivatedly curious.
Finally, he said, "She did, only she says I'm forbidden the quickest forms of knitting for certain of
my bones except under conditions of dire emergency until spring of '97, I believe it was, in the case
of the ribs. She says doing it too often weakens their natural resiliency."

Sirius considered this. An age jab might show an appropriate lack of pi—sympathy. Except, no,
wrong; Sirius was older, so even though there was only a month or so between them it wouldn't
matter how far Sniv looked like he'd hand-crawled out of some grave. So he offered, ",...You could
pull on your tongue really hard."

"Sod off, Black," Snape grouched, morosely squishing his lemons and stuff around in the mortar,
clearly imagining them as some part of Sirius's anatomy.

"Want to make me some breakfast while you're puttering?"

"Which part of 'sod off' do you wish me to explain in graphic detail before you've had any coffee?"

Sirius grinned a little, and settled himself into his carefully chosen ancient Quidditch rag.
After a minute or two, "You're not hung over."

"Nah." He had been for most of the day before. Remus had been inclined to give him looks like he wanted to scold, but Sirius had only had to say he'd been looking at pictures to make Remus say ah, and spend the rest of the evening in utter silence, looking like he was quivering on a razor edge of either shaking Sirius down for information or fleeing some inevitable fallout. Sirius hadn't gotten to sleep easily, but he'd slept hard, and woken full of plans and purpose.

"Mm." That grunt had said, I approve, but if I let you know it you'll revert out of spite.

Which was annoying, mostly because he was afraid it might be accurate. So he finished the page, flipped a bit, and, when he got to where he wanted to be, made what he hoped was a noise of disgruntled surprise. Accusing the universe, he demanded, "Gryffiths left the Harpies with amnesia?"

Snape glanced at him over his shoulder, an eyebrow raised. There was a something in his eye, something surprised and gleaming, that said, I know just where you're taking this, I never would have expected it of you, and I'm intrigued and impressed enough to go along.

Well. Sirius might have been kidding himself about the 'intrigued and impressed bit.' It was probably more along the lines of oh, look, it's trying to play me, like one of my baby snakes, awww.

But he knew he was right about the rest of it when Snape turned back to his mashed lemons and confirmed, "Bludger to the back of the broom in '86. Propelled her into the stands; she'd been cutting it close. She got off lucky; a direct hit might well have removed her head outright. It came out later that she'd been hit with an obliviate first, to make her forget the planned plays and be disoriented. It was thought the damage wouldn't have been fatal for her career, if the injury hadn't been complicated by magic." He waved a disinterested hand. "Terrible scandal, enormous turnover within the Arrows, unfortunate promotions within the Prophet."

"There's got to be a spell for that, though. Or a potion. Isn't there?" He'd planned that to be needling, but that gleam of Snape's had put him off balance, and it came out as a simple question.

"Amnesia?" Snape shrugged, said cautiously, "There are a number of simples that are good against it. Phosphorus, potassium, B1. Apples, oranges, dates, grapes, walnuts, almonds. Bananas, obviously. Certain fish oils. Sphinx feather, as a suffumitory."

"Okay, now you're just making up words."

"Burned to make smoke, fuzz-for-brains."

"Uh-huh. Sure it is."

"Oh, look," Snape said, tilting his chin towards the cauldron drolly, "a task which I will provide me with infinitely more entertainment and personal benefit than talking to you."

"I am a giant ear," Sirius promised, grinning.

Snape rolled his eyes tolerantly and went on. "Amethyst or pearl paste in mead of honey made with certain pollens, or with white wine. Preparations of ginseng, gingko, other things beginning with G. Things that nourish the brain, hasten neurological healing, strengthen and stabilize the pathways. Sometimes that's hic!damnit! Sometimes that's enough. For mere physical damage or stress-related amnesia, there are a number of combinations of ingredients that can be quite effective, with one or another part of an olive tree and a few fwooper feathers—or phoenix down freely given, of course, if it can be obtained. If it can, adding a few of the webs of trapdoor spiders sprinkled with melted
butter and powdered amethyst can improve it even further."

"Olives—for Athena? Psychic stuff?" Whoops, bad word choice. He hoped Snape wouldn't think he meant divination shite and go on some stern rant about how that would be under Apollo and mean dried python sinew or something, duh.

Happily (that is, Sirius was pleased about it; obviously there was no happiness in Sniv's dispassionate face or tone, or, probably, in his entire soul, for his entire life) Snape just said, "If by that you mean mind-magic, then yes. It doesn't have to be the tree's fruit; roots work better for memory potions, or the amber if it can be gotten. Heartwood, even oil. Not bark, or outer wood. The fruit itself… I suppose if you only had access to a grocer's, it might be worth a try."

"What's the butter for?"

"To be a demulcent between and blending catalyst of the olive and spiderwebs. They work together only reluctantly, and butter is of the nature of enhancement and oil and animal product whose taking doesn't harm its maker. Butter is an emollient of the nature of sun-and-gold, from its color and warm, rich flavor and from its association with the cows of Grecian sun-gods. So it can, for lack of a better term, coax latent qualities from ingredients."

"Uh... why?"

Snape shrugged. "That gets into the realm of magical theory. It would be interesting to know whether it had worked before the whole world came to the conclusion that gold is the perfect metal, which can be evoked alchemically from lesser materials. All that can be said for certain is that it works now."

"Okay," he sighed, wondering whether this excessive swottiness was what Harry had to put up with in class. Of course, according to Harry's letters, he got it from that friend of his with all the hair all the time. Obviously she was worth it, though, like Remus was; Sirius had owed her his soul before they'd known each other twelve hours.

Probably to punish him for sighing, Snape went on. "Also because of their mutual planetary-affiliation, phoenix down can augment the power of the butter enough to force the olive products and spiderweb to work together, although a phoenix isn't itself a peacemaker. Butter also makes the amethyst dust adhere better to the spidersilk; that's only naturally sticky in some areas of web and this potion isn't picky about which are used."

He was silent for a moment, then asked what he had to ask. "But that all doesn't work if the memory loss is because of magic."

"Not really. Not work, as you put it. Not restore."

"An obliviate, or," he forced himself, "a magical creature."

"They can help," Snape repeated. A stranger just walking into the kitchen would have heard his brisk, matter of fact tone as professional. The contrast to his usual voice as directed at Sirius, though, made him sound almost gentle. "They can make the brain more receptive, engage in better, more rapid, targeted healing."

"But if you've studied pensieves, you know that memories themselves are fearfully hard to affect. They can be displaced—and replaced, if you know where they are. They can be altered, if you're powerful enough and deft enough and know exactly what you're doing, although it's bloody difficult to make them seem right. They can hic! Oh, sod her. With a morningstar."
Sirius waited a minute for Snape to take his berry-stained hands away from his weary eyes and clean off the resulting the raccoon mask. Finally, though, prompted, "They can what?"

"Oh, yes," Snape recalled, on an aching sigh, and re-applied himself to his work. "They be planted, I was going to say. Good luck stopping them feeling alien or itching, of course or even felt as viewed rather than experienced. There has to be something to work with, though; they can't be missing. The two answers to removed memories are to find and return them, or to nurture the brain and allow them to re-grow from the echoes and scars their removal has left."

He turned that over in his mind as Snape's diaphragm spasmed again, prompting quiet, vicious cursing and even leaning on the counter. A bad one, obviously. He'd be well advised to pretend Snape didn't exist until he straightened up and started brewing again.

So. Echoes and scars. Yes. And no finding anything down a Dementor's maw. "So… how do you do that?" he asked tentatively. "You'd just remind the person, wouldn't you?"

Snape looked at him over his shoulder again. Sirius suspected he was deeply tempted to say yes and get Remus into trouble, because he obviously knew what they were really talking about here. But he said no.

Sirius wondered if he was using the same brisk tones because he didn't care, because he was still in Tra La La I am Mr. Amazing Potions Man Let Me Dispense My Wisdom To An Uncaring Public mode, or because he knew how much Sirius would have wanted to rip his throat out from behind if he'd started to act sympathetic.

"That's contra-indicated," Snape went on. "If you tell people what they've forgotten, you're feeding them your own impressions. People are impressionable. They usually," he finished on a deepening note of bitterness, "believe what they're told. Especially if they want to, or find the source pleasant or otherwise trustworthy."

Sirius decided he didn't care whose gullibility Snivellus was mad at. He said, "So what is indicated?"

Looking him straight in the eye, Snape told him, "To be patient. To expose the amnesiac to stimuli that might recall his past to him, as naturally as possible, and see what strikes home. To not fuss him about it and let him recover at his own pace, interfering only if you're hic!"

His hand and throat spasmed, with a nails-on-a-chalkboard scrape of the pestle, but he didn't pause. "Only if you're certain he's confusing imagination or wishful thinking with memory, and then carefully, because wishful thinking and memory are bound up together anyway." He dropped a small handful of currents into the red clay mortar, ground at them a few times reflectively, and added with a certain amount of sadism, "Not that a diet of fruit and nuts and a restriction to honey-date wine and marzipan wouldn't be eminently appropriate."

The only reason Sirius was able to keep from snarking back was that it would have been an outright admission that they'd been talking about him. Instead, he said, "That sounds pretty damn sweet, honey-date wine."

"Cloying," Snape agreed with malicious cheer, and scraped the fruit and gentian mash into the little silver cauldron, over the pickle slices. "Incidentally, sneak into any room I'm sleeping in again, and the inner wards won't stop at waking me." Sirius stared at him, for far too long, rather white, until he added, with nasty satisfaction, "If you can get past the new outer ones that don't compromise with the obligatory guest-faith in hospitality."
He was able, with this threat, to pull himself together into a leer and purr, "I hope you like the surprise I left you."

"You didn't leave one," Snape replied with bedrock certainty, and started measuring out water.

Arrogant bastard. But he couldn't go back and leave one now. The wards, he knew, would be so intricate that he'd never have a long enough chance to dismantle them.

Chapter End Notes

'I am a giant ear' is a quote from Diane Carey's 'Final Frontier' which I could not resist.

Most of the real things Severus says are good for memory are actually supposed to be, in one tradition or another. Including the minerals, although not the spiderwebs. Obviously, this list is not FDA approved.
Heimish Tsuris

Chapter Summary

Molly narrowly escapes a concussion. Her shopping is not so lucky. Sirius isn't sure he is, either.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"That book," he said to Remus, abruptly, while they attacked a doxy nest. "Good one, Moony."

Remus turned to look at him, sidelong, giving nothing away.

"You must have been beyond furious," he tried. "Don't blame you."

"I was," Remus agreed, mildly. "Eventually."

Because Wormy had been so very convincing. A spill of red threatened his vision; he blinked it back. "So, good one." Good prank, he meant.

"You mean," Remus tried, in that ever-so special, cautious, talking-to-Sirius-when-he's-in-a-Mood tone that Sirius hates, "that it was good of me to pack up your things instead of burning them? Yes, it was rather, good of you to notice."

"No, I mean," he said, rather desperately, "I mean, yes, very good of you, but I meant slipping a picture like that into my album. Reckon you thought I deserved that. How'd you fake it?"

He can't bear the way Remus is looking at him, the slow, deep, late-autumn-oak eyes that are looking at him as though they can't decide whether to be confused or suspicious or kind as all hell. Gaily announcing his intention to deal with the salamander in the oven that's been driving Molly crazy, he scrambles away before Remus can ask which photo.

"Sirius!" Remus calls after him, trying to catch him up, but he's already collided with Snape on the landing.

Papers go everywhere, a rain of black and red ink, the occasional brief stroke of green. It's a long, long moment of surprised and endless black set in skin white with the pain of being jostled. Of noticing that, yes, that is a not-sallow tone to it again, under the grey, and what in Merlin's sagging pouches is going on with that?

A long moment of riveted, unwilling awareness that the whites of those dark eyes are blue-tinted over the smudgy (also bluish) circles, not yellowed. Porcelain, and not nicotine-stained wallpaper at all. An instant eternity of cauldron-strong hands catching him, steady and sure on his arms, despite the white knuckles and hissed breath, of aromatic woods and herbs, seeping his blood with electric thorns of cedar and agrimony, sweet fennel and spiced heather, dark oregano and sharp rosemary, thorns sliding home just as though they belonged.

All in all, he's pathetically grateful when Snape's mouth presses from a soft bruise of startlement into its accustomed tight impatience, pushes him away, pulls in a breath that looks like it hurts (and
hurts in stranger ways than Sirius would really like to think about), lets it out, and starts yelling at him for being a clumsy, sotted ass.

He remains grateful even when Remus comes up from behind to make soothing yet annoyingly amused noises, Snape turns the explosion on him with uncalled for melodrama, Winky shows up in a fountain of scolding to try to rescue Master Potions Master from the big bad threadbare corduroy jacket with elbow patches, Kreacher oozes by to make snide remarks about what can only be expected of mudbloods and blood traitors, his Dear Mamma starts shrieking from the hall, and Molly stops at the bottom of the stairwell, her arms full of groceries, to demand (with complete justification) to know what the hell is going on up there, and why had she just had all her eggs crushed by a flying inkpot?

Oddly, Sirius gets the distinct feeling that it's because he does rather than doesn't have a sense of the ridiculous that Snape sniffily corrects her with a, "Falling inkwell," before gathering up his papers and the dripping ink-whatever with a swish of his wand, and swooping out grandly like an enormous (and slightly arthritic) raven. Er, vulture. Definitely vulture.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, that was short, sorry. But, hey, slapstick!
The chapter title means, approximately, 'homelike troubles.'
**The Kamikaze Bitch**

**Chapter Summary**

Sirius burns his hands dealing with an ice elemental, which is the least complicated thing that will happen to him all day. Also, Quidditch!

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

You had to feel sorry for salamanders, craving heat so much and not being able to keep it to warm their icy bodies when they'd eaten it. Even when they burned you. It wasn't as if they did it on purpose, mostly, and even then only when they were scared.

When he'd gotten the one that had gotten into the oven back into its firepit under the cold box, Molly ungratefully told him to get out of the kitchen until she'd made lunch. Maybe she thought the lunch was enough, but it wasn't as though he'd cared about rousting the damn thing. Or as if it was easy to get ice anywhere else in this hextuple-damned house, with everyone's wands mostly muzzled.

Snape was in the sitting room, grading out of his de-eggified inkwell, but Sirius wasn't going to be dissuaded out of his own damn sitting room. Certainly not by some swotty crow-snake, no matter what he smelled like. Definitely not by one who was just sitting there. Wouldn't do to let the good old red and gold down playing the shrinking violet and whatnot; the Tartan would give him what for. So he dropped himself onto the sofa and, swinging his legs up, started applying a vial of burn cream from the potions cabinet to his singed hands.

"That's shite," Snape informed him, without looking up.

"You didn't even look at it," he accused, exasperated.

"Didn't have to," Snape drawled, still attending to his papers. "I have, as you are so often at pains to point out, a nose. Sweet Nell's Burn And Bruise Emollient. Actually by Kevin Trentmore. A pleasant little arnica and yeti-blood based recipe. Not completely without effect, but the firm closed six years ago without selling anyone the recipe. In other words, if you need it spelled out, it's well past its expiry date. You'll be lucky if you don't end up with frostbite."

"You are so full of yourself," Sirius grumbled amiably, not much minding being checkmated on the cheap-nose-joke front. He checked the date. Since the tube had indeed expired (nine years ago), he cleaned his hands with a spell, and looked at them glumly.

Smirking into his papers, Snape inquired, in tones as sweetly suggestive as an amontillado cherry peeking coyly out from behind chocolate whipped cream on a dark treacle tart, "What should I be full—"

If a silence could fall with a clang, this one did.

They stared at each other. Sirius didn't know what his face looked like, but Snape's had gone a bone white so ugly that all expression had fled it for fear of taint by association. This, Sirius...
became horrifically aware as the black wells of those eyes widened into not particularly bitter almonds, fearful and wistful and *furious*, was not doing anything to loosen his trousers. Things got even worse when he remembered that he'd been raiding his father’s wardrobe against the dream of a time when someone would let him go on a damn shopping trip, which meant they were actually *his father's trousers*, arrgh, arrgh…

"So," he said desperately, inanely, "I guess that hiccup cure of yours worked."

"Palliative, but yes," Snape agreed absently, as though all his attention was on figuring out how to dive through the window without breaking his ribs worse, or possibly on deciding whether to transfigure his quill into a disemboweling knife here or kill himself less messily in the bath, Roman-style to suit his nose.

"You still look like a zombie, though," Sirius said, and was rewarded by seeing a trace of color ride the annoyance back onto Snape's face. "What did those kids do to you, anyway? I thought you were supposed to be able to handle classroom explosions."

"I can," Snape snapped irritably. "But if there's someone who can 'handle' five unrelated cauldron disasters in the space of ninety seconds, on two hours sleep and with Fudge's candyfloss lap-toad cooing down his neck, I'd like to sit at his feet with a dictaquill and let him take pot-shots at me until I'd completed whatever regime was a better teacher than your menace and malice. Or, more likely, hers."

"You're the malice," Sirius felt obliged to say, grinning.

Snape rolled right over him like the Express, grumbling and ranting about hung-over Hufflepuffs and *innovative* Ravenclaws sly enough to try their experiments while the professor was occupied, and other Hufflepuffs not angelic enough to refrain from pranking their worse-for-wear housemates during the exact same moments of *completely justified* distraction.

Actually, the image was charming, especially the one of the pink froggy perched on Sniv's shoulder, making him freak out with a long, sticky tongue while trying to whisper sweet nothings. "Lap-toad?" was, therefore, the obvious first question.

Snape, obviously still disturbed enough to welcome any topic change, actually answered him, but didn't get very far before the low embers of recollection growled, and Sirius interrupted him. "Wait, Umbridge? That bitch from the Werewolf Registry? The hell is she doing at Hogwarts?"

"She's Fudge's undersecretary now. He empowered himself to appoint 'teachers' to posts the Headmaster can't fill by mid-August," Snape said with wearily subdued anger. "We ran out of saps to hold Defense."

"And whose fault is that?" Sirius demanded, suddenly remembering that Remus's more recent patches were not entirely any woman's doing: not just a toad's, but also a bat's.

Snape gave him an even wearier *you're-an-idiot* look, and pointed at his left arm, putting the blame on Voldemort's DADA curse.

"Hell of a role model you are," Sirius snarled. "Take some responsibility."

"I'll take all that's mine," Snape flared. Sirius flashed again onto a much younger face, eyes sick and hard with dread before an elmwood wand, but Snape kept hissing at him, pulling him back. "Do you think I liked feeling myself turn day by day into a raving, foaming hysteric?"

"Oh, don't kid yourself, Snivvy," he purred back with a hard grin, "you were always a foaming
hysteric."

The look Snape gave him then was clearly meant to sear through his skull and leave smoking holes in the wall. "Talking of responsibility, why don't you take what's yours? It was you two who wore down the path in my mind for the curse to overtake, you and your dead friend; you who kept Lupin from being anyone I could be indifferent to, holding his secrets hostage to his complicity in the most thoughtless and friendly, and therefore, believe me, impossible to fight manner possible, you yourself who turned him into my night and shadow terror. Good God, how do you think a curse like his," he raised his left hand, fisted like some strega's curse, "flexible, insinuating, capable of turning the smallest circumstance, the faintest flicker of impulse to its cause, could resist an opening like that? With Dementors on the grounds sapping my resistance and my sanity because you had to sit sing-songing your escape plans to your jailors, letting everyone know just where you'd gck—"

He stops talking, but only because of the arm cutting off his airway. "What the fuck," Sirius growls into his face, resisting Padfoot's teeth with poor and wavering self-control, his cock-eyed wariness over how damn much Snape seems to admire and possibly be physically attracted to the very curse he was bitching about and blaming the world on instantly consumed, "do you think you know about Azkaban."

Snape just looks at him, eyes all surface, perhaps all pupil, matte-black and too dead for fear, disconcerting and dreadful, for far, far too long.

Ages. Forever.

He brushes Sirius's by now unresisting arm away from his. Says, in a voice to match his eyes, "Everything."

The silence throbs between them, thick and raw. Snape's shirt is a stone-green stonewashed linen today, out of his vampiric, monastic Hogwarts monochrome, his waistcoat of a lightweight wet-slate-brown broadcloth, better camouflage than black at nighttime, in the shadows, in a dark cell. Sirius knows this because his singed fingers are wrapped in them and it's like the salamander again, in reverse. The freeze isn't only in Snape's flat, hooded eyes, but radiating from his whole body, piercing into Sirius's hands and shins and his face where he's gotten into Snape's, but it's ice over embers, and a violent, magnetic heat is clinging to his knuckles.

The heat pushes against him as Snape pulls in a breath, pulls himself together, says with a curl of his lips too self-deprecatingly sardonic to be really cruel, "I suppose it's natural that you would have forgotten. What a happy memory the state I was in afterwards must have been for you."

It seems that Sirius's hands must be slipping loose from that dark, dull cloth, falling away, that Sirius must be backing up, surely, he must be. Only, his body stays where it is, transfixed. "Your hands are burned," he's reminded, in a tone so mild it couldn't possibly reach him.

Another flash of that heavy irony, a shift of muscles in a pale throat, and Snape is looking up at him from a new angle. There's a heavy veil of clinical cordiality in his face now, but Sirius can see through it. He can see yellow eyes in tall grass. He can only brace himself until he finds out which of them this venom will dissolve into screaming jelly.

"What do I know," the serpent reflects, relaxing into lounging magniloquence beneath his hands, bringing Sirius swaying with him as he coils loosely back into the armchair, "about Azkaban, what can I tell such a life-long citizen? I wonder, what doesn't he know already." He snaps his fingers lazily. "Of course. Naturally I can tell him nothing of what it is to have his memories and his happinesses sipped away from him in a cloud of horror, to be bombarded without pause with all the
considerable and inexhaustible ugliness of his past."

He doesn't even have the grace to jerk in surprise as Sirius's fists tighten on him again, as a knee grinds into his hip instead of the words Sirius is too choked to scream at him—paralyzed, like a baby bird, but angrier—just rolls like grass in wind in the hard, shaking grip, so that his hair against the chair-back fans into a cobra's dark hood in Sirius's stuttering vision. But it's not Sirius those fangs (neither pointy nor yellow enough for his taste in this moment) are gashing; in the next moment, he can almost taste the poisoned blood splash up onto his tongue.

"But I can tell him," Snape muses in those same smooth, benevolent tones, unflinching, "what it is to go in with no padding of past happiness, with nothing but self for them to steal, no armor of injustice, no animal dens to retreat to. To agree to go, and to do it with open eyes. To go in, not as a punishment misapplied, but as an ordeal and a ploy and a penance, with nothing to hold against them. With nothing to hold at all, with no prayer to chant but trust in the most untrustworthy and ruthless good man alive, who never loved you even that forever ago when it was his duty and he had no just cause not to."

Sirius realizes that his hands have loosened; his singed palms are flat against Snape's steady heartbeat, its slow roll barely softened by muscle or ribs. He thinks he might try to say something, but then the thin lips curve again. This is a purged smile, tired and humorous and disturbingly engaging. "I don't think I will, though," Snape says meditatively. Almost brightly. Well, for him. "So let's just consider ourselves fortunate you haven't self-medicated yourself into a beer belly yet."

This makes so little sense that Sirius, who had just been feeling that the world was considering maybe someday, in its own good time, getting into focus, is left gaping, asking stupidly, "What?"

"I said," Snape enunciates patiently, and still almost jauntily (clearly enjoying himself, the prick), "get off my lap, you enormous ox."

Unresisting, Sirius finds himself pushed away, watching long hands gather papers into two parcels, done and undone. "Definitely a bull," he hears his own voice say.

"Whatever, Black," Snape drones at him, standing carefully, with a little wince. "Perhaps I'll do the rest of this in my so-called office. At least I'm paid for those interruptions. Do please break into my room while I'm gone."

"Snape," Sirius called after him, just as he reached the floo. Snape turned, polite and cool, putting his cloak on with a stiffer and far less dramatic swirl than usual as he waited. Sirius, who actually had no idea what he'd been going to say, asked him, "Were you and Regulus…?" Because, he realized once the words were out, as something he couldn't put a name to howled, it fit. Fit like putting down a puzzle piece where the box said its color should be, before it had any neighbors to make sense of it.

One neighbor. That photograph—but his defenses, well-honed between slimy grey walls, hustled it away from his thoughts.

Snape turned a little, looking profoundly annoyed, and only that. "This again?" he demanded, although Sirius had never named his suspicion before. "Christ, but you're an ass. Here," he added, pulling a vial out of his cloak and pitching it at Sirius's head, lightning quick, with a practiced arm.

*Blue and fluffy-white sky and thundering throngs with painted faces, warm, no cooling breeze but passing brooms. His eyes fixed on Snivellus's darting form, coiled up around his school Moontrimmer like a snake on a branch even in flight, the quaffle tucked under his arm. Seeing him dodge Pete's bludger and zip a taunting ring around him, feeling his lips pull up unwillingly at his*
friend’s annoyance and earnest, clumsy, airborne scamper to get the ball of malice back from Avery.

Catching bird-bright black eyes and a mad grin, utterly contagious in its focused, wicked excitement. The bludger zinging towards his own club, and both their grins widening evilly as the bludger CRACKED off his bat in the same moment that the quaffle whipped off a graceful, airily melodramatic gesture of long, inkstained fingers—and smaller, finer, much cleaner ones, fifty yards to the right. Darcy nearly leaving smoke trying to block the one closest, ending up holding a squashed paper balloon.

The bell for a Slytherin goal ringing to the subdued roar of three hundred throats gasping, just as Snivellus crashes into the stands in a shower of splinters, propelled by a leather cannonball to the shoulder. If anything, the manic, lunatic grin is wider and more gleaming yet, triumphant in the shock before the agony. James winging close to slap Sirius' back, more in congratulation than consolation. Two red heads heading for Snape, all concern over clashing uniforms, Rosier's strawberry blond and Lily's true copper. The sudden yowl and kestrel-dive as James recognized the faint gilt flutter that Snape's hand was caging against his crushed shoulder in the shadow of the bludger (not clutching himself in pain at all, the canny, crazy, brilliant little kamikaze bitch), and screamed to Lily that Slytherin's Seeker-Captain was headed right for it with no one getting in his way. Her hair whipping in alarm, and still in confusion, and Rosier's broom kicking into undisguised speed.

The crack of his hand against his goggles as he tossed ol' Sniv a mocking salute, wondering if Reg had been telegraphing his goal on purpose. Throwing back his head to let the exhilaration and subsiding adrenaline spill out in a peal of rueful laughter, his sweaty hair and the sunlight bathing his face. A flash of movement as Snivvy gleefully, sparklingly, salutes him back in the moment before they all descende. An archer's salute, not military, and he curls in on himself against the Seekers like a tortoise-dragon guarding its hoard.

A high-pitched squeal-and-roar from red-gold painted fans, who had not yet understood James's desperation, rewarding his gallantry, as well they should...

This time Sirius caught the little projectile before it hit him, although the sponge would have hurt his hands less.

Snape went on, "At least you needn't be a useless one." He cast that really irritating privacy spell of his, the one that let you hear that someone was speaking but not the words, cast the powder into the floo, spoke briefly, and stepped through. Exit one git so paranoid you couldn't even be insulted when it was turned on you.

Sirius examined the vial. Innocuous glass with a cushioning spell on it and a sealing charm on the cork, full of a viscous auburn gel. The label was in Snape's brisk copperplate. Like his voice, it had been trained out of the tortured, cramped, calligraphical crimps of his childhood, but, again like his voice, he hadn't quite succeeded in scrubbing away all its near-illegible idiosyncrasies. It was still a touch spidery on the long strokes, still had a hint of pretentious serif about the angle of the nib.

The label read, Temperature Damage (topical).

This, he thought, was ambiguous. When a drop of it didn't burn through the mantelpiece, though, or the next through the side of his arm, or leave them iced over, he spilled some onto his gaunt hand. A cool relief swept over them, leaving his skin soft, relaxed, and unblemished over his worn and chilly bones. The mild warmth of the fire seemed dull and numbing after that softly unyielding heat and its frozen and woolen armors, after the clean wash of magic.
He stoppered the little bottle and looked at it for a moment, Snape's parting jab ringing in his ears. He wanted a drink badly, but it would be... dishonorable, somehow, or at least guiltily uncomfortable, to take the medicine and leave the challenge dangling. Well, he decided, he could take a bottle of wine into one of the less dangerous rooms, and drink it slowly as he worked. After the first glass or two, anyway.

---

DVD Extra, As Requested (elsewhere)

Summary of a Double-Foul

(positions couched as, for example, HS = Hufflepuff Seeker, RB = Ravenclaw beater)

SC Snape, in possession of a quaffle dodged a bludger from GB Pettigrew and noticed that the snitch was near him. GB Black saw an opening to take a shot at SC Snape and took it. Instead of dodging, Snape used the moment to distract GK Darcy with an illusory quaffle while, while SC Black made a goal (or possibly vice versa; Snape and Black both died master prestidigitators). Since a Chaser catching the snitch means either nothing or a foul (possibly depending on the referee) he hid it by curling over his injury until SS Rosier (accompanied by GC Evans) could reach him to check up on him, at which point he planned to pass the snitch to Rosier. GS Potter realized what was going on and and nearly ran over the love of his life in an attempt to get there before Rosier, and GB Black fell toes-over-fucking-teakettle in squee with Quidditch all over again.

I suspect that Evan did get there before James, considering his head start. Considering that you're really not supposed to do that and that it was a happy enough memory for Sirius that the dementors ate it, though, I also suspect that it was such a colossal foul that the game didn't finish, and probably Gryffindor won in the end. This is probably why Severus isn't interested in conveying any information about it to me except a colossal sense of glee over the play and smugness about working well on a team with Reggie.

In this 'verse, Regulus became a seeker in his fifth year, when Evan decided his NEWTs were more important than sports/had a growth spurt and was no longer as aerodynamic as Reg. Severus was only a reserve Chaser. He refused to be considered for the main team, since no one was giving him any time-turners, he got beaten up enough on the ground, and the other regular Chaser liked the glory. He usually played Gryffindor games, though, since his presence was so incredibly distracting to half their team. The bribes he raked in for that over the years would have been enough to cover the down payment for a shop in almost any Wizarding downtown, although [probably not in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade.]
I don't think Harry or even Hermione is quite right about what it means, the way that Severus talks about the dark arts. I've had Sirius share his opinion, but that's because Sirius grew up as a Black, hearing people be genuinely enthused about them, and further up in Gryffindor where what you talked about at length was Quidditch and those whose robes one would like to get inside of and jokes to pull.

No doubt JKR agrees with them, but if there was ever an author who's thrown away rights to exclusive interpretation of a certain character with both hands, that would be her. One's consolation is that she seems to think he's so nasty she probably doesn't even want him (cuddles and flees).

Personally, while I do believe Severus to be fascinated by DADA, it's not the fascination the Gryffs (who were trained to meet things head-on and not let worry be a major part of the preparation process if possible) think it is or probably would even understand.

We've been given to understand that the only time in his life he wouldn't have had reason to feel under constant threat is between Halloween of '81 and Christmas of '91. And that's only if he was as oblivious to what was going on with Quirrell as Harry and Voldemort were led to believe. Of course he's into DADA! Of course he's a defense wonk!

And there's something else. Like Harry, Hermione, and Lily, he didn't live with magic until school. Unlike them, though (and especially unlike the girls, whose parents seem to have been both proud of them from the beginning and well-enough off), he'd grown up knowing it was not only birthright but best if not only hope he had for a future of anything beyond grunt or assembly-line work and alcoholism. And when he got to Hogwarts, the magic was the only thing that worked the way it was supposed to.
He's Covered In TEA!

Chapter Summary

Remus makes Severus want to beat his head against the wall. Like, really a lot. No, no, more than that. Be ambitious!

Chapter Notes

Title apologies to Mr. Izzard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"He had the nerve," he told Remus later that evening, when he'd steadied his own nerves by clearing a couple of highly unpleasant nixies out of the loo next to the bedroom that the Weasley girl and Harry's whip-quick friend with all the hair were going to be staying in, "to tell me it was my fault he got you fired."

Remus, meditatively toasting the bottoms of his slippers in the fireplace, sighed, "Well, I'm not surprised." And before Sirius could do more than gasp with the knife sliding in, he went on with a sort of rueful merriment. "Poor Severus. He's furious with himself over that, I can tell." Eventually noticing that Sirius was still gaping at him, an eyebrow slid up in amusement. He smiled, "You can't expect to get his real feelings out of him by asking about them, surely. Did he manage to come up with a rationale that hung together at all, or just hurl a fistful of disjointed barbs?"

"I can't believe you're sticking up for him!"

"Of course I don't mean he should have blamed you, Padfoot. But we both, surely, have had ample opportunity to see how he gets when he's angry with his own weakness." He sighs again, takes a sip of tea, and reflects regretfully, "I suppose embarrassment doesn't make anyone more graceful, but it's so hard to get along with someone who'll shove anything at you he can to stop you noticing."

"Get along with—!" All this should have been mollifying, but a piece of it choked him, like a splintered chicken bone. "Moony, he had you—"

"I resigned," Remus reminded him, with the air of someone who'd already had to say it a thousand times and was beginning to find the chore tiresome.

"Because he—"

"Because I violated my contract."

"Oh, bollocks, if he hadn't flapped his—"

"I've already spoken to him about this," Remus told him, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Before he could say it's done and make it so, Sirius demanded, "And?"
Pinching harder, Remus said, "I told him how disappointed I was, and he said there was no getting around the Defense curse and I was lucky to have got out with only his self-control and my reputation in shreds, but he was sure he would have been more careful about where he vented his feelings had he been in his right mind. Well, master of his own mind was what he said. And 'entirely justified opinion.' And that he was sure Albus would offer me a job, what was it," Remus's eyes crinkled, "better suited to my duplicity."

He got up without a word to go beat Snivellus into a bloody pulp, but Remus grabbed his arm, chuckling, "Sirius, if you're going to be all stiff-necked and duels-at-sunrise, you've got to be able to recognize the best apology someone's capable of giving."

"APOLOGY!" he yelled.

"I hate this work," Remus said, frankly, "and it's dangerous, but it's been of use for us. And with staying and eating here and continuing to get the potion from him, I can save most of the money."

"So he's giving you the potion as an apology," he tries.

"He recommended I be given the job as an apology, Padfoot," Remus explained patiently. "I think the potion is for his own peace of mind," he added, smiling a little sadly.

Sirius thought about this for a moment, then decided, quite calmly, "Yeah, gonna kill him. Back in a minute."

"Padfoot, don't be ridiculous," Remus laughed at him affectionately. "Can't you see what a compliment it is?"

Sirius stared at him. "You," he utters, "are mad."

"Only in days without a Y in them," Remus said placidly, and drank more tea.

"So, just in France."

"Aren't we all, in France?"

"I don't even know where to start," he said, with perfect truth, abandoning the diversion in disgust.

"Excellent," Remus said encouragingly. "Very parental. Keep it up; you only have a week or two to practice before Harry gets here."

"Don't change the subject!"

"Sirius." Remus put the tea down. "Of course I was angry with him. Very much so. But it's so... so pointless to be angry with Severus for any length of time. You feel upset yourself, when instead you could let the feeling go in perfect confidence that he's already feeling terrible, whether because of what upset you or for other reasons. Besides, if your anger has the least shred of justice in it, he's already internalized your rage at himself, and will continue to feel it in inverse proportions to what you express to him. Getting angry at him just lets him off the hook; if someone else is trying to punish him, he needn't do it himself. It gets his back up, so he'll argue about it, and that has him thinking about why he was right, not why he was wrong. No," he smiled, "I'm quite happy to show Severus friendship and courtesy. He'll punish himself with believing it's false until he decides he doesn't deserve worse, which will most likely be a period longer than I'd wish on him, and then he'll start to give it back." He paused, added with judicious irony, "In his way."

"Oh, like hell," Sirius said grumpily, but he'd already deflated. "What makes you think he even has
"I told you we worked together before," Remus said mildly, delicately refraining from bringing up the circumstances again. "We got on well enough, then."

"And what," Sirius said, making it very clear with his voice that he was humoring the madman, "does 'his way' look like?"

Remus gave him another one of those odd I'm holding back on you looks, and said, judicious again, "Find out on your own, if you want to know."

Sirius didn't like the implications of that. Considering the only other things Remus wasn't willing to tell him? No. Not one fraction of an iota. Not at all.

While he mulled uneasily and Remus placidly sipped, the flames flared green. Snape stepped through with a huge scrap-book-like affair in one arm and a handkerchief clasped over his face. Therefore, they did all the coughing for him. Cleaning the flue wasn't exactly the first thing on Sirius's chore list, but he had to admit that he remembered floo travel as being harsh on lungs and clothes even when the chimneys had been cleaned sometime in the last decade.

"What a sour face," Snape said, smirkingly entertained as he carefully brushed himself off. "Is that all for me? How charming. Lupin, I have a proposal for you to review."

"He says you're the reason he's risking his life spying," Sirius interrupted him belligerently. It was his bloody house, after all.

"How gratifying to hear you acknowledge the risks of espionage," Snape drawled, and, for a perfect parody of class he could never hope to aspire to, buffed his nails languidly on his cloak and examined them with a bored air.

"Well, did you?" he demanded.

Snape gave Remus a wary scowl (Remus was, for some reason, holding his cup of tea up to his mouth to shield suppressed snickers), and said, "Lupin overestimates my influence, I'm sure. What the blazes are you laughing at?"

Slightly pink-faced with bottled mirth, Remus turned a dancingly innocent visage to Snape and said, "Your Malfoy impression, Severus. Does he really do the thing with the nails?"

Snape blinked at him, an eyebrow twisting up in bemused consideration. He answered in a perplexed and cautious tone. Maybe it was because he didn't understand why the question was being asked that he had to answer completely, couldn't do it simply, with a yes or no, like a normal person. "There aren't many circumstances in which Lucius feels it correct to communicate intolerant boredom without actually closing the conversation and walking away. It implies a reason for remaining to listen, as well as spending what credit a man of society must spend to be rude—not a coin he spends lightly on those he must endure. But while entertaining, or being entertained, on occasion, or in the presence of a drunk," his eyes cut meaningfully to Sirius, who looked impatiently back at him, showing not one more scrap of anger than he'd already been pulsating with, "yes."

"What's your reason for staying, then?" Sirius pushed, still feeling bellicose.

"I did say," Snape said, gently, gently, with the most obnoxious patience possible. "I want Lupin to look at something."
"And what's that?"

"Asking into your friend's business, Black? Tsk. How intrusive."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sirius exhaled, exasperated with him. "He's right here. It's not behind his back or anything."

Remus smiled at Snape, and said, "Thank you, Severus, but I don't mind if Si-"

"You're mucking about with his wolfsbane!" Sirius yelped, interrupting as the knut dropped.

"Oh, look!" Snape turned to Lupin in bright interest. "It retains two dry neurons to rub together after all. Shall we have a fire, or will it burn the house down?"

"Severus," Remus sighed, now also exasperated with him. Sirius might have thumbed his nose, if he hadn't been boiling, "please. Sirius, he's not 'mucking about;' he wants permission to try something." He sought confirmation with an inquiring glance at Snape, who inclined his head briefly.

"Because he knows you're too polite to say no," Sirius accused.

"I daresay you don't care whether or not you're doing me an injustice," Snape drawled, "but you might consider whether you're doing your precious chum one. I still don't understand why you refused the valerian and yucca experiment," he told Remus.

Who rolled his eyes. "Severus, you've been throwing valerian at everything even vaguely applicable since third year, and I still think you made yucca up."

"Ha!" Sirius declared triumphantly. He was absolutely going to go look up 'suffimitory' in the dictionary, and if was there, he'd... he'd stop arguing with Molly for a whole day.

"It's a tree," Snape told them, easing himself into a chair near Remus with an air of wanting to thump into it irritably. "Not every plant in the world grows in Britain. Or Europe. It's good for rheumatism and other joint problems and inflammations. Valerian is good for pain and nervous problems, including convulsions and shock. They're both wound-healers, and I had already triple-checked for adverse reactions. The refusal was irrational. And I have not," he added, a touch belatedly, a trifle sulkily. Sirius smirked behind his coffee.

"Valerian needs to build up to a level, I know that—using it for a week won't do anything," Remus retorted, smiling.

"That's as a simple, you crack-brained mule, ingredients work differently when you put them together!" Snape cried, with a note of real anguish. "Why do I bother telling you the details instead of merely the expected effect if you've forgotten all of the most basic theory you've ever learned!"

"Why do you?" Remus asked curiously, still smiling.

Snape growled, loudly and low in his throat—and, in the middle of it, fell pray to a loudhic! Taken by surprise, he clutched his ribs, the muscles standing out in his throat as though the sound that wanted to emerge was too large for a human mouth to contain. A moment of stillness, and breath, and he rose with stiff care, slamming the book bad-temperedly onto the coffee table. "I wouldn't attempt to open to any page but the one bookmarked, if I were you," he snarled.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Severus," Remus said mildly, smiling.
"We'll discuss it after supper. Try to be marginally informed by then."

"Oh, certainly, Severus," Remus said meekly, smiling. "Will you be joining us, then?"

Snape slanted a low-intensity look of distaste down at him, and clipped off, "No."

"What a pity," Remus said regretfully, smile dipping briefly in harmony with his bullshit. "But I hope you'll eat something."

"Don't concern yourself," the bat snapped, and stormed off, style hampered slightly by his ribs.

Remus's smile, as it turned to Sirius, also turned hugely smug. "See?" he inquired.

"He wasn't polite," Sirius pointed out. "He was, in fact, Moony, and I'm concerned if you didn't notice this, because he was pretty obvious about it, insulting."

"For Severus he was polite, don't you think?"

"You said he gives back what he's given," he maintained stoutly, because Remus couldn't be allowed to have it all his own way.

"I didn't say it was instantaneous. Even if I explained them in insufficient depth," Moony returned serenely, amused with his stubbornness, "my methods have demonstrably gotten him to conduct his business with me without a flaming row."

"Your unworthy servant," Sirius bowed melodramatically, although he was, to be honest, impressed; he didn't think he could have gotten that effect even if he understood what the hell Remus had just done, "abases himself at your feet, O master."

"God's in his heaven," Remus declaimed, reaching for his tea again with insufferable satisfaction, "all's right with the world."

Sirius threw a pillow right at his teacup. It turned into a butterfly and started warbling seraphic hymns (flatly, because Remus couldn't carry a tune if you nailed it to a tin of drinking chocolate and soldered a handle on) before it hit, but he was sure Remus got the point.

Chapter End Notes

Suffumitory (or suffumigation) may or may not be in your dictionary, depending on when and where it was published. While no longer in common usage, it was a real thing once. These days we have aromatherapy instead, which is probably easier on the lungs.
Memory and Dream

Chapter Summary

In which it is demonstrated that Severus has a pair of lungs on him, and Black cats do not wish to be ginger. Or stripy.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for language. Or at least volume.

Chapter title in tribute to de Lint.

This chapter should properly be in all-italics. You're welcome.

"I desire you to be kind," Dumbledore tells them, sharp as a tickled dragon, eyes moving between them. The distance between him and Sirius stretches and wavers, distorted as by heat off a hot road. The closeness between Sirius and his friends is so far protected from the effects on emotion of present knowledge that the drifting, observing consciousness twists in on itself in unease. "I hope you would be kind, my children, to even a sworn enemy who had so recently lost his parents. He has sworn oaths to me and walked through flames willingly to prove them. I will have it understood: whatever he has been to you, now he's mine."

Some hoard, he thinks, eyes having already followed the illustrative hand to the ragged figure curled in on itself in the corner. It looks as though its been through ten miles of any rough road you'd care to name, any at all except fire.

The black hair and rough cloth both hang stringily below stark collarbones. Skin whose mild lab-pallor he'd last noticed is a dull grey, almost greenish, like the ash of paper. Lines have pinched their way into a face he'd last seen trained into the kind of bland setting to sharp, mobile eyes that his own family insists on for its women, partially to fend such lines away. The eyes themselves he can't see, now; they're closed, or bare slits. He slowly becomes aware that a stream of sound is coming from the corner, very low.

Names and dates, trolls and goblins and dead kings, the roll of Nature's Nobility, poems and snatches of song that had to be muggle, declensions in three languages, what sound like instructions for building something mechanical, the Quidditch handbook and some other set of rules, all mixed together. Not a hint of spell-talk, or of potions, or of hatred, or of threats.

It's clear that they're here to see him while he still looks far enough down that kicking him would be in bad taste. He still smells of filthy stone and mold, just (badly) shaven enough to stop things building nests on his face, clearly unwashed.

Sirius wonders if Dumbledore thinks himself subtle. He knots his hands, grimly thinking that his brother was, at least, spared this. Chalk one up to karma, maybe.
"Oh, no," Lily gulps, half-strangled, and jerks towards the scarecrow, as if memories of years of being tailed by a surly, sheep-eyed, greasily unkempt beaky basset hound have shoved her forward wearing a stern expression and a FRIENDSHIP costume.

James's wary, restraining arm turns out to be unnecessary. The walking skeleton in the corner flinches further into it, blind-beetle eyes sliding open, staring glassily in their direction, on the other side of Dumbledore from Sirius. "Never, never," it breathes, and Sirius almost smiles—or thinks he does; it doesn't touch his face—to hear the breath of scorn even now, "never, never, never, never fooled." A straw of a finger comes up, circles and slashes emphatically as the scarecrow figure presses out, "Resolutio patronum."

Neither the shining white of a normal patronus nor a Death Eater's soot-black skull-snake that slides off the sharp tip of his finger to hover between them. Instead, a shifting shadow of a feathered serpent, eyes vast and deep and grave, mouth closed on its great curved fangs, spreads enormous wings protectively between its caster and the Potters.

James pokes at it in fascinated experimentation, presumably to test its physical presence, but doesn't leave his hand in place long enough for the lightning fangs to close on it.

"What the…" Sirius breathes, aware of Remus silently echoing the sentiment next to him, of the drop of Pete's jaw.

"One loses the ability to cast a true patronus very quickly," Dumbledore is saying sadly. He's surely about to go on to say that his grimy hoard has obviously figured out an alternative, but he's interrupted.

Snape has already raised bleary, hooded, bloodshot eyes to Sirius, hurled himself across the room, nearly as fast as apparition (never mind a striking snake) and his maybe-just-maybe six stones have crashed Sirius against the wall on pure momentum and recoil. Raw beggar-poet's hands bypass Sirius's light autumn cloak to fist into the collar and bright mouth of his Stones shirt. They draw back to pound him helplessly, like a conniving schoolgirl who wants to show her feelings without interrupting her glamour of fragility, and clutch again. He doesn't look all that much nastier than usual, but he's never smelled bad without their help before. He's never ever smelled, no one has, like so many things that make Padfoot cringe and bristle and back away under Sirius's skin.

"YOU," he bellows, eyes blazing ferocity and filling brightly, struggling to get a handle on his volume and failing every other word. Even James is paralyzed with surprise, because he's never, ever been this suicidal. "You SODDING MORON, what the HELL kind of Slytherin are you, what the FUCK kind of Slytherin plays MARTYR WITHOUT ALLIES, YOU LITTLE IDIOT, YOU CLUNCH-HEADED MULE, YOU MANE-BRAINED, you... you... WHY COULDN'T YOU WAIT TILL I could help you?" He and his voice are breaking, shrivelling in on themselves, and he punches Sirius again, both fists into his chest, bony knuckles first this time, hard.

Sirius thinks through the shock that this one will probably hurt, when the adrenaline goes away, will bruise. But now Snape is hanging from his clothes again, prison-grimy forehead drooping against his cloak, low voice a raw wound of hollow despair, salt dripping onto their knees off a sharp chin, unnoticed. "You let her kill you, you stupid sap, and we'll never prove it, never, never, I expect you didn't want us to, there are no words, I swear to Janus and Salazar I will etch fat orange kittens onto your bloody gravestone, just like I said, with stripes, I don't care what you were trying to do…"

There is the sensation of furious thought without its content as the voice leadenly trails, and then the sensation of a hand on fire, accompanied by a terrible crunch.
Sitting bolt upright in bed, mind and heart racing, Sirius rubs the familiar ghost of a breaking nose out of his fingers, and rolls out of bed, shaken, to shower away the cold sweat.
They had nearly a full day of peace. If one allows that even horrible smells, mouldering piles of junk, rotten wallpaper, cursed heirlooms, and small biting magical vermin can be a part of peace, when taken in good company and without injury, even without anything stronger than pumpkin juice to soften the botheration and itching.

Eventually, though, Snape came back from the castle to spoil what peace there was to be spoiled. Under his arm was a bottle full of clear, faintly yellow-tinted liquid, petals and supple green needles floating in it. Sirius, full of unsettling dreams and yesterday's fury and several lungfuls of filthy black dust, could not possibly have cared two fewer pins what it was, or why.

Snape didn't seem to be deathly ill this time, so although he did look like grim, lowering death having a bad day, Sirius felt no compunctions about getting in his face and growling, "Remus may be the most forgiving person in the entire world, but let me tell you, Snape, you are going to regret the day—"

"Yes, yes," Snape cut him off, with a lazy drawl and an airy gesture. His nostrils flared testingly, and then there was a flicker of relief over his face that made Sirius shiver clear to his boots with rage. The hand that had punched the bedboard in Sirius's sleep last night clenched, drawn with magnetic longing to its favorite beaky target. Without pause, though, Snape finished, "I must wear my rue with a difference."

"Yes, yes," Snape cut him off, with a lazy drawl and an airy gesture. His nostrils flared testingly, and then there was a flicker of relief over his face that made Sirius shiver clear to his boots with rage. The hand that had punched the bedboard in Sirius's sleep last night clenched, drawn with magnetic longing to its favorite beaky target. Without pause, though, Snape finished, "I must wear my rue with a difference."

This stopped him short, a soft slap full in the face with a silky bag of petals. He knew this, he knew it, the grass-vanilla-dust-and-leather smell of old books, and Remus's low voice, lulling them all to sleep… After a moment of processing, he was able to tell Snape, in a much calmer tone, "Go jump in a lake."

Snape smirked, and presented him with the bottle. He angled his angular chin slightly to suggest posing, and declaimed, with a wicked eyebrow, "Here's rosemary, that's for remembrance; I pray you, mutt, remember that I can supply your deficiencies any day of the week. And pansies, actually, and fennel, and columbine—a soppy name, bindweed suits it better. No extract of almond, though. Since you haven't Lupin's sweet tooth I imagine the honey medium will be cloying tedium enough, on the dry side though it is."

Sirius had the feeling of being stopped short and doused with something shocking. Again. He stared at the bottle, which his hands had somehow closed around, and managed, "You made me
"Metheglin," Snape corrected him like the pedant he was, as though it mattered. "It's called metheglin, when it's herbal. If we put the apples and bananas in, it would be malomel. And don't flatter yourself; the base was already made. It's nothing to drop a few herbs and powders in and haste the infusion. I suppose we won't get you off the firewhiskey cold," he added sneeringly, but with a glint in his eye that looked secretly pleased with himself.

Sirius stared from him to the bottle some more, and finally asked, "Why?"

Scoffing, the complete prat answered, "Oh, please. 'Goodness gracious, has Gryffiths left the Harpies? Mercy me, and probably lawks.' You forget I've known your family since I was eleven. I know what it looks like when a Black tries to drop to his knees and beg."

"Fucking gorgeous is what it looks like," Sirius fired back automatically, instantly wanting to avada himself for tossing his head like he and his hair are still young enough for it not to look completely, pathetically stupid.

Only milliseconds less instantly, he's blown away for the third fucking time in five minutes, godricdammit, by the arrested look in front of him, the way the slight widening of black eyes makes them suddenly look blown-pupiled instead of sink-holes, the way the softening of the lines that shoot down the forehead and imprison the severe mouth soften it, too, make it a mouth instead of a harsh, impatient line. There's a feather-touch by his eyes again, Merlin, drifting slowly to his lips, again. A dark voice murmurs, as though it doesn't quite hear itself. "Thunderheads. Night water. Singed mercury."

Sirius's mouth opens, to—what? To say something? Or to… but it doesn't matter what, because Snape is flinching, letting his arm drop, not clutching but flinching around it. The lines on his face are back, with whole exhausted families of company.

"This is often," Sirius says, his eyes on those two harsh runnels above Snape's eyes. They had almost looked, a moment ago, as though they might be capable of thinking about considering a leave of absence. He finds that his hand has wrapped without his direction around an arm feverish with dark magic, that his smallest fingertip has insinuated itself under an overly-long, overly-starched white cuff to rest lightly over a suddenly jackhammering pulse.

"Yes," Snape says blankly. Then he does it again, this time leaving Sirius not stilled or electrified but chilled. Producing his mask and cloak from one of his eighty billion pockets-of-holding and putting them on, he says in a flat voice, "There's something he wants retrieved. It's not now where he left it. Tell the Headmaster that; I haven't seen him since this morning. There are some works in progress in the top left drawer of my desk you might find useful, if," the pale silver scrollwork covers his indifferent face with an almost audible click, "the little bastards have left me a desk."

And then he's gone. Sirius stands very still, clutching the bottle. Breathes. Considers swearing. Considers drinking. Breathes in, deeply, and shouts, "Winky!"
The Scorching Bits

Chapter Summary

M. Riddle would never do anything so (shudder) MUGGLE as to shoot the messenger.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings for nasty nastiness and voice alteration.

I have seriously reduced the voice alteration because frankly I couldn't stand looking at it. You'll just have to imagine all the hhhs and szhs for Severus's c, g, and soft-g noises.

The battery of potions Winky had lined up looked pitifully insufficient when the wards pinged, forever later, and Snape had dragged himself through the door and fumbled it closed. He leaned up against the jamb, sans filmy black over-robe, as though one more step would have him breaking his nose again on the floor. "What the hell happened?" Sirius demanded, trying hard not to look away from him. Somehow, the lack of blood made it worse.

"Told you," Snape pushed out in a thick, mangled voice. Something that looked like a snake or worm's head of liquid, dully crimson fire wiggled its way lethargically out of a cauterized hole in his throat. Another was slowly rocking its way out of his hand. There were similarly scorched areas in his clothes, and his sleeve was smoking where the second flame-thing was working.

"Unwelcome news." The neck-thing started listlessly working its way back in, and Snape's throat and face convulsed slightly, as though holding back a whimper.

"You cannot go back there," Sirius said flatly, and ignored Snape's flash of surprise (and the immediately following irritable, expressive eye-roll, too) in favor of turning back to the stairs and yelling, "Remus, get down here!" He wheeled back, and growled snidely, "Why haven't you gotten rid of them, Mr. Hot-shot out-cursed the seventh year by '72 dark-arts genius?"

"Arms," Snape told him, effort and no emotion in that butchered voice, "bit hamstrung. Can't concentrate for wandless. The crawling. Give me a minute." By the time he'd gotten all that out, an area of broadcloth under his ribs was beginning to sizzle and smoke.

"But you know the incantation?" Remus asked, trying to be his usual soothing self while also efficiently sliding down the bannister and trying not to look horrified and nauseated. He wasn't particularly successful. Sirius was glad, with a tight, heavy heat knotting his gut, to see the pitying sneer on that black-patchworked face, telling them so.

"Probably 'ophidiophae— ophidiophachus— OPHIDIOPHAGUS nihilum,'" Snape pushed out, adding sullenly, under his breath and with equal difficulty, "Defense genius."

"Probably?" they asked like twins, speaking over him. Snape gave the little should work shrug Lily used get sometimes in potions class,
her bright hair bobbing as she bounces on her toes, reined-in excitement a vivid contrast to her partner's air of judiciously maybe-not-completely-doomed dourness. Two long hands moving together in tandem patterns over the dull grey cauldron's mouth, the slim, tanned one trailing shredded willow leaves, the calloused, bony one letting kneazle fur slip between its larger knuckles, drift dustingly down. An effusion of golden bubbles fountains almost to the ceiling, James's teeth grind loudly next to him as the rose-gold girl throws herself ecstatically on her dark and sallow partner. He pats her back awkwardly, bemused and flushed and trying hastily to look displeased when a strawberry blond eyebrow and a finer platinum one raise themselves at him from across the room.

and waggled his finger in a wand-like gesture. Remus pulled out his wand and repeated the incantation. It fizzled, and Remus's throat tightened in frustration. His lips pulled into a snarl aimed, Sirius thinks, at the curtained portrait. Sirius pulled out his stolen wand and copied the gesture, too, repeating the phrase vehemently.

Then Snape is making a horrible swallowed noise and being propelled by the spell away from the door in a smoky burst of yellow-white magic. He crashes to the floor and curls in on himself as several dozen oily-flame things burst their way out of his skin, his clothes, his shoes. They dissipate into puffs of greasy ash, leaving particles floating disgustingly in the air, burnt patches on the mat and the floor.

Snape doesn't groan, like any sane person would. He lets out a long breath and goes limp for a minute, breathing quietly and deeply, and then starts trying to drag himself to his feet with noodle-knees, with wrists and elbows that don't seem to be responding to orders. Sirius and Remus look at each other and kneel down to haul him up by the arms, pretending they're only half-carrying him up the stairs.

*Stop fussing, Padfoot, I've got to get back to—*

*To the Thickey ward, sodding mental you are, at least get your leg set before you go diving into—*

*Bawk, bawk, bawk, mama Black. Look, that wall's going to collapse any minute, okay, we've got to get Roz out—*

*She's fine, Pete's on it, see? Bawk bawk my arse; you think I won't hit you just because you're bleeding?*

*Well, yeah.*

*And quite right you are, M. Prongs. I'll just tell your lovely she-buck. And your mum.*

*...So where was that mediwizard again?*

as Snape managed to make his feet more or less track. "So, Padfoot," Remus mused lightly as they moved him, "If Severus were an animagus…"

Snape made a pointed retching sound. It was quite realistic, what with the shape his throat was in. Daft of him on several counts, of course, but it had always been clear to everyone, including Snape, that he and the rest of the world had different definitions of 'sensible.'

"Rhinoceros?" Sirius suggested thoughtfully. "Charging rhino?"

"I thought battering ram," Remus proposed.

"No, rhino," Sirius explained, albeit with an appreciative eyebrow-bob, "what with the nose."
"You," Snape rasped, sweating and even more limp-haired than usual with pain in the middle of the stairs, "everyone south of Manchester. And hippogriff y' stumbled drunkenly in on. All know where you can stick your," he stopped to swallow, "overtrodden nose jokes. Memorizin' de Bergerac. Soon. You wait."

They grinned at each other over his head, which was bowed in ferocious attention to his feet and the steps. "Are you sure you're in shape to talk?" Remus asked, dripping with solicitude.

Snape hauled his head up to look at Moony, pulled back his lips, and, with a fine deliberation, hissed. More feline than snakey, actually, an unending hiii from the top of his mouth rather than a sibilant set of esses whistled between his teeth, along with a sparse but alarming few flecks of blood. Sirius said, "Oh, of course, Mooney, how stupid of us. Obviously he'd keep on being a catty little bitch."

"Cobra," Snape said grumpily (and slurrily; it sounded more like 'houvra') as they made it to the top of the stairs. "When I walk among men I make truths ring like spurs. Ha! 'Ll have th' rest of it soon. Bring me giants!" His foot caught on the last step, and he swallowed a pain noise. Then he added, "Hagrid, for preference. Doesn't give people second concussions."

"You'd need better hair to be a cobra," Sirius advised him lightly, ignoring the rest of the nonsense. "This lot'd make a shite hood. Uh, Snape? We're going to need to get past your wards now."

"Can walk," they were informed, still grumpily.

"Shall we laugh now?" Remus politely asked the string-bean who was starting to tremour with the effort of not slumping onto one or both of them, "or wait until we've picked you up off the floor?"

"Die now," Snape suggested as a third alternative, brightly helpful, like gilding on gingerbread loam-black with molasses, even though Remus generously hadn't said again. Then, after a moment's effort, in a drearier voice, resigned to his temporary helplessness, "My hand to the door-frame. Middle hinge. Higher. Higher. There. Close eyes."

Of course Remus pretended to do as requested, and Sirius didn't bother. He still couldn't track the complex set of runes Snape traced into the door, though, even though a silvery-green light followed the long, muddy finger. Reddish mud. Sherlock Holmes would have been able to figure out where the Death Eaters had had their meeting from that, probably; Sirius had no clue. "Should we help you change?" he asked dubiously.

Snape's head rolled again, and Sirius got a long, slow, sardonic look. This wasn't one of the many designed to make the recipient feel knee-high to a worm, though, although the difference was subtle. Maybe having been interrupted by something besides themselves was the key, because it was laced with perilous undertones of an almost warm ruefulness. He was left remembering the moment before the call, a sleepy hand reaching up to him in a sunny room, a warm body pillowing him, all wire and bone and radiating grim purpose along with spicy, dark, a mber-green scented heat. His own voice in the air, reading something very boring from the book he's holding, and the steady scratch of a quill from off to the side. He can just see the calloused hand holding it, stained in patches and splashes with ink and other things. The moving feather's grey tip traces backwards and upside-down letters into the air, and the lazy thought drifts by that maybe he could read them that way, if he really tried. Wiggling closer into the legs cradling his sides, not purposely distracting but merely in contentment. Then his own laughter in the air, rich and pure in hindsight, delighted with the stutter of the quill, the twitch and growl from behind him, and the reproachful tug to his curling hair.
No! He isn't remembering that. Not really remembering. It's what Snape had said: people were suggestible about memories. He should have burned that book before he cracked its cover. Never happened, excellent prank, image well-charmed, now, how to get Remus back for it...

"Tergeo and evanesco, do for now."

Snape was calling him back to the real. There was scathing courtesy in his blasted-open voice, withering to a shivering, whimpering husk the idea that anyone might undress him.

Sirius made everyone look at him with surprised consideration by jumping nervously to obey. "You take that, Moony," he rattled, "what potions d'you want, Sniv? Winky brought loads."

"Don't know what that person wants," Snape tried to drawl and merely grated, pausing to swallow painfully a few times as he also failed to lever himself up on disobedient elbows, "but I'll have general curse smotherance, cell replacement, muscle support, mentholated mucilaginous anesthetic, the scar suppressant that's blue without the picture of a dittany flower, temperature damage. 'Less you've used it all."

Remus blinked at Sirius.

Snape added, face curling and charred throat shuddering in revulsion despite himself, "Nnh. Parasitifuge. Orange, white marbling. Probably unnecessary, far better safe." He swallowed again, grimaced, and said dolefully, "Please dis— discourage 'f I do anything really mad next seventy-two hours." He heard himself, groaned, and mourned, "No point saying that to you; have to pray. Called Headmaster?"

"Not yet," Remus said unhurriedly. "Severus, how many of these are topical?"

"My concern," Severus rasped flatly. "Just bring washcloth. No magic at all in. Cucumber water and another cup. Let Headmaster know, back all right. Say..." he paused for thought, ignoring their disbelief at this description of his state, "say 'Hypatia's wit still obscure.'"

"As is yours?" Remus murmured, face taken over with that old cryptographer's intrigue. Sirius grinned a little

*dark dusty rooms gathered in together over the map, all vibrating together with the best kind of*
anxious, giggling over Spot Mrs. Norris

sprawled out on curtained beds pushed together for convenience, Jamie getting fed up and pummeling his Charms book with a pillow till Remus smacked him, chewing snortlingly on his own in magnanimous solidarity, not-really-planning Oh The Dog Ate My Homework, Professor M, really!

to see it again. "I'll tell him some of that," Remus told Snape on the way to the door.

"How far have you got so far?" Sirius asked him before he went. Sniv always needed humbling, especially when he thought he was being a martyr.

"Well," Moony said cautiously, "Hypatia was the librarian at Alexandria when it burned who wouldn't let the crowds in, for all the good that did."

Snape made an annoyed pff noise and said, "Story. Skinned by monks. Relig—" he paused to swallow again. Sirius had been noticing he'd been doing that a lot after hard c and g noises, even though they kept turning to mush. It made him sound congested. "Religiopolitics. Seashells and pot shards."

"It's the better-known story, Severus, and she was from Alexandria and associated with the library. And you're trying to convince me I'm wrong So it's something—"

"Could be double-bluff," Snape pointed out, eying Remus with condescending amusement. "'R triple."

"So it's something," Remus repeated, unruffled, "to do with either the Hogwarts library or Ravenclaw. Whose wit is certainly obscure, if I remember those times we tried to get into their tower rightly. And, come to think of it, her family motto was 'wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure, wasn't it?"

"Sniv said something wasn't where the Noseless One thought it was," Sirius put in helpfully. "If he's thinks he's punny, maybe something other than a book? Something of Ravenclaw's, or that was supposed to be in the library?"

They looked at Snape inquiringly.

He looked impatiently back at them, saying, "Headmaster, cucumber water, empty cup. Not glass, wood, or bronze. And washcloth. 'Fyou'd be so good. 'F'ts not beyond you. This century'd be favorite." He was still trying to sit up. It was kind of pathetic, Sirius thought, if you only forgot that he really deserved every moment of it.

Or maybe only if you forgot those moments of lying on the floor, collecting himself as though gathering himself through pain to stand calmly were a habit. He'd never used to do that; hex Snivvy down and he was clawing his way to his wand before he'd even hit the ground.
"Century's almost over," Sirius commented, after Remus had sighed disappointedly and left. "So's the millennium. Think we'll have him beat by then?"

"Not slogging through five more bloody years 'fthis," Snape snarled. Sirius chose to suppose that was a yes, as the alternatives would be alarming. A muscle under Snape's eye winced in the middle of the sentence, although he didn't pause for it. "Want to talk? Throat drops." He sighed, evidently giving up on his elbows and dignity. "And help me up."

He turned out to have meant the blue-streaked green 'mentholated mucilaginous anesthetic,' and it also turned out that he was being literal; the top unscrewed to reveal an eyedropper. The stuff smelled like being punched in the face with a cheap candy store.

It gave Sirius a flash back to pretending to really enjoy some peppermint vodka that Jamie had gotten from Tessa Sprout all the way back in third year. There'd been all this enthusiasm about how it 'tasted like, like, like cleanliness! Like lightning when it's still in the sky! Reckon this'd be what light magic tastes like if you could taste it?' Sirius, who hadn't quite stopped feeling pulled between his friends and family yet, hadn't felt able to admit that as far as he was concerned it tasted like having his tongue freezer-burned off with salamander bits.

On reflection, Tessa had probably grown the peppermint herself, yes, or nicked it from her mum's greenhouses. However, she'd most likely gotten the actual vodka from Snape. He wasn't the only one who could have made it, but he was the most likely to have made it to sell or trade.

Sirius, now, wasn't sure whether he was more amused or depressed-and-revolted by this realization. On the one hand, Jamie would probably have thrown up if he'd found out, so hideousness and betrayal by the universe and all that. On the other hand, Sirius could imagine the slack-jawed, D-mouthed, nose-wrinkling face he would have made, eyes as round as his glasses, and it would have been hilarious and Sirius and Remus would have ganged up on him for weeks of mockery.

Pete would have gone into also-hilarious flustered denial and a state of brain-frying cognitive dissonance around having enjoyed (or at least having said he'd enjoyed) something Snape had made, and a whole other one about James having made an obvious mistake which had come back to bite him in the arse. He would have wanted to support Jamie, and would have dithered and fretted himself into a state of sweets-induced indigestion trying to think how, since Pete always thought Remus was talking sense even when he wasn't.

But Worms-for-brains had killed Pete dead and run off with his skin and talents, and it was too poisonously painful to think about him. Even Sniv was better.

Settling against the headboard with a pillow behind him, said Sniv titled his head back as far as it would go and practically unhinged his jaw in an obvious attempt not to taste the potion as he held it up with a shaky, wandless levitating charm and aimed it down his throat. Sirius was caught
between the urge to laugh and the one to stare, at the arch of white throat and the necessary curve of spine and shift of narrow hips, and tug his waistcoat farther down.

Snape caught him at the laugh-repressing and glowered at him, almost as ill-humored as usual. "Good stuff?" Sirius asked innocently.

Snape wrinkled his beak, and said, "Effective." It must have been; his voice already sounded better.

"Muggles use flavoring," he mentioned.

"Beyond reason," Snape complained, then paused and let out a relieved breath, his eyes falling closed for a second. He was gripping hard, when he went on, but he looked actually happy now that he no longer seemed to be gargling sandpaper, eyes relaxed over the twist of his mouth in the pleasure and relief of having his voice back. "It is beyond reason that people cannot seem to grasp the very simple idea that flavoring agents would act as ingredients in a potion and, oh, I don't know, perhaps somehow change it."

He didn't quite smile, but there was a world of smug in his voice as he said to himself, apparently just for the hell of it, "Calcutta. Jonquil. Equinox. Gargantuan. Quetzalcoatl. Ha."

"Whatever you say, Cicero Churchill," Sirius droned at him, although he couldn't help smiling a little. "Won't taking a lot of potions on top of each other do something like that?"

"That's what the cucumber water's for. It takes what you might call, in this context, a cushioning charm well. Potions generally don't interact with each other once swallowed; schools of thought are divided on whether it's an effect of living stomach acid or a wizard's magical field. Still, with a battery like this, it's better not to take chances."

"But mostly you want it because every single one of them tastes disgusting," he challenged him.


Sirius smiled. After a quiet moment, he picked up a quill that had been lying on top of a potions journal on the bedside table, played with it idly. Without looking up from it, he declared, "You weren't sleeping with Reg."

"What makes you say that?" Snape asked quietly, eying him as though he might explode, somehow, if prodded.

With an uncomfortable shrug, Sirius hedged, "I just... think you weren't." When he'd decided to say it, he'd thought it would sound better than 'you called him a little moron in my dream.' In retrospect, he was less sure about that, although he was still sure it wasn't the way Snape talked to people who manage to edge or force their way into his personal space. He was also still quite pleased he hadn't said anything about fourteen-year-old bed linens.

"Ah," Snape uttered, and looked through the door after Remus.

"Were you?" He couldn't help it.

Snape sighed, and tilted his head to look at Sirius, revealing wide burns over his cheekbone, under his jaw. "Would it mean anything to you," he inquired carefully, "if I reminded you of his namesake?"

"You mean my great-aunt?"
"No."

The Leo star, then. He thinks about it, staring at the feather, grasping at trailing threads..

Will you—my god, will you stop asking me that? That's foul, you—

You're damn right it's foul, you—

-You don't sleep with kittens!

...

That is, unless you do. You don't, do you? Dear me, Black, and here I thought humping legs was more your line.

...Oh, sod off.

With whom, pray?

With the memory of deep but for once not dark laughter ringing in him, black eyes bright with actual by-god merriment, he looks up. The eyes are shadowed, bruised-looking, lined, and there's a smudge of ash on one eyelid, but they're clear and relaxed with the same shocking lack of malice. Wary, but with that same don't-spook-the-wild-animal wariness from before he'd gone careening into the very disturbing past.

"You said," he says slowly, "you said he was the House pet, and you used to help him with his homework. You said he kept getting his feathers ruffled trying to be the Slytherin Prince of the late seventies when Malfoy had it locked up-

"Malfoy was five years ahead of us. It's generally a mistake to believe the things about him that he's himself convinced of, Black."

"Someone else, then-"

"Evan." Sirius stares at him for a moment, because Lily Evans was many things, but good grief. "Rosier," Snape answers his stare, annoyed. "It was Evan Rosier."

"Rosier, fine, you must have had fun with that, Ev and Sev, was it? And you'd flatter him with spiked cocoa."

"Made him feel more grown-up," Snape agrees, mouth down-turned, looking trapped in a past of his own. "As though he were being taken seriously, when all anyone wanted to do was ruffle his hair. Anyone who didn't want to take him for all the Blacks had, anyway." Unhappily, he adds, "And it was just short-brew rum, too. Couldn't have been as much twenty proof. And it was not 'Ev and Sev,' thank you," he adds belatedly, scowling, the quotation marks almost visibly painted with contempt.

"Kept the dungeons well-supplied, did you?" he asks, trying to leer, to pull them up out of it.

"I earned my keep."

Sirius was still looking at him—silenced, because that hadn't sounded sneering or ironic—when Remus came back in. He looked between them, and said, with that note of ominous concern that had quelled the Marauders' worst ideas, no matter what outsiders thought of his prefecture, "Severus?"
"No," Snape answered, briefly, not looking up.

"All right," Remus said, still in that lowering tone, and put the things down. Sirius instantly started to itch; he hated being left out. Remus watched until Snape had successfully maneuvered the curse suppressant, cell replacement, and muscle support potions down his throat, punctuated by long sips of clumsily rune-impregnated cucumber water, and was cautiously flexing his arms. Then he wandered out with a cordial nod.

Sirius caught up with him in the hall, and demanded, "What was that about?"

"Oh," Remus said evasively. "Nothing. I thought he might have hurt himself."

"I was sitting right there," Sirius pointed out, wounded.

"Yes, well," Remus agreed, his eyebrow cocked right at that's not reassuring, Sirius o'clock. "You might have… not been able to stop it." You might done it yourself, his expression said, but it was the clumsy puppy tone, not bad dog. Sirius was mystified.

And Remus was smiling at him, as though he'd just brought the sun out, and that was beyond mystifying, it was dizzying, with the suddenness of the turn-around. "That's our Padfoot," he said fondly, and spun Sirius around by the shoulder, propelling him back into Snape's room with a cheerful, "You babysit him, Severus."

Severus, in the middle of a mouthful of something probably revolting, choked on a strangled, indignant squawking noise, clutching at the lined measuring cup Remus had brought up to pour his potions into.

"What the fuck," Sirius demanded of everyone, but Remus was already closing the door and Snape was giving him an annoyed what are you asking me for look over the rim of his cup. "Okay," he said belligerently. If he wasn't getting an answer to that, then, "If it wasn't Ev and Sev," Snape glared at him, "what was it? You two were joined at the hip half the time, weren't you?"

"It's none of your business."

"Why not?"

Snape made a quite good attempt at gaping elegantly at him, which ought not to have been possible at all. "Why would it be?"

It might have been Sirius's imagination, but he thought he heard a note of challenge, or perhaps motivated curiosity. He was spurred to think back, grasp about for silvery threads. This question didn't make the world thrum and go all focused wrong, didn't beat at his skull from inside his head. So, not informative. He finally said, "Well, it wasn't Cobra."
"Not in front of Gryffs it wasn't," Snape said mildly, and regarded the jar of orange and white yuck with a dismal mixture of utter loathing and the hope of salvation. "You wouldn't have gotten the joke."

"What joke?" he asked not really paying attention, because all his snatching at memories had gleaned was nonsense. Not pain, not images, not even real words. All mimsey were the borogrobes, rattling around his head while Snape poured himself out a solid measure of the unshrunken pestilowhatever and swilled it around the cup with an expression of resigned repugnance that would have done any first-year proud.

If he'd been paying attention, he might have noticed Snape looking up from the cup, up at him with an inscrutable expression, its unreadability marred only by the wry millimeter's curl at one side of his mouth. Instead, he only heard Snape say, "We all had our snakes, it wasn't some unique affectation. Cobras are apt to give warning. And make targets of themselves. I was Naja siamensis; they'll spit in your eye. Hang on and chew, if you make them bite."

"That's a joke?"

"Cobra is always a slur. Crass, you see? The least Slytherin snake there is, some would say. Obvious. More stubborn than utilitarian. The difference between it and what you called me is that my house took care to choose an humiliation that was moderately clever and wouldn't sound like they'd meant it to be one if heard outside the dungeons. United front and all that."

What, thought Sirius, turning to look at him, tugged by that determinedly don't-care tone, am I doing in here?

"Tea?" asked Snape, everything about him innocent and shining under the awful hair and the blackened cauterized patches and the fatigue and the mud and ash Remus hadn't remembered to clean up before flaking off to get the cups and things. He held the tin measuring cup with its seething orange bleargh for all the world as though it were Royal Doulton, black form-fitting boots buckled to the knee crossed composedly at the ankles over Molly's knitted blanket, itself spread over the white eiderdown. Sirius could see the leather strap of a wand-holster cinched at his thigh, the calloused, knuckly length of his tapering fingers, the spare strength of his wrist, gravity smoothing dark cloth down over the bones of his hips.

"You sadistic bastard," Sirius declared, slink—er, storming out. And he meant it.
Bread and Board

Chapter Summary

A few words on hospitality and domesticity.

Chapter Notes

Although probably no one needs to be told, assumptions like that get me in trouble. So: In many traditions, eating bread and salt together creates a sort of contract (implicit or otherwise) of hospitality between guest and host. It's an affirmation of good wishes and/or a promise to behave appropriately and treat the other well. It's a custom that might fall anywhere on the spectrum of polite to sacred.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus and Molly ganged up on him later, while Arthur sat at the imperviused kitchen table, blissfully attacking something metal and covered in oil with a wrench and a screwdriver. All Sirius could say for sure that it probably wasn't a motercycle or car part, unless there'd been more advancement while he was rotting than he could quite credit. They sent him back to see if Snape could come down for dinner or needed a tray up.

Despite his insistence that a) he didn't want to, b) Snape would prefer anyone else, c) he didn't want to, d) it was a hopeless piece of optimism since Snape never ate at Grimmauld, and e) he really didn't want to, he found himself snarling under his breath at the door, found his hand opening it.

Snape had drunk the orange stuff, taken his boots off, and cleaned himself and the bed up. He hadn't changed, though, and his skin and clothes were both unmended. The washcloth and the vial of burn potion were still sitting untouched on the bedside table. He had evidently fallen asleep before getting to them; his lax hand had drooped off the side of the bed, the measuring cup fallen to the floor.

Sirius sighed, and shook him awake. This time there was no dreamy welcome in the bruised eyes, just instant weary protest, echoed in the groaned, "Not again!"

"Not that I know of," Sirius said, and then they both fell silent while Snape clumsily clawed at the buttons of his sleeve. They went nearly up to his elbow, both layers. The mark lay quiescent under the bloody linen of his shirt, a shadow barely visible under the white skin. Snape shot a stormy what did you wake me up for then look at him, and Sirius hastily defended himself, "It's not my fault, Molly and Remus made me. They say are you coming down to eat."

"Against my will," Snape mocked him, "I am sent to bid you come in to dinner."

"Well, yeah," Sirius said, sprawling down to sit on the bed as Snape dragged himself up unwillingly, propping himself up against the headboard again. "I reminded them you never eat here, but Molly threw a fit and said she's sure a gentleman like your highness wouldn't scorn her cooking when you're not in shape for the Great Hall."
"She did not."

"No, but she did throw the fit."

"Tell her," Snape suggested, with a haughty sneering head motion that made his neck look positively swa—positively giraffe-like (and also cracked one of his burns so that a drop or two of blood trickled down to kiss the thin strip of white shirt peeking above his jacket collar), "that I do not eat… food."

"She'll just make you blood pudding. —Huh. Can you make your skin go any color, like Tonksadora, or just green?"

He couldn't quite get used to calling his cousin by her surname, even if he could almost wrap his mind around her being a cop. When he tried, he remembered when she'd worn (and been) pink because Andi thought it looked sweet on a three-year-old, not because she herself was, as now, the poster witch for chirppunk. He couldn't get away from when there had been no fiercely cheerful irony in her pigtails, when her lollipop fetish had been honest-to-Merlin innocent and cute. He'd been able to get her to practice reading by cuddling her in his lap for it, and promising that she could help teach the Prongslet in a few years, when he was old enough and she was good at it.

"It's a matter of House pride," Snape said demurely, the horrible whey color retreating not quite as rapidly as it had come on.

Sirius gave him an uh-huh smirk, but dropped it before saying, "You should come down and eat."

"Wrong."

"I'm not saying it for your sake, you prat. It would reassure her if you'd take bread and salt with us."

Snape gave him one of his signature you are an utter twit who has tried to learn a trick but instead fallen on his face looks. "Well spotted."

Sirius straightened, going cold. "That's what this is about? You won't—get out of my house."

The o ya u r so dum look intensified. "It means nothing to me, and a great deal to traditional families. It's useful to be able to say I never have."

"Lie," he suggested angrily.

"I wouldn't have to be a good occlumens if I were a good liar," Snape said scathingly.

"A good what?" he demanded.

"Tell her I need to rest so I can get up and take my classes tomorrow. Which I do."

"A good what?"

They folded their arms at each other. Snape first, Sirius half-mockingly. Standoff.

"You're going to have to eat anyway," Sirius pointed out eventually, despite knowing in his soul that he who speaks last laughs last.

"Says who?" Snape inquired, looking as though he was enjoying himself mightily.

"Biology!"
"But I'm full now."

Sirius gaped at him. "Of what?"

"Potions," Snape replied, giving him a severe look that left him flushed, realizing what the question had echoed. "And cucumber water. A lot of volume in liquids, Black, very filling. But you already know that."

Sirius went on staring. "That is not-"

"Black," Snape declared, equally exasperated. "I do not know who could possibly eat, let alone trip down for a jolly family supper, after having carnivorous flameworms under their skins! I may never eat again!"

This was a point, Sirius had to admit it, although he also had to notice that Snape looked as though the snake things had eaten what little extra flesh he had, and the cell-replacement potion hadn't put it back. "It means something," he said finally, sullenly, even if it was a tacit admission of being a member of his family, "to me."

"I have to reassure them I'm not getting chummy with you lot!" Snape pressed at him fiercely. "Very kind of you, I'm sure, to take the Headmaster's place and forbid me to go back, but the work needs doing and no one's better suited, better trained, or better placed. No one else is moderately well placed, except Lupin. Even if he were in the least credible, do you want him taking my place? Being able to periodically tell them I haven't broken bread with the Order is one of the details that helps me stay that way. It's like being able to tell the Ministry I haven't personally killed anybody. It may be stupid and superstitious, but that's purebloods. It's baseline, Black!"

"You've broken bread with me!" Sirius hears his voice insist, although he's pretty sure he'd meant to protest the comparison. He sees Snape's eyes narrow into that still watchfulness, hears the brittle scorn of his, "Oh really, and when was that?" thinks it a veil over what he could almost think is hope.

From a long way away, it feels like, he hears himself say, "You broke open a loaf with your hands. It was garlic bread, it was... was about dripping with butter, enough garlic to sting, and rosemary, and the steam came up in a cloud, smelled like... like stepping off the train and into the feast, and there was a chicken and... and you said you for one couldn't afford this kind of extravagance every week, but..."

His voice has trailed off, and his head is pounding. Snape is holding his breath, hands clenched on Molly's blanket, leaning slightly forward, his eyes transfixed, pulling Sirius in. "But?" he whispers.

"But some occasions..." he gropes for it, head splitting, and brings his hot palms up to cradle his forehead. "I can't remember." The words fall on the bed like stones.

Cool hands replace his, and one slides through his hair, landing lightly, lightly on his nape, washing cleanly through the throbbing pain. "I'll eat with you," Snape says, very quietly. "Sometime. If you like."

"Chicken was brilliant," he mutters.

Snape's forehead comes to rest on his, the hand moving down to cup his jaw. Maybe it's the freshening spells he seemed to have done instead of attending to his burns before falling asleep, but the hair falling on Sirius's face doesn't feel disgusting at all. Rather, it's fine and cool, like dry water. Although without pain now, his head is pounding, brain dashing itself yearningly against his
skull, perhaps, or the other way around. He doesn't dare to breathe in the man's scent, tries to shove away awareness of the heat and weight of him.

"Remind me after, if we live," he's told, a rueful half-smile buried somewhere in the deep, somber voice, "in the free, with enough of the requisite limbs and organs functional and more than half our wits—" at this point Sirius half-heartedly thumps the most convenient bit of him, since he seems likely to go on doomsaying forever. Snape flicks him back, an utterly token gesture shot into the join of his neck and shoulder. It stings a little, like a jolt of life. "Remind me after," he finishes softly, hand unknotted to drape once more, warmer now, over Sirius's nape, "and I'll make it again."

Chapter End Notes

On the subject of Severus killing people: while DH is by no means my north star or guiding light, I think we're in agreement on this one. Other interpretations are valid, of course, but that 'And my soul?' suggests he's unlikely to have had direct homicide on his conscience before the Tower, Death Eater or not.
"This was probably not a very good idea, Severus," the voice says from behind him, somehow steely and mild at the same time. Sirius has barely a moment to register the feel of a hard hand soft on his back, body-warmed linen under his cheek, at the corner of his mouth. Then he's being hauled away from them and propelled to the door.

They were in the corridor, the door closed, before Sirius was awake enough to get his feet securely under him. Remus was giving him a neutral look. "What happened?"

"Happened?" Sirius repeated, a bit blurry, resisting the desire to rub at his eyes, his mouth. "Nothing 'happened.' We were talking, and I guess we both fell asleep."

Remus kept looking at him. It had been, he realized belatedly, a crazy thing to say. As though they trusted each other enough to sleep in a room together. To breathe in a room together. Much less on a bed. "He's in that condition," Sirius defended himself, explaining why it was reasonable for them both to have drowsed off accidentally, "and I didn't sleep well last night." He flexed his hand, remembering the dream that, he suspects, wasn't one.

Remus kept looking at him. Finally, he allowed, "He is still burned," as though it were a grudging point in someone's favor. Now Sirius looked at him, confused. "You can't—if you're going to—you'd have to be sure, Padfoot," Remus said haltingly, still giving him the Earnest Gaze That Sucks The Truth Out. "I think he'd kill... someone if you... changed your mind on him."

A snarl, black eyes armored and glinting with the last desperate armor of suspicion. "I'm not one of your trulls or tarts, Black, I am not to be toyed with!"

"I think I want to kiss him," Sirius blurts. The Gaze has pulled it from between his lips while he
was busy keeping back my mouth aches with wanting to sheathe his tongue and fill the shadows between his ribs.

Remus's autumn eyes widen only marginally, and the twin blows of those not-really-surprised eyes and his own prepubescent outburst let him get a hold of himself. "What's wrong with me?" he asks Remus plaintively. "Maybe a fume interaction? Those were a hell of a lot of potions to have open in a five-minute block."

"Anything else?" Remus asks steadily, with an air of putting diagnosis on hold.

"I want to," The Eyes drag out of him before he grinds to a halt.

Wash all those layers off his shoulders one by one with my hands, his horrifying brain helpfully suggests, until the myth of brewer's triceps is answered in skin. Find out whether He Who Must Not Eat Supper has any kind of a stomach under there (to breathe in from so close, to rest a cheek on), and whether he looks indignant or arrested when his nipples are assaulted. Warm my palms on his thighs, see if we can get past finding out how soon after acquiring an income he made the sensible switch to boxers (black or green? Surely not silk, not a repressed little puritan like him, surely never grey again) or how long he hugged the wound like a stubborn little tit, without too much blood and trauma. Find out why that brand isn't safely forested away in hair, what two white arms would do for those lines in his face, whether he could keep that sour look on during a backrub, a foot rub, ha, bet not, whether the depilation goes farther up, or farther down. Watch him let me touch his throat, lace our fingers together, see if I have enough tan left from last year to make a contrast. Feel clean hair fall around my hands.

He seizes with some relief on this last wistful thought, and substitutes, "I want to find out why he only looks greasy when he's on his feet."

Remus's Patiently Long-Suffering And Unwavering I Am Not Fooled Gaze™ makes him

Let me see if I can explain this to you, gentlemen. The difference between Marvin the Mad Muggle dipping Betty Oglethorpe's braids in an inkwell and your giving Evans and McKinnon animal faces is that Betty Oglethorpe's usual reaction is to burst into tears and graciously accept a gallant apology in flowers. As opposed to hexing back, not speaking to you for a week, and telling the entire third year that all four of us are a bunch of marauding Neanderthals who must be boycotted in female solidarity. Which Pete and I think is just a bit unfair. And since he'd just about pinned Tessa Sprout down for next Hogsmeade, it would be decent of you to start trying to make it up to the girls once the boils have dried and the Pomfrey lets you up, don't you think?

wonder what it would feel like to be Snape, and think you could fool anybody, ever, let alone everybody all the time. "Hey, remember when we gave Lily and Marlene animal faces?" he asked, not caring if it was abrupt.

Now Remus did look startled, but the deep foreboding chased the surprise and reminiscent pleasure out of his face smartly. "Sirius," he said hastily, "you're not going to-"

"I was just trying to remember what they looked like," Sirius assured him. "Lils made a good vixen, didn't she? Pretty sure James was trying to be flattering and lying through his teeth when he said it'd be a laugh."

"Oh, Merlin," Remus uttered faintly, hiding his face behind a hand in dread. "Please, no, no, no, Sirius, no, I'm glad you're feeling better, I really am, I'm glad beyond words, Padfoot, but please, please, no..."
"You know," Sirius complained, aggrieved at this slur on his sense and good character, "if someone would give me something actually useful to do, I'd have other things to think about besides Snape and doxycide and ye olde schoolyarde and driving myself mad not being able to do a damned thing for Harry."

Recovering, Remus said drily, "I really admire how you've managed to steer this conversation right around onto a subject neither of us has a great deal of control over. If you burn the house down while I'm speaking to Severus, please do me the courtesy of not flashing me innocent puppy-dog eyes, will you?"

"Right you are," Sirius replied amiably over the spark of anger, flashing him innocent puppy-dog eyes in vengeance.

Remus groaned, and wheeled about to re-enter the guest room, pausing on the threshold to set his shoulders.
Socks of Malice

Chapter Summary

Remus has it out with people more politely than Sirius would.

Sirius crept up to eavesdrop shamelessly. Naturally, the first words he heard once the spell was in place were a pre-emptive, "Mind your own business, Lupin."

"Can't you even bear to say my name, Severus?" Remus asked mildly.

"No." Matter of fact. "And I can't see why you'd want me to. It's worse than mine; at least mine has a modicum of dignity. Stick to the floral one that doesn't spend half its time sounding like a small child announcing a need for the toilet and the other half waving the furry banner of Rome's omega. And, I repeat, mind your own business."

"I'm worried about you."

A long pause. Sirius could almost see the eyebrow. "About me." Another long pause, and this time it was Remus's head-tilt that Sirius could just clearly imagine before the firm, "Bollocks. Go away."

"That's funny," Remus said in the same mild tone. "I don't recall your being impressed with my minding my own business in the past. Maybe I'd like to be someone who does better."

An instant creaking of bedsprings, as of someone vaulting upright to a sitting position, and the rustle of something papery being slammed down. "It was your business then," Snape hissed, a little harder to hear despite the clear pressure behind the words. "You are not now a prefect, and the behavior you're suddenly choosing to make your concern isn't… isn't objectively appalling. We are all adults, or at least I am," a dutiful if slightly impatient chuckle from Moony, "you are not acting in loco domini to me or in loco parentis for the infantile brutalities of those you claim as friends; my protection," he spat, "is not now in your jurisdiction."

"We're colleagues," Remus replied in his I'm Not Arguing, Just Implacable voice. "We are two of the very few surviving members of a group who can say to each other 'we were at school together, we were Sorted together'."

"We were not Sorted together."

"You know what I mean, Severus. And we are indeed both adults, although I must admit I'm finding it difficult to imagine an adult reason for leaving yourself covered in burns all night." Now it was Remus's voice that got harder to hear, as it got softer. "Besides, you can't expect a fellow to just turn off—"

"Oh, spare me. O unemployèd one." The difference in the spelling of the Ohs was audible, and not only because 'unemployed' had been given four syllables.

"I resigned, Severus, since it was my own distraction that violated the safety terms of my contract, as you always point out when you're not—not being all Ivory Tower Unassailable, and I'm trying to spare you!" Another long silence, probably filled with narrow-eyed porcupine glares on one end of
the room and the patented exhausted-but-stubborn one on the other. "I remember what you were like, That November, if you don't."

"Keep out of it, Lupin," Snape warned tightly.

"That's what I'm telling you, Severus. You need to keep out of it, too. You haven't been."

"That… reaction," Snape said, tight and clinical (Sirius, agog, had the listening spell practically mashed into his earhole at this point), "was based on information we now know to be mistaken."

"I know it to be mistaken," Remus said. "I've heard things that tell me you may not. What was all that a few days ago, when you wouldn't tell him why it was a good thing you were hit with that hiccuping jinx instead of taking a crucio?"

Silence.

"Severus."

"It wasn't a jinx, it was a curse."

"Severus."

"Don't fold your arms at me, you bog-oak dishrag," the bat snapped. "It's called caution."

"It's called inherently toxic suspicion." Remus continued, implacable (and tactful; he obviously meant 'paranoia'), over the derisive snort. "Let's not have a repeat of last war: did you have any real reason for keeping it from him, other than your complete inability to keep from needling each other?"

A long pause, and then, with grudging reluctance, "I may have had a… moment of déjà vu."

"But you haven't let anyone in on your reasoning since then."

"Of course I have. I've told the Headmaster."

"No one here."

A brief pause, probably for an impatient gesture to match the tone, Sirius thought. "Everyone's accustomed to being punished with pain by now," Snape said dismissively. "Standard practice, everything doled out the same to everyone, very manly to endure."

Sirius could hear the lip-curl. He felt a tremendous urge to yodel *Hypocrite!*

"And those who haven't had their brains slowly addled over the last fourteen years are only with him out of fear, however active their fear drives their loyalty to be. He's past dark-arts-dementia into stone-sane inhumanity and everyone knows it. Everyone knows it, and only those nearly as far along as he is from decades of dementor poisoning are glad."

What must his darling cousin Bella be like now, if she was back to herself enough to be glad about anything. She hadn't gone quiet, in the grey, although her husband had. Not in the same way that most prisoners did. He'd thought over and over again that she was gone and gone, and then he'd hear her throwing herself at the bars attacking whatever she thought was on the other side again. It was the only thing that had ever, in their lives, given him a moment's pride or pleasure at sharing her blood. But take the bars away...

It was only an instant's thought, and he shuddered away from it before he'd even missed a word. He
was glad of that not only for its own sake, but because this was something he actually wanted to know.

"He's introducing the use of comparatively imaginative," Snape was saying, "read flippant, humiliations as punishment to an order mostly made up of wealthy, arrogant purebloods. And he's doing it while he's pressing them to pressure their treasured offspring to enslave themselves to the cause, as they are themselves enslaved. It's probably the single most efficient thing he can do to make their balance of fear-driven loyalty spin on a fulcrum of hatred. This is a gift."

A beat. "Thank you, Severus," Remus says, with a note that said yes, I had figured that out already, ta so very much for the dissertation, and made Sirius smile through his thoughtfulness, "but I meant that you still haven't told Sirius. He did ask you, you know."

"He thinks the brat ought to be told everything and take every risk. That's not possible. Or wise."

"Harry's very capable for his age, you have to admit."

"The hell I do. He's a thoughtless, reckless fumbler with very little going for him but luck, broom skills, and a fortunately well-focused reaction to adrenaline. He doesn't even use what brains he has, unless you count Granger's as his own. Which she clearly does. Honestly, I could strangle them both, can you imagine, if she gave herself the leisure to comprehend instead of stuffing facts into her head for his use?!"

"He's a very persistent student, Severus."

"Only when he thinks he can see the whites of Death's eyes."

"And he has a good heart—"

"Ha!"

"—And he has, as you point out, the gift for making the best people want to help him, without trying to."

Sirius heard a brief whoosh he imagined was Snape waving an impatient hand. "All right, their little defense club isn't a completely pants idea, if they can manage to keep it under the rose."

He made a note to remember to pass on to the girl who'd saved his life that Snape hadn't argued when Remus called her 'the best people.' Come to think of it, the not-completely-pants idea had been hers, too, hadn't it? He knew it wasn't Harry's; he'd seen last year how the spotlight had worn away the poor kid's nerves. Baffling, but there it was. And even if Harry hadn't been Harry, or James's son, Sirius would waive the need for understanding in a lot of matters for a bloke whose faithful owling had saved him from that many scrounged and hunted meals.

"But considering the way adolescents gossip," Snape was saying in a grim and depressed tone, "it's madly improbable that they will or could. And that's even calculating without Fletcher's report that two of the signatories looked reluctant and one was openly mutinous. And without their very problematic notions about safe venues.

"And Maleficent said Black was ready to induct all six of the children fully into the Order this summer, as if he had the right or power. He's a maniac, a mane-brained, loose-cannon, one-man embodiment of a blithe-blind Fool dancing over the edge of a sodding tarot cliff. He has no sense that fifteen-year-olds are not almost his age and capable of coping with everything those his age are expected to process and manage. Not unreasonable, under the circumstances, and especially unsurprising as he never had any sense that anything was off-limits to him, any problem or grace or
worldly thing, or that limits even exist. But that it's understandable doesn't matter: it's dangerous."

Remus chuckled, and said, "Well, that is a point." Sirius frowned indignantly. "But what's the harm if Harry were to find out?"

A long hesitation, and then, "The Headmaster thinks…” And, curtly, "Ask him if you want to know." And then, in an odd tone, "Lupin? Do you see that?"

Whoops, Sirius thought, grinning, and, silencing his footfalls, betook himself elsewhere.

"What?" he just heard Remus ask, before distance made the spell fray, and Snape's reply, louder, incredulous: "Is the keyhole twinkling?"

He didn't need the spell at all to hear Moony's maternal, "SIRIUS!" By then, though, he was already halfway down the stairs, hand-springing off the banister. His real mother's similarly pitched cries drowned the rest out.

Much, much later, he mentioned to Snape his observation that Remus had been the only one visibly outraged by his spying. He instantly regretted it, because the infuriating bastard merely put up an eyebrow and remarked, "Historically, everyone I've ever put up with without direct political arm-twisting has been some permutation of sneak, user, and breathtakingly entitled. Don't ask me why; I've no idea." **Mildly**, damn him. And then turned a page.

And that night, when Sirius had changed for bed, it had been to the jaw-dropping realization that his pants and socks had at some point become matte-black fabric embroidered in silver with swirly-eyed baby birds and rabbits that had, since that point, dyed his skin a dark jewel-tone forest green. The sock only started dying his hand faintly green after he'd held it, half dumbstruck and half experimentally, for a fair few minutes.

Which meant, the maths seemed to indicate, that unless the rate of saturation was exponential or the charm was failing (further experimentation proved not), Snape's blinkishly bemused discovery of the twinkle in the keyhole had been perfect shite.

Getting at people's smalls while they helplessly slept would have taken Sniv off his precious, lonely scrap of moral high ground. So had the dye-spell been part of the wards? No; more likely, given Snape's more vicious than humorous ideas about protecting his privacy, the whole bloody confusing conversation had been **on display for him**.

Put on display, and this done through the door, under Moony's radar (surely!), while Snape was monologuing. And what the dye proved was that **Sirius was supposed to know it**.

Buckbeak, apparently feeling neglected, couldn't even be arsed to fake sympathy. And there was the damned mead, winking all pale, mellow gold at him from the shelf, intimating that drinking it was the most mature thing he could possibly do right now. But he couldn't quite bring himself to fling the bottle out the window.
I'll Show You Mine

Chapter Summary

In which Severus is indiscriminate in his condemnation of the howlingly dense.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disgustingly small-numbered hours in the next morning found him staring moodily at the mead again. The sound of someone cursing someone's stupidity briefly touched his awareness, but he was too busy waffling between drink-it-or-dump-it to pay any attention to insane people who were (not only awake but) up before dawn.

The door flew open. This shouldn't have been possible, given his locks and wards. It wouldn't have been, but Grimmauld regularly hosted Moony, Arthur the tinkerer, and Tonks who could stumble through anything, as well as occasionally Dumbledore, Moody, and Dung. Also Snape, right now, and soon there'd be the twins, whose only faults were in not taking Harry as an apprentice to their mayhem and similarly ignoring the frustrated potential of their sister. Fab and Giddy all over again, those two were. Emmy Vance, too, although she wouldn't barge in without knocking for anything less than a dragon on the roof.

So he wasn't terribly alarmed. It could have been nearly anyone, although he would have eaten Buckbeak's primaries if it had been Hestia. Because his luck shone with the brilliance of a thousand flobberworms, it turned out to be the vampire bat.

Admittedly, Snape didn't look very batlike at the moment. He'd thrown on a confusingly blue and bronze house robe with a crest Sirius didn't recognize on the breast over his charcoal-colored nightshirt and a pair of black trou that Sirius just couldn't believe even Sniv had actually slept in. His hair was clubbed back for sleep. It was probably a charmed tie; he didn't have quite enough hair to have stayed tied back without magic. Pale and sweaty but still not quite oily looking, he was clutching at the door-frame like he needed it to stay upright. He'd healed one or two of his visible burns, and then apparently stopped to come badger Sirius.

"Where did you get that wand?" he demanded, then stopped, stared at Sirius's living (and bristling) pillow, shot Sirius an incredulous look, and belatedly bowed to Buckbeak. The hippogriff took it graciously, and settled down again.

"Why are you wearing Ravenclaw colors?" Sirius countered, and sweetly added, "This isn't an invitation to another standoff, this is a trade."

Snape stared at him again, then shrugged, and said, "It's a pass-down robe. My mother's family's worn it for generations. Won't be any colors but blue or red, and I'm not walking about looking like the Headmaster's flaming chicken."

Sirius swallowed a beak joke. Also a fire-and-oil joke. And, for good measure, a joke about Slytherins being chicken. Who was a good boy? Oh, yes, he was, he was, _good_ Padfoot!

"Where did you get the wand?" Snape demanded again, with that flat I do not have to read your
mind to know you're being unamusingly rude and not diverting look.

"In Kent."

"Wiltshire?"

"Ramsgate."

"There's no wizarding enclave in bloody Ramsgate. No shopping district!"

"So?"

"Well?" Snape demanded.

"It's blue and bronze."

"And it would be red and gold if I let it. Princes are always Gryff or Raven. How did-"

"Suits you better than the Edwardian shop-clerk of darkness get-up," Sirius said brightly. "Or it would if you'd finish closing your skin up and have a wash."

When he said 'wash,' the robe turned heavy and plush. Snape irritably slapped at the crest, turning it to the silky dressing gown again and growling, "Yes. I know. Can I possibly explain to you how disinterested this observation leaves me. How did you get that wand? I know they broke yours; no one goes in with a whole one, even just on suspicion."

"Took it off someone. Bit of a narrow escape, actually," he said casually.  He didn't want to think about what had happened to his old wand, or even about Snivvy watching it happen to his.

It wasn't exactly that he'd forgotten Snape wasn't James; that would be impossible. For some reason, however, he was expecting to have the story coaxed out of him, not for Snape to punch the doorway and look like he wanted to spit with disgust like the river rat he was. "Auror or Death Eater?" he gritted.

"Auror."

"And what precautions have you taken to break its bonds to its previous bearer?"

"You're going to have no teeth left in five years, mate, if you keep using them for millstones."

"I am in earnest."

He shrugged, and said, "I disarmed him and didn't give the wand back. That transfers a wand's loyalty."

Snape took a deep breath, visibly counted to ten, and said, "Yes, Black. That transfers a wand's loyalty. Usually. Mostly. Until its chosen wins it back. But that's all it does. It doesn't really compensate for a lack of natural affinity. It really doesn't strip the wand of any tracing spells on it, which the Ministry's been getting hotter about over the last year and a half. You didn't take it with you to the platform when you trotted to see Potter off, did you?"

"Of course I did."

"O Salazar, preserve us from our own blind folly," Snape moaned, curling a hand around his eyes. "No bleeding wonder Luke rumbled you. I thought it was just the description of the bloody Grim had got about; didn't you realize Pettigrew would have told everyone? And then you brought a
"ministry wizard's wand with you, which I'm sure had been reported missing months ago, out of the wards… oh, God, Albus," he finished miserably, apparently to his own elbow, "why don't we teach logic?"

"Why'd you suddenly think of this?" Sirius asked curiously, distracted from his annoyance by the moaning. This wasn't either of the ways of making Snivellus moan, scream, or beg that he'd fantasized about. Still: very distracting.

"That's not the question," Snape spat. "The question is why didn't I think of it the first time you whipped it out."

"Wizards have wands?" he suggested with a charitable shrug, and got maybe a half percent of a gloomy nod. You had to know what to look for. "But, really, why now?"

"I didn't think the nihilum was supposed to be that violent," Snape said faintly. Sirius felt better now that he was ninety percent sure it was Sniv's own denseness he'd been cursing. Mostly that. It was never just that with Sniv; at best he was castigating himself for having failed to factor in other people's stupidity. "That kind of action is typical of battle spells or poorly-channeled magic. When I thought back, I realized how likely it was that your wand hadn't chosen you."

"It works fine," Sirius pointed out.

"It doesn't in the least. You've just forgotten what it's like to have one that's part of you. If it 'worked fine,' we wouldn't have had fireworm fireworks in the foyer. They would have dissipated without exploding. What the hell are you grinning at me for?"

"It's nice to know you're universally abusive," Sirius said affably, "and will beat absolutely anybody up for no good reason."

"Gryffindors," Snape said, in contempt. "This is very good reason."

"And what good exactly is a play by play going to do? We already know I'm stuck here," he added moodily. "One more reason why isn't going to change anything."

"I would throw something at your head if it weren't for the hippogriff," Snape informed him, voice curling in irritation. "You have…" he glanced down at himself, and went on, "half an hour to devise a better disguise than that obvious canine monstrosity and meet me in the living room."

Sirius bridled. "Or what?" he demanded.
Sniv smirked at him, and said loftily, as he wheeled and strode away in a subdued whirl of blue and bronze silk, "Or I won't take you out for walkies."

Chapter End Notes

Art notes: So I think I drew Sirius a little differently here than in the other illustrations. Let's call it I'm improving (as opposed to inconsistent). It is, honestly, a much more recent picture than all of them except Kamikaze Bitch. As in, finished as of ten minutes before posting rather than ten months.

You can't see it because his knee is in the way, but his formerly-a-T-shirt reads 'The Whom.' This is because Remus had, when the shirt was new, a sense of humor that was highbrow for his age but not always as original as he liked to think.

The crest on Severus's dressing gown is (I simplify) the Plantagenet white boar over the Tudor Rose (theoretically), and the motto is 'Loyaulte me Lie,' or 'loyalty binds me.' Because I will never ever ever get over his mum's maiden name. :D

And, yes, Sirius also has bedhead... but sweethaht? He's Sirius BLACK.
"Lend him yours, then," the muggle was saying irritably in Snape's voice when Sirius approached him and Remus half an hour later.

Of course, he wasn't really a muggle. That was beyond improbable, and then there was the nose. Besides, he was transfiguring Snape's cloak into a frock coat, sighing regretfully (presumably at being a citizen of the twentieth century against his will), further transfiguring it into a thigh-length peacoat, and charming it brown.

Nothing had been done to alter Snape's face aside from the suggested healing-up and wash. His hair looked clean under the cap. Still limp, it was actually glossy, which made Sirius's eyes hurt a little. "It's not as though you'll be able to use it tonight anyway," he was saying. "But he's not taking that one out of this house."

"I could go with you," Remus was pointing out reasonably.

"I'm not exactly in disguise; they know me there," Snape said flatly. "It'll be hard enough to explain away one companion, let alone one who might turn into a bloody enormous full-grown 'dog' if the errand goes long."

"It couldn't possibly that you don't trust your own po—"

"You look in disguise to me," Sirius interrupted Remus's disingenuous needling, surveying Snape from soft cap to heavy boots to cable-knit tunic-thing to ratty grey scarf tied in a sloppy not-cravat. Remus's disingenuous needling was always fun, when not aimed at oneself, but Sirius had been promised OUT.

"And you look like a clown; I thought you were good at transfiguration," he was sniped at in return. "This is just… garb. It's not important for me to go unrecognized, and, in fact, I ought not to. We'll be going through a mixed area, and muggle clothes will attract less attention."

"...You've got your old quidditch boots on," Remus pointed out mildly.

"They'll just think I'm clinging to the rags and tags of a misspent youth," he said dismissively, adding with only moderately sadistic brightness, "Like Black."

"Then we're going? A clown is better than a dog?" Sirius teased.

"Yes," Snape admitted grudgingly, while Remus took on an indecipherable expression, "but still entirely unacceptable. I'll fix them. Your facial alterations look all right, but will they hold for a finite?"
"Double layers."

"What's the underlayer?"

"Same as the first."

"That's no good," Snape scorned him, as the clothes changed shape around him. "Same as the first with acne, or something of that nature, and the same below it if you can manage three. Lighten your hair to an unattractive shade under a really blond look, that sort of thing. I know looking vain isn't beyond your talents." Sirius flashed him a V, which he sneered at. "If there's a spell detector on, you want to make it clear to it why it's picking something up; that you have an innocent reason for walking around beglamoured."

Sirius jumped and nearly squeaked as his trousers shrank and stiffened. Then he grinned slowly, and said, "You just turned my father's trousers into jeans."

"Obviously."

"Can they be bellbottoms?"

Remus stifled a laugh as Snape declaimed an appalled, "No!"

"But he would have hated it!"

"Not the point of the exercise." Snape drawled.

"No one wears those anymore, Sirius," Remus put in.

"Okay," Sirius said unbegrudgingly, despite having just been bloody magically goosed, "but here's the thing, Snape. I may not know how to dress like a muggle anymore, but you don't know how to wear color."

"I do, in fact," he snapped. "I know my trade, thank you so very—"

"Where did you get that monstrosity, anyway?" Sirius nodded at the jumper.

Snape looked like he wanted to argue the point for a minute, then sighed and muttered, "Albus."

"Made it himself?" Remus asked sympathetically, and got a gloomy nod. Remus nodded back, wincing.

Sirius assumed this was a Hogwarts staffroom in-joke. Or not-joke. "Why is it reaching for your
knees?"

Snape looked scandalized. "We're not all panting to wave our tails in everyone's faces, Rex," he said acidly.

"Uh, okay, yeah, right, well, anyway. As I was saying, you're dressed like a blond," Sirius informed him while Remus made a valiant effort not to dissolve into snickers. "My precious coz La Peroxide can wear beige. You can't."


Sirius ignored the barb (if you could call it that) and Remus's stifled, treacherous (let's be honest) giggles, and took the victory. It didn't take a lot of imagination to see Narcissa fluting makeover! and teaching a fawn-kneed Sniv to wear pretty cravats and put on kohl and soften his nose with eyeshadow and introduce him to shampoo and brushes, throwing up her hands in despair and allowing him his blacks when all the colors she liked just washed him out.

Well, okay, maybe it did, but once you had it, the image just popped.

"Look, I'm just going to fix it so every bird and queer bloke you pass doesn't stare at you and wince in pity. Less likely to remember you then, right?"

Snape growled, but didn't actually stop Sirius from casting richer and more suitable hues across his skin, making his pallor less ashy and more inviting.

Remus discarded the rather pained there-really-is-no-hope-for-you-at-all look he'd been giving Sirius, in favor of delicately asking "Severus, er, I'm not sure how to put this, but… is this… all right? Going out together?"

"I'm exercising my intuition guided by experience," Snape said loftily. The expression looked ridiculous under the knit cap.

Actually, everything did; it made him look like a parrot. Sirius stole the abomination, deftly dodging defensively swatting hands. Snape was dressed for cold well enough without it, and everything looked good on Sirius; he could walk out in clothes James laid out for him while in a snit and look like a trend-setter.

…Everything had looked good on him. At least he still had better hair.

So did Hagrid.

"You mean, better to ask forgiveness than consent?" he translated, giving Snape an intrigued look instead of dwelling on his own ravaged frame.

"I mean as follows," Sniv answered, favoring them with a very crooked, nasty, oh how sorry you are going to be for asking smile.

"Well done, Paddy," Remus groaned, burying his face in one hand.

"I'm not expected to be on my feet yet," the prat bulldozed over him, clearly enjoying himself, "so no one will be looking for me. We're not going to anyone's known usual haunts. If you leave the damned wand home and keep to two legs you shouldn't trip any wires either. I don't have class till this afternoon today, as it's my turn to lose the first years to Madam Hooch's foul-weather flying class. Tomorrow is Saturday, so I can put off my grading for a few hours. After yesterday, I don't
have anything on the simmer that isn't already irretrievably ruined. This needs to be done in case of
emergency, and the only people who could reliably be trusted to stand escort shouldn't be asked to
actively help flout the Manhunt for Sirius Black in case they're questioned cleverly. In summation—"

"Thank Merlin," they chorused, even though it was obviously going to make Snape bare all his
teeth in inappropriately and glintily evil self-satisfaction, which it did.

"In summation," he repeated smugly, "I think we can probably get away with it."

"But Dumbledore—"

"I'll take responsibility with the Headmaster," Snape said flatly. "Obviously. He'll probably think
it's charming, as risks go. Heel, Black."

"Ha ha," Sirius grumbled, meeting Remus's worried look with a grimace. "D'you mind, Moony?"

He took the wand and the sigh Remus gave him, swapping the former for his own, and also took to
heart the murmured, "Be careful of you both, Padfoot. I don't know what he thinks he's running on,
but it's not food or rest."

"What, still?" he asked, his turn to be disgusted, and then Snape had taken his arm and brusquely
apparated them away. "Give a bloke some warning, Sniv," he suggested when the greyness (like
greenery, only uglier) had stopped swirling and his stomach seemed less likely to come out his
nose. "Where are we?"

"Nottingham. Just outside the Sherwood. The forest proper doesn't take apparition well." Dryly,
"For some unaccountable reason."

"Sherwood," he blinked. That's when it hit him: OUTSIDE.

He instantly flopped onto his back, heedless of dirt, chill, and potential grass-stains. Sky. Merlin.
Trees. SKY. He wanted to, he was going to, he HAD to roll, splay out and wag his tail and dig his
fingers and toes into the dirt and smell EVERYTHING!

Chapter End Notes

Art notes: This picture's style is somewhat inspired by the work of Didodikali, who is
a much better and more practiced artist than yours truly, and whose stuff you should
all run out and read/look at immediately. I'm not going to draw your attention to the
problems, but if you see them... yeah, mea culpa. First attempt at comics-proportions.
n,n;;;

(squints) But I will say it was easier to tell before scanning that Severus is wearing
tight trousers rather than just tights. Sadly, he didn't get them for clubbing or anything,
he's just not comfortable if his clothes don't feel a bit like armor.

Similarly, he has not gone and bought Goth boots. If he had, they'd be properly black.
No, he nicked that pair when he was reserve Chaser, on the premise of, "Um... perks?"
"Um, no." "Whatever, MINE." He was sick of wearing shonky shop boots that a) got
him sneered at and b) required him to wear three pairs of socks. See, they're adjustable
all over, his feet are narrow enough to make finding off-the-rack shoes more of a
nuisance than he's willing to put up with for (sneer) clothes, and he didn't get really
confident with transfiguration until he was working at Hogwarts and could bribe
Minerva for private tuition with without it being inappropriate. Earning enough money
for a new pair wasn't a problem by the time he was on the team, but he kept fleshing
out his bookshelves and potions kit with it instead.

As one does.

The runes on his zomg-I-cannot-wear-my-teaching-robes-and-their-6,000-pockets-
aaaauuuuugh-I-feel-naked potions quiver are for protection and secrecy. Therefore it's
invisible when he needs it to be, and won't be visible in future chapters/art.

Finally, the horrible jumper is courtesy of Albus is not-so-secretly evil (or at least ebil)
and thinks Severus is funny when he flails in indignation and/or has a twitching fit
forcing himself to be polite.
Chapter Summary

In which Severus plots maniacally. BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHahem.

Chapter Notes

Very Important Chapter Warning: Voice Alteration (And Very Long Chapter Notes)

For the next few chapters, there will be ACCENT AND DIALECT. This arc of the story has been made possible by wordsinthoughtspace, who has kindly and life-savingly agreed to help me with my pipe dream of not offending everyone between Scotland and, what, Manchester?

And I do mean made possible. Because even if (I am sorry about this) the non-dictionary spellings may make the reading tough going for some for a while, it is simply not credible to me that Severus would speak as he does to wizards under these circumstances.

We know Severus is from a miserable, polluted, ratty, dingy failed-mill-town, and the author and essayist Whitehound has made a very sound case for his being quite, quite Northern.* It is, I am given to understand, as sneer-and-scoff-worthy to sound BBC in one's home territory as it is to keep up a regional accent at high-ranked British boarding school (I was going to say public school, but, as has been pointed out by others, the only person who's talked about Hogwarts having school fees was Vernon Dursley, who was making assumptions and may have been wrong).

Therefore Severus (who is A SPY, YO, and can be assumed to have more fitting-in skills than he bothers to exercise around Harry) is not going to swan around the Wizarding downtown he and his mother could get to on foot sounding posh.

The voice alteration will last only a few chapters, and will be heaviest in this one. After a while Sirius's ears will adjust, and he'll stop registering every coom, oop, and owt. It's also not supposed to be at a consistent intensity: Severus will be making constant adjustments depending on who he's talking to, what he's talking about, how much attention he's giving it, whether his mind is on what's around him now or his accustomed environment, how pissed off he is, which kind of pissed off he is, and who he's pissed off at.

I've minimized it as much as I thought I could without sacrificing the flavor, but it's still going to be heavier than the West Country accent JKR gives Hagrid. It's a tightrope; please have patience with me. This kinda thing is wikkid hahd, yannowhuddImean?

* Manchester and Yorkshire have been suggested, but I don't really see him growing up with as many opportunities for culture and socialization as those areas would have given him. Given what we're meant to assume about Tobias (and since we probably-saw-him pre-DH, I'm going along with JKR on this one), I don't think a young Severus
would have needed to be worried about the Moors murderers to have grown up with a panic disorder.

I've picked Nelson, in Lancashire. It's a textile-mill area and was in really terrible shape during the period covered by the books, although I think I read it's doing better now (I will be playing with that fact, btw). It's near a fantastic forest that would have helped a nascent brewer in an impoverished area out a lot, too. I can imagine the guy who (movieverse) put his body between three kids that drove him up a wall and a werewolf that had nearly eaten him once having grown up in a town that hero-worshiped a genuine hero that sacrificed actual bo for the Crown.

Plus, remember my personal canon about the Prince family tree? Lancashire is Lancaster territory. Tudor territory. There would be nowhere but York (maybe Gloucester) more meaningful to a family so tied up with the War of the Roses. Severus is so incredibly Gryffindor for a Slytherin who sneers at Gryffindor that, given the way traits seem to run in wizarding families and for historical reasons that would take a lot of page space, I am convinced that the Princes are very, very Gryffindor and therefore very, very much inclined to favor their Plantagenet over their Tudor blood (La Gloriana probably excepted). So Severus growing up in Lancashire would make for some beautiful irony, if it wasn't a conscious choice Eileen made for the specific purpose of sticking it to her old man (which I would totally believe).

Why, yes, this was supposed to be actual fiction, why do you ask? :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snape gave Sirius an annoyed look. Flat on his back with the crisp smell of leaves and loam about him, wind on his face, and sky, sky, SKY soaking through his eyes, Sirius did not care one whit of an iota.

"Yes, Sherwood. There are communities in Britain other than London, if you've forgotten," Sniv drawled. "Even for wizards. Wiltshire, Caernarfon, Galway, Glasgow, Bath, Conwy… Anywhere you find muggles in face paint unrelated to the footie and rubbish cloaks made to peacock in the breeze, it's a reasonable wager they didn't piece together the idea out of whole cloth."

"And Remus knows where we are?"

"Yes."

"You made quite a production out of making sure I saw you telling him," he notes.

"I thought it would leave you less likely to hex me and run off to Gretna Green to elope with yourself." Snape was still drawling, but then he got that listening-to-himself look and frowned.

"What?"

"Doan spose there's aught ye can do to quit soundin' sich a swank Southern ponce," Snape inquired pessimistically, shaking his hands and shoulders out and gingerly stretching his spine.

"I think you'll be happier and I'll be rained in fewer showers of scorn if I don't try," Sirius pointed out, hands laced behind his head, quite casually watching the stretch of spine and trying to avoid trying to suss out the exact the exact nature of the smile he was hiding.
Snape made a face, and agreed, "Ay, tha's quaite laikleh." He was moderating his accent as he talked, like a piano-tuner. Already it was lighter and more musical than the flat, tight-mouthed near-incomprehensibility Sirius seemed to remember enough to expect.

He'd finished off in a posture ten times more casual and three inches shorter than his usual, too. It could almost have been called a slouch, but it wasn't the sulky, sullen one from school. Sniv still radiated the sense of absolute self-possession that had given Sirius such a turn when he'd first barged into the Shack two years ago, even with both of them demented to just about the point of frothing at the mouth and Sirius barely able to see anything but red and RAT, even the mini Prongs face, past the crushing, exhausting joy of Moony not hating him.

"Oop y'coom; we're no' for lollin' about."

"So this is your real voice?" Sirius grinned up at him.

"This is my real voice," Snape said irritably, the return of his phonily but impeccably well-bred tones a bit jarring, somehow. "This would be my real voice if it were speaking Mandarin with a Portuguese accent which, would be assured, be more difficult for the decipherin', an' I've no wish tae play nose-in-air with them as hasn't started with me. On feet: we're off. Did'st think on a name for thasel?"

"What?"

Snape growled under his breath and muttered the usual slurs on Gryffindor intelligence, his increasingly restrained earthy lilt rendering it all oddly charming. "Tha'll be Russell Tanner, then," he said shortly.

Sirius felt he was starting to catch the rhythm. "Any particular reason?" he asked, watching a large bird wheel lazily.

"Don't sound like 'Sirius Black.' And tha' 'Russ' might catch tha'ttention. Best use familiar sound."

"And the Tanner? Tinker, tailor, tanner, potter?"


"But Sn-Snape, sky."

Snape curled a hand over his eyes again, and said, "Soonest we gets thee wanded, soonest other things coom."

"Were you no-nonsense when you were born?" Sirius grumbled, hauling himself to his feet reluctantly and brushing himself off.

Snape bared crooked teeth at him in a humorless, flat-eyed technically-a-grin, and drilled, "Belike."

"It used to be thicker, though, I'm sure it did," he insisted, as they walked towards the line of trees. His blood whined, leashed, but he was more in control than that. "Flatter. Like when you told me off for being from civilization."

Snape rounded on him, irritated, and said, "Were well calculated to have me draggin' you into town, son, I'll grant you, full marks tae royal crimson if you weren't an alum—"
"When, the eighteenth of never?"

"—And I will say Nottingham," Snape rolled over Sirius's 100% accurate estimation of exactly when he'd give Gryffindor point one, "has some knock-ye-flat architecture and the best winterfair in the isles, only I'm never so oblivious nor so distractable. We're no' come for thee to gad about."

"It was worth a shot," Sirius said loftily, patrician nose in the air.

"Did this tae him, din't tha," Snape accused, striding into the trees so that Sirius had to lengthen his own stride to keep up, even with the height advantage. His face looked, though, rather than angry, like a clever terrier with its teeth into something. "Led 'im about by the... hair, tweaked his pride where tha wanted it pointed, and he thought it all his own idea."

This took a moment to decipher, and then Sirius shrugged, putting out a hand to trail across knobbly bark, feeling the sap rise to meet him. Merlin, but he'd missed this, sap and scent and air, and he didn't want to think about James right now. "Don't tell me sweet Cissy never did it to you."

"I usually noticed," he said dryly. "Also, ugh, don't call her that, you sound like Bellatrix. Was he playing along, too? Or was it ever his own idea?"

"She never gave you ideas?" he countered, the muscles at his temples moving in the way that laid his ears flat when they were furrier and more mobile. He hated, hated being caught out doing Things Blacks Do. As not only Dumbledore but also Moony kept reminding him (and reminding him), he was supposed to be better than his ingrained instincts, hadn't he chosen to be?

"I greatly dislike this comparison," Snape growled. He did: it wasn't just curled lips like he'd tasted something terrible, but a stiff, spasming throat as though he were about to throw it up.

"It doesn't have to go farther than who you were friends with," Sirius told him, mildly alarmed, more amused. "Don't leave your guts on the ground over it. But did she? She's always been a convincing, confiding little death-blossom, but I never thought she was clever."

Snape glared cold murder at him. "If I thought she needed defending," he snarled, "I would turn you into a teacup terrier for the duration of this trip, and tell everyone that I'd come to have Hooch's lapdog neutered."

"And what would that prove exactly?" Sirius asked, refusing to be cowed.

"That taking that tone about those vanishingly few of my friends who don't deserve it where I can hear you is more trouble than it's worth," Snape said, every syllable clipped to obsidian-scalpel precision.

And wasn't that something to roil uneasily between them. Friends who don't deserve it. By implication, friends who do, and are still friends.

He said, absently, "Your voice slips when you boil over."

Snape cursed. They continued on into the woods in silence, Sirius trailing his fingers over every tree in easy reach.

"She didn't give me ideas, exactly," Snape said eventually. He wasn't trying particularly to avoid stepping on branches, as far as Sirius could tell, but he was still moving eerie-quiet. "She'd just... ask something, talk as normal, and then 'eigh up, two new spells and a potion in the stillroom book by supper. Though not brilliant yourself, you are a conductor of light," he added in a quoting tone. "And she were good at helping me refine."
"I'm not saying I wasn't just as pleased with where Jamie's head tended to go," Sirius returned, matching him answer for answer, "but 'I will say'," his attempt at aping Snape was, even he would admit, fairly mangled, "that usually I said things like 'I'm bored, let's do something brilliant that'll leave all their jaws on the floor,' not 'I'm bored, let's roll Sniv.' He was right fraught over you, the way Lils wouldn't give him the time of day."

"The way I wouldn't kowtow no matter how many times he floored me four to one, you mean." It was a snarl, but a quiet one.

"Same thing," Sirius told him with a little shrug.

"...In what universe?"

"Stag land. Deer only have co-ed herds in autumn. His kind, anyway. Even then what you've got is a harem, not a community. One herd, one stag. There's no difference between losing dominance and losing everything. Dogs and wolves can lose or refuse a fight. Much rather not, but it's not the end of the world. They'll lose status, and it seriously impairs a wolf's chances of ever getting his end away, but the stakes are lower. A lot lower, for dogs. A stag'll starve himself all autumn if it's a choice between eating and chasing other bucks off."

"You talk like you really are animals." This was a look of revulsion without judgment; an odd look, and Sirius watched his face with interest, briefly diverted from clouds crows trees blue ooorabbit!

"I don't know why people want to become animagi, if this is what happens to them."

Sirius shook his head. "It's not like that. It doesn't work if you don't have... clear, sharp traits that match up. If you don't know who you are, in those ways, or don't embrace it, or can't embrace the affinity. If you don't recognize yourself, you don't get anywhere. And if you can't accept the match, if you panic when you start to change instead of feeling it's right, that's where the horror stories come from. Once you do turn properly, spend enough time changed, I guess it is hard not to... get more matched. You spend time that way and it's a way of thinking, well, of feeling, to relax into. And it is relaxing. Especially when the world's..."

"Full of dementors?"

"Or really complicated," he agreed. "But that's why it took us so long; none of us could get our heads right the first few times for the first steps without drugs, and you can understand how a rat would take some—"

"Ha!" Snape had interrupted, triumphant. "Got your grass from Tessa Sprout, didn't you? I knew it!"

"Merlin, so did you, stop bellyaching."

"Only the first cuttin'," Sniv said, the glee only in his eyes; the mouth was as above-it-all as Narcissa could have managed. "Why buy and buy?"

Sirius stared at him. "Oh, belt up, we both know the Sprout banned you from the greenhouses back in second year for making everything die by breathing on it."

"Oo-aye, got the brewer's black hands right enow, sensible of them to spare themselves the pain of plucking—and god but I wish I could ban Longbottom from practicals," he interrupted himself with grim and desperate longing, "Albus will regret not letting me when the next time the dungeons blow up is one of his bloody cock-ups and somebody dies. But Évan could go in, no trouble, and tend them, too. And it's not a breath thing, thank you, it's an interaction-of-life-fields. And yes, I've
"experimented."

"Of course."

"Yes, of course."

"Your voice slipped. A lot," Sirius informed him, all earnest helpfulness.

Snape ignored him. "Stop a bit, I think we're nearly here."

"Wait, you said Longbottom? Frank and Alice's kid?" he asked, stopping out of surprise and not because he'd been told to. Neil? Nelson?

Lily and Alice with their heads together over two round, wrinkly, red faces, complaining at each other with pride, happy animation, Frank and James hovering behind them with bewildered terror, equally proud. Standing awkwardly with Moony and Pete, holding presents wrapped in girly-looking blue paper, exchanging out-of-our-world glances, for once rather glad when Marlene started bossing everyone around and handing out tea and horrible seedcake under the rather sad streamers and zooming cherub-balloons.

Neville. No moon-faced Alice at Headquarters with her fierce spring-loaded wand-sheath and gold-edged robe, volunteering for every mission like a bright-eyed woodpecker. No Frank to draw the second invisibility cloak they'd all pooled for over his medkit and worried forehead and duck into every house with a Mark over it. No one saying what had happened to them (or the cloak, for that matter).

But Neville, grown and carrying on the good Gryffindor work of trying to turn Sniv's hair grey. Sirius would have to ask Harry to ask that girl with the Shakespeare name what the boy might like as a Christmas present. It was never any good asking a teenaged boy who wasn't Remus to come up with a thoughtful present for anyone. If you were lucky, you'd end up sending a box of cockroach clusters and blood lollies, or wank mags. If you weren't, you'd get a face full of panic and hysteria.

"Yes," Snape said absently, peering intently at this tree and that hillock and forbearing to touch any of them. "Worst case of wortmaster's thumb I've ever seen. It's amazing the Hat didn't send him to me for being all-over green, well past the wrist. He's beyond a menace in the lab, quite apart from forgetting every damned thing his essays show me he bloody well knows the moment he's flustered. Herbs can have been dead for decades and they try to go fresh when he handles them, and fresh ones grow double their mass. I don't know why he refuses to buy a pair of damned dragonhide gloves; his gran's not what tha'd call skint. Not even you, who don't know what the word means. He carries a Remembrall around, and those things cost more than they're worth by a fair sight."

"Didn't you kill all of greenhouse two before the Sprout caught on?" Sirius reminded him, frowning.

blood draining out of a sharp, stricken little face, turning to the green glass. Black eyes drawn like dread-full magnets to inkstained, loamy hands, welling up. Jamie's head turning, just as magnetized, a wicked, incredulous grin blooming on it, elbows jostling all three of them

"Caught on before you did, as I recall. Has someone told him?"

"Pomona must have," Snape protested, pulling his considering gaze in surprise from a nearby beech tree. 'I'm sure she's noticed. He's her star. She talks as though now he's shown up she can
"start planning her retirement."

"Surely she's told him he's doomed to fail in your subject?" Sirius pointed out.

He tried not to grin when Snape's jaw came perilously close to dropping. It wasn't funny, really. "He's not one of mine!" Snape protested. "It should be her, or Minerva!"

"Maybe she doesn't count it that way. You weren't 'one of hers,' right?"

Snape made a strangled noise, halfway between a groan and a low-pitched shriek, and declared, "I don't often say this about Pomona, but I could strangle that witch! Listening to me rant year in and out with never a word! D'you think it's vengeance?!"

"Probably not," he said, trying to shove away from himself the memory of Sni—of Snape going for James's throat, hands covered in earth and blazing with fire green with salt from where he'd wiped his dirty face, of the Sprout peeling them apart and bundling Snape off all motherly to the Pomfrey or maybe to Slughorn, of learning why badgers were to be respected when she caught up with them after. "Not like her, is it? Probably she just thought it was your classroom, your business."

"My problem," Snape repeated, less gloomy than thoughtful. "Ah. Here's this year's port-tree, can you put your—no. I'd better do it; no use putting more than necessary past the ministry just because act disorganized and look stupid. They've had years to take anything they need to identify you with, and they're hot as blazes on tracing spells, ask the brat..."

"You won't kill it, activating the charm?"

"Oh, trees can take it, if I don't try to magic-about with roots or saplings. Excuse us," he said to the quivering beech tree, "but we need to get through." He laid his palm on the trunk, fingers pointing down, and washed them upwards to point skywards. After glancing around, he traced a rune on the trunk with his wand. With something between a sigh and a groan, it split down the middle.

They stooped and stepped through to a gut-wrenching dizziness that wasn't quite a portkey, wasn't quite a floo. "I daresay it's manageable even now," Snape said as the wood re-knit behind them in the form of a public loo, back to musing about Frank's kid. He seemed to be unaffected by the trip, although seeming was a poor guide.

They were deep in a deeply boring alley, its smell unpleasantly indistinguishable from the toilet. When they emerged, Sirius's eyes widened in delight at the sight of vendors, shops, people.

"Longbottom, you gormless waste of blood," Snape was saying to himself in a rehearsing tone, "I shall live in anticipation of your OWL examiner's face when he realizes your contempt of the subject has led you to scorn the most elementary safety measures for—no."

He grabbed Sirius, about to break off for the nearest shop window, by the collar, without apparently paying attention. "No, wrong. The brat could handle that without worse than a steaming sulk; Longbottom curls up in a ball if you just tell him what he's done wrong in a normal tone of voice... 'For pity's sake, Longbottom, buy a pair of gloves to put over that damned green thumb, and an apron would not be pushing it!' Still too much?"

He yanked Sirius back to heel again, nearly throttling him (there'd been vinyls and tiny silvery futuristic-looking records in that window, damn it!), and concluded, "Well, not quite right; too straightforwardly helpful; my lot would notice. Let's see, I could assign a blood replenishing potion, and then, 'Now who can tell me what would get us a vertical jet of scintillating purple goo..."
that leaves everything it touches covered in yellow fur? Five points from Gryffindor for speaking out of turn, Miss Granger!" he declaimed with relish, gesticulating with his free hand.

Sirius was glad to be on the other side and wondered if he'd noticed, caught up as he was, that they were now attracting the attention he hadn't wanted.

"'Are we detecting a pattern, Mr. Longbottom? Fresh tansy instead of dried, as Miss Granger has correctly but so intemperately blurted—yet again! Did I even put fresh tansy on the ingredients table, class? No indeed, Miss Bulstrode, I did not, five points to Slytherin for accurate visual memory or guessing correctly from context!"

He wondered, keeping his face very blank, whether shoving Snape against a tree and a tongue into his mouth would shut him up. It might instead have the hugely counterproductive effect of making him squawk and stop sparking with in-his-element relish and happy stage villainy in favor of louder, crankier, and more violent shouting directed at Sirius.

And then he wondered, with a jolt of horror, whether this wasn't very nearly what that fond, stressed, resigned little smile of Arthur's had been about, and Dumbledore's before his, when he and Remus had pulled them away from each other on the landing while Snape ranted with every indication of enjoyment his desiccated soul could muster.

"Yet again you put us all at risk, Longbottom, with your refusal—no, wait, this is Longbottom—with your failure to take the basic safety precautions your nature requires! Four feet on the responsibilities of the wortmaster's thumb in the stillroom by Thursday, and don't let me see you in here again without at the very least a pair of—"

"That's never our Seth?" someone interrupted him, delighted.
Story Notes
You're darn right Severus is being unusually civil and non-provocative. You can chalk it up to relationship-development if you like, and it certainly has something to do with being able to control himself when he has to, as evidenced by his post GoF survival. And he does have to, because Sirius in a tantrum is about as rational and self-mastered as he is himself after multiple semesters of low-grade chronic Dementor poisoning and the Defense curse squiggling around in his brain. Five points for close reading to those who know why else. ;)

Art Notes
There's more on the concept and this ministry (including what the Neville's green thumb and Severus's black hands have to do with baby Harry's parseltongue and what happened in the staffroom once Severus got back to Hogwarts) in chapter 3 of About the Swot. That chapter should explain the speech-picture-bubbles better than I can with exposition. What Severus is giving Neville is a pair of dragonhide gloves.
That isn't going to happen, except metaphorically. What's going to happen is what Severus is planning above, give or take a few tweaks. I did the picture *long* before the fic. This explains the nose-fail.

A confusion, I admit, but I'm quite pleased with the fire.

Reference notes
Gretna Green is where people in Austen's books went to elope. Or at least, where their families hoped they'd go. Whether this still has any connection to reality is irrelevant, because Severus didn't, as a kid, have much choice about reading the books Lily thought were wonderful.

Tinker Tailor refers to the counting game rhyme 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief.' And also the John Le Carré title, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. And what you do to not drown in the dense, dry-witted Byzantium of that amazing book is as follows. First watch the 2011 movie with Gary Oldman (yes, Sirius's actor) and Benedict Cummerbatch (Yes, Sherlock) to get the broad strokes in a digestible and beautifully-acted first bite. Then watch the miniseries with Alec Guinness to dig in deeper. By this time you may or may not understand exactly what happened and how, but you will be familiar enough with the plot and the outline of, well, the plots that the subtleties and complexity of the book itself will be spellbinding instead of an overwhelming confusion. Skipping steps is not recommended unless you already know you can keep up with Le Carré or always know whodunnit by page five.

Jack Tanner is the main character of Man and Superman, which is my bar-none favorite of George Bernard Shaw's plays and has far too many awesome lines to pick one that would show you why. Also, it doesn't really tend to one-liners. In fact, Jack is such a 'jawin' bleeder' that the last line in the play (barring his !!! reaction) is, "Never mind her, dear. Go on talking."

The original conductor of light was, of course, John Watson.
"That's never our Seth?" asked the grinning man who'd stopped by them. He was burly and shortish, and quite at home in his short-sleeved shirt over the longer one. Sirius thought he was a muggle, but his glance at Snape's slightly horrified face wasn't informative. He noted that Snape was making no attempt to hide his displeasure, though, which was.

Sirius relaxed. If the man had been Ministry or a Death Eater, Sniv would have pulled on that urbane, bored-but-not-desperately-displeased look he'd very obviously nicked from Malfoy. The sour glower was just Snape being Snape.

"Growed a fair bit, but I can tell it is by the way air's gone blue and the bushes are trying to run away. An' I'd know that ship's prow anywhere. Weren't expectin' t'see yeh here, lad, who's tha mate?"

It was in fact, Sirius decided, the exact look he himself had once gotten when he'd gone to meet Frank up at St. Mungo's once, before things had gotten really dangerous. Running into Sirius unexpectedly, arms full of a box of fizzing beakers, Sniv had looked sapped on the back of the head to wake trapped hobbled in a large cage with a tiger on a short leash, too afraid of the effects of scent-of-fear to allow himself to feel anything.

That's not a good place to be, he realized, and gave the newcomer a friendly, open-to-anything smile, watching Snape carefully in his peripheral vision. "Well, now," he chuckled, not fooling around with his voice in any way he couldn't keep up. "Our boy here didn't tell me he had friends in the area." Seth, huh. How many nights later would he wake up flayed to the bone if he used that…

"I don't," Snape growled, giving them each their own special his grrr-you-are-too-exasperating-to-
breathe-my-air looks. "Russ Tanner, Will Callum. Callum was at school wi' me," he snarled, giving them each such a glare as to make clear to Sirius that he and James had not been the first to try and make Snivvy eat humble pie well seasoned with dirt.

"Afore his gran rushed him off tae tha' fancy prep school," Callum put in cheerfully, and told Snape, "Air's nay turned to vinegar of a sudden, man, don' look sae sour. All water under bridge, innit?"

"Tha's for me to decide, Willem," Snape told him, with a deadly little semi-smile and soft poisoned-cordial tones.

"Waaaell, you know how it is," Callum appealed to Sirius, rubbing his neck sheepishly. "Who in't a right squit as a lad, eh? An' our Seth here, he were such a reader as all our mams held up as a Good Example. Hard to take."

"Hard," Sirius repeated, feeling stunned and mugged—

"I can't say," Mother deliberates, lips pinched, "that I much like your going begging to a filthy half-blood, dear, even if Horace thinks highly of him."

"But he helps me a lot, Mother," Reg says, a touch desperately, laying down his fork. "The professor says he hasn't had a pupil who knows Potions like Severus does in twenty years, and no one with his instinct for it ever. He says I'm lucky he's agreeing to tutor me. And I'm not getting into debt, I swear, Mother, he asks for help back."

"Financial?" Father asks, taking an interested sip of Thestralle Verde '42.

"No," Reg says hastily, although Sirius could have told him that the correct answer would have been Yes Sir He's In Our Pockets Now. "Manners things."

"Doesn't use them," Sirius sneers quietly into his veal.

It earns him, as well as a glare from Reg, a sharp look from Mother, who only says, however, with a curled lip, "A climber."

"Oh, I don't know, my love," Father muses, popping a forkful into his mouth, making them all wait while he chews and swallows meditatively. "Ellie was always too bullheaded for her own good, of course, but the Princes are a good family. Not sure it's climbing if he only wants back the birthright his mother spat on, don't you know."

"Gryffindors and bastards, the lot of them," she declares scornfully, but the argument seems to have made some impression on her. "There's not two Princes out of five born in wedlock."

"Plenty of Ravenclaws, too, dearest, and you can't argue with the spout of the blood-well," Father points out, smiling. He likes to argue with her to see her glint. "And if we're talking about illegitimacy in the Prince line, perhaps we shouldn't scorn too loudly, eh?" he adds with a flicker of his eyes towards the sitting room and its portraits. Mother makes a face that, while mostly scowl, acknowledges his point.

"Slytherin means the world to Severus," Reg puts in earnestly. "Cissa says he set the Hat on fire to get in."

"Is that true?" Mother asks Sirius sharply.

He shrugs sullenly, and allows, "It might have smoked a little. Hot to get away from his greasy
"A boy of good values, then, despite his mother's folly and treachery," Mother sums up sharply, glaring smoking holes through her firstborn's head. "A boy who wishes to purify himself and rise above his polluted blood, and not sink below it." He refuses to flinch, as Reg nods in vehement innocence of subtext, although he has to glare back instead of going on sullenly eating his food because his skin is so hot and his throat so tight. "Perhaps it may be permitted. I'll speak to Narcissa."

"Speak to Bella, too, my dear, I believe she said the boy rather looked up to her Rodolphus before they graduated."

"Hah," Mother utters, examining a long, exquisitely seasoned snap pea with a judgmental look. "A charming boy, young Lestrange, but I've never been certain he wasn't exactly as beef-witted as he appears. Far too eager to be led by the nose. Bellatrix won't be happy with anyone weaker than she is. Still, I suppose," with another sharp, disappointed look, "his heart's in the right place..."

"—to take," he agrees hoarsely.

Snape flicks him a sidelong look. Although his face doesn't change, he speaks in a brusque tone that itself says that yes, he doesn't have to like it but he supposes all boys are oiks. Sirius knows he would never make any admission so forgiving. "Tanner's a colleague."

He doesn't know whether he most wants to pummel Snape for the fresh humiliation of Mother's long-dead eyes, or curl an arm around his narrow waist and lick his face until it softens for even pretending to let go a grudge to throw Sirius a lifeline.
The Kids Are All Right(ish)

Chapter Summary

A little catching up between old schoolmates (KILL!)

Chapter Notes

Confession: I haven't actually seen that movie. But I think it's something Severus's mum and Sirius's father would have liked to be told.

The kind and helpful w.i.t.s. cannot be held even tangentially responsible for any dialect-fail in the latter half of this chapter; I decided the bits with Will needed to be fewer and therefore longer about five minutes before posting, and she hadn't seen all of it. I couldn't tell you whether the fact that she hasn't emailed me to say WHAT DID YOU DO?! indicates a lack of problem or just good manners.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Bess did say as you were teaching last she saw you," Callum smiled, unstrained again, seeming to understand he was off the hook.

It probably meant that Snape really had been a prickly, sullen, uncivil little brat all his life, if the man gathered what he was meant to from such very little grace. Sirius dragged his attention away from the burn of acid in his throat. Away, too, from the way Snape's scowl almost looked concerned in this light, from the fine contraction of chronically sleep-deprived skin under his eyes.

"Still doin' tha'? Up in Scotland somewhere, eh? Or was it Wales?"

"Chemistry," Snape said sullenly, as though reluctant to let go of an anger too long dead to really dredge up. Sirius was tempted to applaud. Ducking the last question while making himself look cooperative by volunteering to answer an inevitable next one before it was asked, Snape went on. "Our history teacher's rubbish, so far as keeping the little monsters innerested goes; Headmaster thinks field trips tae Greet Historic Sites," he parodied the Tartan's voice mockingly, rather than Dumbledore's, "might help. Activities Director," he gave Sirius an annoyed look, "demanded a native guide."

"He'd look fetching in a feathered headress, don't you think?" Sirius asked Callum cheerfully. He'd noted with fascination that Snape's head had taken a faintly leftward tilt, his whole body a slightly tense air. A tell, but what was it telling? Did Snape want Sirius to think he was a bad liar? But Snape was a spy, been one on and off for years and not dead yet. How could he possibly be a bad liar, how could he expect anyone in the know to believe it of him?

So maybe he was trying to say something else, or maybe he was just dangling bait to lure Sirius round the twist. Put it on the back-burner, then.

Callum had opened his mouth to say something, but Snape was railroading over him. Judging from
the twinkle in the muggle's hazel eyes, that probably best for all concerned. Sirius suspected that feathers had been about to turn into beaks. "When wast talkin' to Bess?" Snape demanded.

The twinkle broadened into a wide grin. "This mornin', most lately," the man said smugly. "She din't coom, though. A few on us took our lads for the skating."

"Bess Pryce married you?" Snape demanded in complete disgust—but not, Sirius noted, any envy. He was still looking tense though. "Thought she'd more sense than tha'."

"I'm persistent, lad," Callum said smugly. "Ran into her in Manchester some six year back, and we got to talkin' of old times… she could see I were a man of promise," he added, even smugger.

"All promise, and where's the delivery?" Snape fired back. He was beyond tense and into vibrating, now, but Sirius didn't think he was particularly angry or frightened, and neither did Padfoot. What the hell? "Well, congratulations; please convey my commiserations to the good lady."

"Nay, son, I'm doin' well," the man protested indignantly, and then paused to give Snape a sharp look. "'Ere, let's stop in for a pint, I'll tell you about it in the warm."

"No!" Snape declared sharply, while Sirius's jaw nearly dropped, and not just because of his tone. **Shivering.** He'd never seen the man shiver in his life, he was sure of it.

Or sweat, for that matter, even in Potions in the most extreme seasons, except in pain. Lily and Rosier had used to make him so uncomfortable Padfoot could smell him trying to crawl out of his skin, pressing close to him in bad weather.

"Oh, come on, let's warm up," Sirius said, folding his arms and chafing them encouragingly. He was cold, truth to tell; the soft outer shirt Snape had transfigured for him, while fuzzy inside, wasn't much help against the wind. Not as much as a boiled-wool jacket should have been, not at his weight. Since settling under a roof again he hadn't padded his raw bones enough to feel quite himself again, although he wasn't as pared-down as Snape had been even before the worm things.

"I'm not taking you into a pub," Snape informed him very, very quietly, turning enough away that Callum wouldn't be able to give shape to the soft sounds by reading his lips, "don't be insane."

Sirius flushed angrily, and Snape added, just a little more loudly, "Be crowded, belike," with a light tone and a very pointed look, although neither stopped Sirius glaring at him, "and we are on a timetable, Tanner. I have afternoon classes, and homework to shred. Hast no respect for those of us wi' marking to wade through."

"None," Sirius said, coldly. With satisfaction, he saw the tone hit home.

So did Callum, who tried to diffuse the situation with a jovial, hasty, and ill-judged, "Could call that unpatriotic, turning down a pint—"

Snape rounded on him with his very own honed snarl. "That attitude does more to destabilize domestic tranquility than politics and mothers-in-law put together."

Callum put up his hands with a look of mixed sympathy and amusement, and said, "Ye ken, some of us prefer to master our parents faults'n turn 'em into monsters, mate."

Snape flinched, turning parchment-colored, and glared arctic death at him. When the man's expression didn't falter (apparently he was persistent; Sirius was slightly impressed), Snape's jaw worked briefly, and then irritably spat out, "Speakin' o' parents, wouldnae dream of keepin' yeh from some abandoned infant."
"Ah, I still have to find an aytee-em," the Callum said, all apparently now mended for him. Sirius was going to ask what he was talking about, but Snape kicked him viciously in the ankle before he could even open his mouth. "Rink fee wiped me out o' ready cash, and they'll all be wanting chippy tea for afters. Our Bry'll be all righ' wi' Charlie an' them a while yet. Which way were you headed?"

Snape studied him with a look of frustrated consternation. Sirius had to tell him, with every appearance of kindness, "I don't think you're getting rid of him. He wants to tell you about his family."

"Suppose I don't want to hear about his family," Snape complained, but with a sigh.

"Bess'll be right glad to hear ye're doing well, lad," Callum said, with an attempt at manipulation through puppy-eyes that made the Slytherin and the Black look at each other in a rare moment of silent agreement about amateurs.

Snape tossed up his hands. He told Sirius, in an I know I can't win this but I'm going to have a victory, dammit tone, "Well, I'm never carrying tha damned speccies about all over the Sherwood just because you won't wear 'em while you try to chat up birds like you're still eighteen. You can take your vanity and choke on it, and put the damned things on if it's such a tragedy putting them in your pockets 'spoils everyone's view of your magical mystery arse.'"

That last was in a mocking but frankly eerie imitation of Sirius's voice, and he followed it with intense do what I'm telling you eyes over the mouth's sneer. He pulled an ovoid case the size of two fists out of a pocket, thrust it at Sirius, and stormed ahead silkily down a street. Sirius could see his cloak, even turned into the peacoat, trying to catch enough of the cold wind to billow with.

Sirius and Callum looked at each other, sighed at his back, and followed. "Always like that, was he?" Sirius asked, unfolding the glasses from the case and, managing not to give them a dubious look, slipping them on. Nonprescription, he was relieved to find, having more than half expected them to be a ploy to make him bump into things. He wondered what Snape had transfigured them out of.

"Might as well have been a thistle patch as a family in that house," Callum agreed. "Prideful, the boiling of 'em. Each worse'n t'other. But he were a good lad. Just like his mam. Skin you alive an' paint the wounds with lemons if you looked at 'im twice, but if you got hurt and it wasn't him as done it, he'd be the first to steal a bit o' cloth an' the right weeds to dress it, and help your gran with her shoppin' in your place, too."

As he talked, Sirius had begun to notice that the edges of the glass before his eyes were silvery, melting into the frames and faintly mirroring the shops behind him, the people. It hit him right in the gut with a good, satisfying impact, like a half-bottle of firewhiskey:

They had their backs to a portkey (or port-tree) point, and Snape had put him on rear guard, given him real equipment. Really quite soon after they'd had a crack at each other.

Suddenly in charity with the world, he turned to Callum, who was still talking, "Course, some of the greens he strapped onto Davy's hand were shredded scallions, and he said they were antiseptic but I've heard a few things about onions and sulfuric acid since then. My oath but you've never heard such a howlin'…"

Sirius laughed dutifully, refusing to think about when he certainly had. He said, "Listen, mate, is
there any take-away about? Soup or coffee or anything? He may not want to spend the time to sit down, but I'm freezing, he's shivering, and you haven't even got a jumper."

The muggle waved this away with a psht-I-can-take it air, but said, "We should pass a few places, if he's going where I think—did he say where th'art headed?"

"Of course not," Sirius said sourly.

Callum nodded sagely, saying, "Just like his mam."

"What were they like, his parents?" Sirius asked, suddenly alive with curiosity. It occurred to him that his mother's contempt meant that Eileen Prince might have been someone worth knowing, and maybe she'd given up her world for someone that had really been worth it.

Callum was silent for a moment. Finally he said, in an altered tone, "Doubt he'd want me tellin' tales about ol' Toby. He weren't much different than other blokes' das—a bit too often to pub and much dislikin' the music and the long hair an' all, but he had his own troubles, you could see it. They got on worse'n most. We reckoned his wife was too smart for him and he knew it, and it shamed him—and that's all I will say.

"Now that Ellie Snape, she were a caution and no mistake," he added, cheerful tone returning as they walked, careful not to let Snape stride too far ahead. Sirius thought Sniv slowed a bit, though, when his mother's name was mentioned.

He listened with interest as Callum painted a scowling, heavy-browed, sharp-tongued, black-and-white picture of a village witch such as you almost never saw anymore, whipping the men into submission and the women into cowed adoration, with an owl-eyed, hawk-nosed scarecrow of a boy in old, oversized, mismatched clothes hanging onto her skirts and drinking in her every word. Visiting the sick and hosting the troubled with teas and plasters and spirits that were wonderfully soothing to their ailments, dressing them down proper for however they'd invited trouble onto their heads, then tearing out like a hellcat to attack it in ways they didn't dare.

Opening a little stillroom of a 'tearoom' when the mill he'd worked at broke down for the second, final time and half the neighborhood had to go on the dole again. Running it out of her living room for food and old clothes and the pick of the her neighbors' scraggly gardens. Battling the overwhelmed schoolmaster like a black-eyed Amazon in prim home-sewn to net her boy the advanced texts that got him beaten up on the playground and sent him to Hogwarts knowing enough of the spellcasting languages to get himself in real trouble.

Murdered in 1980, less than a week after after Reggie's funeral, while Snape was away. Away in Azkaban, Sirius knew though Callum didn't. Being questioned and contained pending the hearing where Dumbledore had lied through his puffy white beard to clear him officially, less officially claiming a vice-grip on his services.

"At least," Callum said somberly, "His da was murdered, and right bloody it was. We thought she might o' had a heart attack seein' it; there wasna mark on her. No one was ever fingered for it. There were some strange weather over the old town that night, too, I'll tell you—some folk said as they saw pictures in the clouds. Fearful things. And not all of 'em drunk off their arses, neither, though it were a Friday night."
They walked nearly into Snape, who had stopped dead, fists wound tight. At first Sirius was worried they were about to meet trouble, but no: he could see from Snape's face that he'd heard them talking. Had they died for him, Sirius wondered. To cement his cover as a spy on the Order, or because not all the Death Eaters were told he'd gone to Dumbledore under orders? The timing was... beyond suggestive.

He wondered if they'd known what their lives were buying. Had the way they'd died reflected how cooperative they'd been? Had someone been more respectful of a witch, even a blood-traitor who'd already paid dearly for her folly with a life of drudgery and exile, than a muggle seducer of witches? Had someone had a measure of mercy for the one Snape hadn't hated? Or maybe she'd forced them to kill her quickly, leaving only him to make an example of.

Had they known, he wondered, what their strange, clever, mushroom-fox of a child had become, or that he was working to remake himself clean even as they died? Had his mother hated living what she'd chosen enough to support his hateful politics, his loathsome patrons? Or had he, in turning coats, been reclaiming her?

He knew, looking at Snape's pale, shuttered face, his tight lips and lowered lashes, that it would be a long, long time before he asked, if he ever did. Stepping closer, in as gentle a tone as he could manage for Sniv, "Did you bring any money?"

"What," Snape breathed, in a crumbled, stifled voice.

"Money," he repeated, still quietly. "Ounces and whatnot."

"Can you possibly mean pounds?" he was asked. Evidently on automatic, because Snape's eyes didn't move from the air two feet in front of him that they were aimed at.

"I possibly might. Look at you, standing in the middle of the road freezing your arse off. I have this sneaking suspicion you didn't eat before we left."

Snape turned to him, eyes unreadable and just a touch too bright. He parted his lips, took a breath, closed them, blinked and swallowed, and through none of this did Sirius touch his worn face, or brush back from it the snips of black hair too short to be tied away. He said finally, "I had a lot of work to do, Tanner, before embarking on this enchanting little jaunt. Some of us do, you know."

And you won't eat in my house, Sirius finished for him silently, looking in at Snape through his invisible wall of dreary isolation. He had not so much of a thought but a sense, a feeling, about dragging him close enough to a fire to make him shed a layer or two, working together back to back until a head relaxed onto his shoulder. Didn't eat last night, won't have this morning.

"Cough up, then," he suggested, quiet, with only enough lightness for leavening. "Cullen says we should be passing some food soon; we could all do with something hot, even if you won't stop for a spell."

"Cullen can piss off." No heat. "He never knew where his rights stopped. No more did you."

"Tell you what else I don't know," Sirius said, after glancing to make sure Cullen really was surveying a nearby shop window like a gentleman, "is why you're not using any heating charms."

"You think I'm going to stop and put hand-warmers into my gloves, Tanner," Snape inquired, choosing his words more carefully than Sirius had bothered to, "in front of an excessively hearty salt-of-the-earth type like that?"

"You had plenty of chances before he showed up," Sirius reminded him, still quiet. "What's going
That netted him an exasperated look. "Do you think I'm... what, wearing a hairshirt for some reason? Quite the reverse, I assure you. After yesterday, temperature alteration is contra-indicated."

He frowned. "Because of those snake-things?"

"Because I took," he glanced at Cullen again, and reigned in his rising irritation to convert whatever he'd been going to say into, "nearly a whole pharmacopeia. You don't do that and go and expose yourself to extraneous... factors the next day, cucumber water or not."

"Put it on your clothes, then."

A sigh, and Snape rubbed at his forehead. "Yes, I should have done that before we left," he admitted. "But I don't usually need wand-charms to keep warm. Didn't think about it. Been a touch foggy all day."

"And here we are out in the open; bloody wonderful."

"Not that foggy," Snape drawled, putting his nose up in an imitation of aristocracy. "I mislike the lingering, though. And we'll have to get rid of him in a few blocks, or stall long enough for a real bloody tour, still in the open."

"Well, let him talk a bit, and then I think I know—"

Callum interrupted, having started back as soon as Snape looked less rocky, Sirius judged. Not a bad bloke, that. "You ladies finished your chinwag?" he asked innocently. His eyes were too understanding to just be understanding that Sirius had been cleaning up the inevitable bloody mess of hearing one's murdered parents talked about. Not that Sirius would have minded (much) in Snape's place, but Sirius's mother had been \textit{special}. What was the muggle assuming?

Chapter End Notes

Next: In which Snape develops a Cunning Plan to fix Spinners' End and environs... and does not like it one bit.

My Fellow Americans, In Case of Interest: Will plans on taking his family out for fish & chips, not tea as we conceive it.

Also, the comment about patriotism isn't so much a real position he's taking as reference to a Hotpots song.
Hop to it!

Chapter Summary

Severus has so much hate in his heart it extends to floral flavoring agents. This will not stop him from saving the world.

Chapter Notes

Continued thanks to w.i.t.s. for helping me minimize the probability of outraging my British readers. This will be the last chapter that uses Lanky accent and dialect.

I have ignored her advice in the matter of street vendors, and have elaborated in the notes below for anyone who’s interested in cultural notes or is agog to learn Severus's feelings about pickles.

Will's band and all of their songs did not actually exist in '95. As previously mentioned, I have chosen not to care about this fact. On account of they are largely awesome and I could not pass up that Tobias's local band has songs about GPS and video gaming (my version of him would have loved that) and Severus's local band has songs called He's Gone Emo and Make Us A Brew (take that, Celestina Warbeck).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You told Tanner there were food stalls?” Snape asked him. “I don’t see any.”

“On main drag,” Callum told him, and pointed at an intersection a little ways ahead. “Down that way.”

They set off, and Snape said, in a resigned tone, “So, man of promise, what is it you deliver?”

“Ah. Well,” Callum grinned, and went on, “I’m thinkin’ of deliverin’ work back to the old home farm, what dost think of tha’?”

Snape turned and frowned at him. “Meanin’?”

“Waaeeel,” the man drew out, savoring it, “I’ve pulled together some capital, what wi’ this venture and that; thought I’d reopen owd mill.”

“ART EWT OF THA BLUDDY MIND?” Snape bellowed, rounding on him.

“Who’s been lickin’ alicker off a knife?” Callum asked mildly, rubbing his ear.

“Who’s lost all the oil in his lamp?” Snape fired back at him, eyes hot.

“Who’s screaming his head off in public?” Sirius inquired in tones of cordial, glass-bright curiosity, smiling tightly. After a second, while Snape simmered, he asked Callum, “Alicker?”
“Vinegar,” Snape said curtly.

“Something me mam used to say,” Callum explained. “Mostly to his mam, come to think on’t. What’s flew up tha nose, lad?” he asked soothingly.

“Them as didn’t get out don’t have savings nor hope to play with, Callum,” Snape smouldered at him. Sirius had to repress a grin, because underneath the actual angry he could also just about see the irritated sod off you patronizing prat I am not your horse to wheedle. “Hast been back there, with tha grand plans?”

“That I have—river black as filth, reekin’ to high heaven, all those grey laundry lines, not a new building in the place. Even the Jelly Babies factory’s looking green around the gills. Thought they could do with a new revenue stream,” the muggle said, looking hurt.

“But never one as’ll plump the place for half a breath and collapse to leave them dust-dry in debt again!” Snape argued hotly. Color had come back into his face.

Sirius surreptitiously extended a hand into his personal space. It was definitely heating up. So much for sense and caution, and wasn’t that just Sniv all over.

“Chrissake, Will, doan’ ye ken British textiles are well and truly cornered? What’ll tha do, make sweaters? Car seats? Vests? Market’s choked, you should know it! All the labor’s oversea in sweatshops dirt-cheap, no one’s going to buy local at community-sustainable prices. You’ll fail in a year, if that!”

“We could make a go of it,” Callum insisted.

“Are you being a pessimist again?” Sirius asked.

“Not a successful one, you couldn’t, and no, Tanner, I’m not—I’m a realist in a world that doesn’t care how well you mean or how romantic your hopes are, and that’s the end of it,” he fired back. “Bring a business into the area, yes, God knows it needs sometHIC oh, bloody ow, but that mill failed for a reason. Take the lesson!”

“Temperature,” Sirius singsonged under his breath, only just loud enough for a spy’s trained (and natural) paranoia to pick up.

“The first time it failed from woodworm breakin’ the old equipment,” Callum pointed out reasonably, eying the flinch and cursing in some alarm. “The second time were during a slump.”

“But all its customers have gone elsewhere, son,” Snape said, looking headachy again. Sirius was relieved to feel the warmth die away, although also a bit sorry. It was cold out, after all. “Long since. Why d’you think there was a slump? It never came back right. And the new businesses looking about for suppliers will be too few, or rather, too unstable, and too cheap to make a steady income stream for a cash-gobbler like any kind of a factory. And I guarantee you: that shiny new equipment’s crumbling wi’ rust by now. Been over twenty year.”

Now it was Callum’s turn to throw up his hands. “I’ve already bought mill, man,” he expostulated. “What business hast tha in mind?”

“Selling something people will actually buy?” Snape suggested, nastily treaclely, and hiccuped again. Sirius watched him just manage not to swear.

“All the tourists coming north come here; it’s got to be production,” Callum argued.
“Production of something people will buy,” Snape stressed, and then got a noticing look. He nodded in a direction that proved to contain a stall, and said, only slightly less viciously sweetly, “Such a fine businessman as thasel’ can bear to stand a round of stew, I’ll be bound.”

“Cheaper’n stout,” Callum agreed amiably.

“You did forget money,” Sirius accused, delighted.

“I’ve enough for what we’re here for, but when do you think I had time to go to the bank?” Snape slid back at him. Winning had calmed him a little, enough to be amused at Sirius enjoying being right. “Luke has too many gossips hanging around the place; if I go off schedule without ducking them, he’ll ask me next day why I didn’t come to him if I needed a loan.”

“I’d like some stout,” Sirius said louder, with a bit of a sigh. “Or a nice mulled red.”

Callum laughed, and puffed up his chest, drawing attention to its band logo, and said in a voice of singsong indignation, “I hope you’re foolin’, son, tha’s not right!”

“What?”

“It’s a song,” Snape said wearily, nodding at the logo, as Callum gustily sang, “Singing bitter, lager, cider, ale, stowt!”

“Which he’s muddling. Never could carry a tune, as I recall.”

“Designer drinks, I’d rather drink nowt!”

“Shet tha tin-eared yawp!” Snape yelled after him as he strolled off. There were a few nods and assenting murmurs from passers-by who understandably weren’t rushing to get involved, but looked as pained as he did.

“Why do you both know the same song that’s not from when we were kids or I’d know it, too?” Sirius queried, grinning.

“You can keep yer white wine spritzer, babycham that’s fer yer sister!” Callum warbled happily, looking back over his shoulder to thumb his nose at Snape and wink. He reached the vendor’s cart and leaned flirtily over onto its lip. “Take plastic, luv?”

“I have to live somewhere in summer,” Snape said, making a face. “Wireless’s in rut up there, as a rule, and the band’s local. I was inclined to approve of their attitude until it became clear they were more nationalistic than patriotic. Criminal what he’s doing to it, though,” he added dispassionately.

“Lanky lads, are you?” the vendor smiled, dishing something chunky into three paper containers.

“What do you mean, nationalistic?” Sirius asked.

“By name and nature, luv,” Callum winked, forcing everyone to notice that he was shortish and rather stocky, and understand at once what he meant (Snape shuddered and made a spectacular face; Sirius snorted at them both). He handed something over something small, squarish, flat, and colorful to her with the hand that housed his wedding ring. Sirius was interested to see a Muggle so naturally make the taken flirt alert gesture of ring-flashing that a decent wizard would also have made in his place.

“It’s possible to take pride in being Northern without having to decide that the rest of the country’s
one enormous girl’s blouse,” Snape with a shrug.

“That’s rich from you,” Sirius raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged again. “You lot wouldn’t have thought I was pick of the litter for bullying if hadn’t had a chip on its collective shoulder about anything posher than ale, fish, chips, and footie, up my way. Doesn’t just leave a mark, that, it etches a bulls-eye. I see it all the time.”

“I like that band meself,” the vendor was confiding over at her cart. She did something vaguely mechanical with the square thing. “Me son turned me onto ‘em. Got their heads on straight, they do. Keys! Wallet! Phone!” she laughed, handing it back to him with a pencil and a little slip of paper. “Let’s have a Beer Olympics!”

“And if you could afford the fish you were suspect,” Snape added, grousing. “And if you got them from the river to fry up yourself, you were suicidal.”

“Who wants a mokachino?” Callum demanded, grinning.

“Is that a kind of yappy dog?” Sirius asked helplessly.

“It’s a frilly, frothy, Southern perversion of both coffee and chocolate at once,” Snape informed him. His mouth was twitching slightly, by which Sirius perceived that whatever the things were, Snape was not an entire hundred percent against them. “Well, probably an American perversion. Couldn’t tell you the derivation for sure. An abomination too effeminate for giggly schoolgirls in lace and pink ribbons, any road.”

“I want one!” Sirius said immediately.

“You probably do,” Snape agreed. Not insultingly, for a wonder. “But don’t give one to Lupin. Not unless you’re sure you want to give him another one every ten minutes for the rest of his life. It might get tedious.”

“Can I get cash back?” Callum asked the vendor.

“Sorry, ducks. There’s an aytee-em over in plaza, by the bank,” she told him helpfully.

“Oh, ta.” Gathering up the lidded containers and white plastic spoons, he paused, and asked her, “‘Ey, lass, what’d you say a man could make to sell, to bring new onto the market, that vendors’d give a try right away?”

She frowned, and offered, “People’ll always try new food.”

“Oh, ta,” he said again, a bit gloomily, and waved clumsily at her. He had to use his little finger for it; it was the only one he could safely free from his full hands. Trotting back to pass over the paper cylinders of glutinous probably beef or mutton stew choked with greyish globules Sirius hoped were barley, he said, “Lass says sell food, but I can see the problems there right enow. Freshness, counter space, impossible sanitation standards for a building of that age, cooks overcharging for their bleedin’ Culinary Arts degrees…”

“I know what you can sell,” Snape said, in an strange tone tone. He was fixing an look of reluctance, almost revulsion, on the vendor, now cleaning up some stray drops of broth with a rag and humming to herself.

“What’s that?” Callum asked, pushing the carton into his hands. And again, and again, until he absently took it.
“She said it, didn’t she.”

Patiently, “And you were reckoning to tell me when?”

“He doesn’t want to tell you. Why don’t you want to tell him?” Sirius asked Snape.

There was a long moment of resistance, with both of their eyes on him, he eventually gritted his teeth and pushed out, “Because I hate hops.”

They both stared at him for a moment longer, and then Callum stuck his thumbs into his belt-loops, grinning, and let out a long ahhh. “And you a brewer,” Sirius said, also grinning but considerably more in the dark.

“No one should bring more beer into that place, you know they shouldn’t,” Snape appealed to Callum, speaking over Sirius.

“Un-patriotic, you are,” Callum shook his head sadly, opening his carton and attacking his soup with every evidence of enthusiasm.

“Mastering a demon’s no joke when the demon’s all you’ve got,” Snape said grimly.

“What have you got against beer?” Sirius demanded, mock-protective. He tried a spoonful himself. It was… hot and salty enough to not be a complete waste of a stranger’s money. The pale things were barley after all, thank Merlin.

“May I start with it’s poisonous?” Snape enquired, the sweet toxicity dripping from his voice again.

“Not for preference,” Sirius duetted with Callum’s, “Try again, lad.”

“Then I’ll point out I’ve already started: I wasn’t joking about domestic tranquility,” he said grimly, eyes going vague for a moment, throat tightening. He choked down another hiccough, and clutched the carton closer in to his body for its unmagical warmth. “Then I’ll go on to ‘it’s addictive,’ digressing by way of hangovers, shattered impulse control and all its many, many consequences, shattered budgets…”

“You can’t possibly have been pals with,” he barely remembered to not use Malfoy’s name, “that toffee-nosed Wiltshire crowd without having picked up a wine-and-whiskey palate. What makes beer so much worse?”

“The lower alcohol content, actually,” Snape said, still grimly. “People know they can drink more of it before hitting their limits than of other drinks. So they do. They keep drinking all night, and lose track of what they’ve put away. You know they do; you’ve done it yourself. Often,” he added, scowling as though that been a personal slap in his personal face.

Forgotten to not tell me anything? Sirius thought, amused, but Snape was ranting on, “Go have a curry, sick up, start again, very Gry—macho. And, of course, the more you take in, the more often, the closer you get to alcoholism. And the lower the average level of artistry, the lower the average level of expectations for it. With wine, unless you’re already a drunk buying plonk you know you’re meant to appreciate every mouthful, take it slow, whether you do or no, but…” he stopped short, looking arrested again.

They waited patiently. When he kept staring into space, Callum inquired, “Do this often, does
he?

“It’s been known to happen,” Sirius nodded, drinking gloop resignedly. “I think he’s remembered he’s a brewer.”

“Can’t see our Seth turning brewer, lad; he weren’t faffing about, talking about dislikin’ the stuff. He’d hang around pub wi’ his da some summers, when they weren’t at it like cats an’ dogs, but he’s the only lad I know as stuck to the cider and arrers. Never took to drinking social with the rest of us, see, and you could see he didn’t like it on anyone’s breath. Huddled in a corner with schoolwork such as no one else could make sense of half the time, when he wasn’t trying to put arrers straight through dartboard.”

“Mm,” said Sirius, afraid he did see, but keeping it off his face. It was starting to sound like his parents might have been right about Snape Senior, even if it was for all the wrong reasons. No respite anywhere, then, like Sirius had had at school. “I didn’t mean that, though. He makes his own herbal tea and things.”

“Just like his mam,” Callum said again. They both watched Snape’s thinking-furiously face for a while, eating stew with wildly disparate degrees of enthusiasm while he continued to use his steaming container as a hand-warmer.

“All right,” Snape said finally. “I think I could address some of those problems, give me a chance, come up with some recipes. What’s your timetable?” he asked the muggle.

“What’ll pushing it back get me?” Callum asked keenly.

Snape shrugged. He said, without any particular tone or emphasis, “All I can tell you is I’m a genius.”

“I wish he wasn’t,” Sirius answered Callum’s hoot of there’s swank! with a sigh, regarding his last few spoonfuls of stew with unenthused calculation. “It would make him so much easier to deal with. Oi, genius. Eat your nice gloop before you fall over.”

“I’m waiting to see if you die,” Snape glittered at him, so he grinned, choked melodramatically, and made as if to measure his length on the cobblestones.

Affecting to haughtily ignore him, Snape turned to Callum. “Stripping out the hangover effect will be easy; I can already think of four or five ways to tackle it. Filtering the mood effects to promote only the sense of well-being without the risk of moroseness or quick belligerence, also relatively simple, I think. Lessening the judgment shutdown without closing off the inhibition reduction, less so. It’s fighting the addictive properties and synthesizing all the changes with pleasant end-flavours that’ll be the challenges. And I won’t give you a recipe that only stops the hangovers, tell you that straightaway.”

Callum scraped his jaw off the road, and demanded, “Can you do tha’, lad?”

“Belike,” Snape said judiciously. “I’ve other obligations, mind. But if you can wait and I don’t… get hit by a lorry, it should be possible. Although I strongly doubt anything acceptable in its effects’ll pass for anything but a designer drink,” he added dryly, with a nod at the band shirt.

“Eh, a local business run and staffed by local folk? They’ll forgive us,” Callum said hastily. “Beer’s beer, eh? Make a joke out of it. We’ll make the label Designer Drinks,” he proposed cheerfully.

Snape eyeballed him with disfavor, but only said, “Could make a start during winter break, any
road, if nothing unexpected turns up. Shall we meet then and talk terms?”

“Terms?” Callum asked, face falling.

Scornfully, Snape demanded, “What sort o’ crack-crate d’you take me for? Think you’ll get owt for nowt? I’ll be wantin’ shares, creative and training control, power of veto on the advertisin’, a cut of the profits, and a strong say in hiring in certain departments, to say the very least.”

“Eh, lad, but we was at school together!” Callum protested, wide-eyed and not very seriously.

“And all the trouble you gae me then’ll cost you now, make no mistake,” Snape fired back, glittering cold and narrow at the muggle until he put up his meaty hands meekly. “But I expect I can be of some utility as regards suppliers, so value added there. Give me your address; I’ll write when I have a sense for when I’ll be done with exams and can meet.”

Chapter End Notes

Apparently (gasp) Nottingham does not actually work like New York or Boston. Shocker, right? Instead of stalls, there should be take-away shops and bakeries selling fish-and-chips or pasties. Which, My Fellow Americans, are not sparkly things you see on strippers' pointy bits, they are single-serving, calzone-shaped, infinitely customizable pie-like objects, very easy to take to work and eat on the go.

Easy to make, too. You don't *have* to use lard. Or suet. Or rutabaga.

I tried to re-write the chapter with this in mind, I really did. But there were some factors.

* It's been a very wearying summer and I am basically done with this fic. I don't mean I won't finish posting it. It no longer has a priority claim on my energy, though. I have another fic in the works, which I think has about 50,000% the awesome of this one (not saying much, granted. It's already twice the length, anyway, and that happened in like a tenth of the time), and also a ton of RL work.

* I am especially done with this chapter and with Will. His silliness here was fun to write (one of us may have gotten a bit carried away) and I do like his unselfconscious confidence, but, yeah, done.

* Severus apparently loves fish-and-chips when his digestion isn't all seized up from stress, and he wouldn't complain about it. Especially as it's hard to screw up high-demand fried food.

* Further, I am psychologically incapable of putting seafood into my mouth (don't ask, I don't know, just they look like aliens and meat should not look or smell like that), and would be unable to describe it. Or the pickles.

* And I would have had to, because Severus assures me he would have eaten all the pickles. Really all of them. Eggs, onions, cukes, all of them, there would have been no pickles left. Because he's hungrier than he thinks he is (or at least hungrier than he's letting on), and besides, no one else would properly appreciate the pickles, the philistines. And then he would probably have been sick on account of all that vinegar.
on an empty stomach. And this is a preslash piece, and Sirius, although still totally a fifteen-year-old doof, has had the frat-boy knocked out of him. Sicking up ≠ sexy.

* Anyway, Will was going to go get fish & chips with his kids later.

* However funny stew isn't, pasties (when you don't make jokes about strippers or have WASPy American feelings about what bits of animals are meant to be eaten) are not as funny as that. The snarky bitching in the next bit simply did not translate.
“Are you expecting to get ‘hit by a lorry’?” Sirius demanded, when Callum had headed back to the skating rink, leaving a business card tucked into one of Snape’s many hidden pockets.

“I’m… not expecting not to,” Snape said, with a bit of a grimace. He finally cracked open his carton, tracing a few runes on its lid with his finger and studying the resultant flares of color first. “That would be unrealistic.” He began to inhale the stew in a businesslike manner. “Livia and Lorenzo protect us, but this is foul,” he noted, although thinking so didn’t slow him down any that Sirius could see.

“And you’re the patron saint of realism in an uncaring world,” Sirius drawled snidely, refusing to examine why he was so angry about it.

“I don’t claim to embody my values, but I do try, as best I can, to…” He broke off, prodded dubiously at something in the canister. “I assume that’s meant to be celery, but celery oughtn’t to be so… soggy.”

“Good morning, have a kipper, we’re discussing your death,” Sirius pointed out, eyes narrowing.

“Don’t pretend to be worked up over the idea after you tried to engineer it,” Snape frowned at the disappointing celery on his spoon, and dropped it back into the stew with a sad little splash.

“I’m not,” he said hastily. “And I never—shouldn’t you be? Worked up?”

“No,” Snape replied absently, now examining a lump of saggy orangeness. “I should take every reasonably sane precaution, and take a few more, and get on with my work. I suppose this is a carrot, and not something’s spleen?”

“Precautions against not dying include a reasonably sane level of caloric intake,” Sirius pointed out, inane with disbelief. “Soggy or not.”

“After making sure your potential caloric intake is edible, mam.” He sniffed at the carrot.

He rolled his eyes. “I saw you check it before you started eating.”

“Only for toxins. Not for… utter failure.” But the spoon started moving again.

Sirius sighed. “Troll work?”
“Let’s call it a Dreadful, unless unfortunate side effects surface later. But not to worry, I’m sure you’ll feel them first, between the time gap and what you’ve done to your liver.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” he informed him. “I doubt ‘what I’ve done to my liver’ in a couple of months is a patch on the lacework you’ve made out of your stomach since you were born.”

Snape looked up with him with a good gracious, it has made a valid point sort of blink, but said, “Stress only worsens ulcers; they’re caused by bacteria. I see no reason to permit that sort of nonsense.” He scraped the last of the stew from the container, and mentioned, “Petty as it may be, I feel impelled to point out that I think it’s sub-par because I could do better blindfolded; you think it’s sub-par because you’ve been spoiled by elves all your living life.”

“Redundant much?”

“I was making a distinction for periods of living death.” He dropped the carton into a dustbin, and Sirius followed suit.

“Oh.” He didn’t know what to do with this… calm person. Half of him felt like he was walking with a stranger, and the rest was having flashes of long fingers curled around the handle of a teacup, a hand curled in his hair, the rustle of pages and the scratch of a quill, a tired, resigned scowl and a… ball of yarn? It made no sense. “I suppose you have a point?” he asked belligerently, rattled.

“I do, since you mention it,” Snape said—mildly, Merlin help them all. “You’ve got into the habit of thinking yourself more useless than you need or ought to. A small difference, perhaps, but of import. This way.” He gestured, and strode temperately towards a side street while Sirius’s thoughts were still yapping around his ankles in mixed confusion and fury.

“Where are we going,” he snarled, rather than try to decipher that ‘need or ought.’ Snape was the only one who ever told him he was useless out loud, for Godric’s sake!

“Heartwood Sweets,” Snape replied, ignoring his tone.

Sirius stopped dead. “Oh, you have got to be kidding,” he uttered, staring at Snape’s retreating back.

“Have I? Keep up, Tanner,” infuriation tossed back.

“Your accent vanished,” he said meanly, following but refusing to hurry.

“I am aware.”

“Heartwood Sweets? When did you turn into Dumbledore?”

That did get him a pause, and a filthy, sullen look over the blue-clad shoulder, but no more aloud than a snapped, “Stop dawdling.”

“I’m not one of your first-years, Snape,” he said, lazily folding his arms.

“No, you’re a mangy cur for whom I’m doing a favor against my every instinct, instruction, and inclination. So heel.”
“If anyone’s got mange here it’s you,” Sirius grumbled, sulkily following.

Chapter End Notes

Livia Drusilla, also known as Julia Augusta, was the wife of the first true Roman Emperor, Augustus Caesar. She was posthumously deified by her grandson, the Emperor Claudius. Severus likes to swear by her because in Robert Graves' I Claudius series she is portrayed as both the true administrative genius behind the Roman Emperor and a ruthless poisoner for the good of the state and her family, while in history she is portrayed as an exemplary Roman matron. Very Slytherin.

Lorenzo is the patron saint of cooks.
Heart of the Wood

Chapter Summary

Freed of extraneous muggles, Our Heroes get to the point. And the chocolate!

Chapter Notes

You don't have to read Grey In the Dark to understand this chapter, I don't think. However, that is where you'll find Severus's history with this shop, to which your narrator is not privy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heartwood Sweets was almost everything Sirius might have expected of a sweet shop just too high-end and just too local to qualify as a tourist trap, if he'd ever given it a second's thought. Or even been in a sweet shop that didn't cater to the Hogwarts crowd.

As he walked in, the pure harmony of quiet bells that he imagined would get irritating after the first three hearings welcomed him softly. The overwhelming impression was of clear green and warm amber, the latter coming from the shining floor and varnished walls.

These were dappled with artistic sweeps of paper leaves (green) and woodsman's hats (a different green). Each of these, when he looked closely, had a handwritten name and an amount with a funny-shaped L—a muggle money sign, memory dustily whispered—next to it. The leaves were all stamped with the phrase Save the Children, and the hats with Cancer Research UK. All had names written on in crayon, and usually in print.

He wondered if there was also specific research about, say, Scorpios. Or Capricorns. Capricorns probably needed it more, the convoluted sods.

Then the smell of fruity chocolate and spice hit him right in the nose, swarming off the velvet-lined metal shelves and out from behind the gleaming glass counter. He wasn't a chocoholic like Remus, which was just as well. If even he was drooling, bringing his friend in would have been the kind of cruelty that was legally called unusual.

Snape, he assumed, was unaffected, the ascetic nit. He couldn't be bothered to look, though, because the tall, softly-greying, stocky man with the hooked nose behind the counter had dropped both his lantern jaw and, in a cloud of powdered sugar, about half a pound of fudge.

Closing the door carefully behind them, so as not to set off the bells again, Snape turned around. He saw the white puff, the dropped jaw, and the furious and astonished customer, and gave the man half a crooked smile. "Ne then, Dickon," he said quietly. His smile went wicked, and he intoned, "I've come a long way."

"Christ," the proprietor swore, softly amazed. "Half a mo. Sorry, miss," he said to the woman, who was certainly not a miss. "I'll cut you fresh. You're wanting reserve stock, S—our Seth?"
"That I am," Snape said, "but I might need to take a mollifier back to the Old Man, too. Got anything with enough lemon to punch you squarely in the sinuses?" His enunciation had blurred again, but only slightly. It was nowhere near the level he'd used with his old not-a-chum.

"What's reserve stock, then?" the woman asked, somewhere between disapproving and interested.

"Bacon-flavored bars," the proprietor said, at the same time as Snape answered, "Chipotle truffles."

They looked at each other, and Snape said, "The bacon was disgusting. It doesn't deserve mention."

"It sells to the pub crowd, with the dipped crisps. But I'm trying a pear-infused chevre filling, now," the man replied. "You'll like it. And a dipped dried strawberry marinated in port with a touch of balsamic."

Sirius gagged slightly, but Snape said, eyebrow going up, "I'll like that better, though you might try it fresh."

"Oh aye, but fresh is a nuisance to keep stocked."

"I have faith," Snape said, sawdust dry, with a pointed look at the shopkeeper's sleeve, "in your… innovation."

"Our Seth," the man said to the woman in a proprietary tone, cutting and boxing her new piece of fudge, "is responsible for our Forest Floor bark."

She stared between them, highly dubious, and Snape said, with a little smirk, "Give her a shard on mine, Dickon. We'll call it advertising."

"Most of the profits go to local schools," the proprietor told his customer, obediently setting a wedge of chocolate strewn with candied flowers over the powdered fudge. "A term of the patenting agreement," he added, with a wink at Snape, who turned away, pulling disdain over his face.

Unfortunately for him, he turned in Sirius's direction. Sirius's jaw dropped, because under all that aloof was a faint flush. Snape scowled menacingly at him, and spun to examine a display.

"So you two know each other," Sirius said lamely when the man had bundled his customer out and replaced the Open sign on the door with one that read Tea Break: Have One Yourself And Come Back!

It was especially lame because they were gripping each other's forearms in classic comrade-back-from-the-wars style. Sniv's face was soft, for him, appreciative. This though the man was fussing over him, turning his hands over, examining them with a fierce scowl. It wasn't something Sirius would have imagined him permitting.

"Russell Tanner, Richard Gowan," Snape said, not in any apparent hurry to pull his hands back. "My line always gets wands here."

"Howdo," Gowan said amiably to Sirius, and back to Snape, "You're looking better than last I saw you, Severus; I'm right glad to see it."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. In his opinion, Snape looked exactly like what he was: someone who lived in a dungeon whose windows were underwater, spent his days monitoring twenty possible explosions at once and his evenings stalking through stone halls or being hexed grey, and would work through two meals a day if you didn't kick him to the table and secure him there with chains
"What brings you?" the man was going on. "Haven't acquired more local color, have you?"* he asked with a look half wariness, half compassion.

"No, indeed," Snape said, with more vehemence than Sirius thought explicable, his hands twitching. He took them back, and said, "Tanner has the usual problem with the limits on Ollivander's stock. I noticed his wandwork is absurdly choked and unfocused, and thought to bring some business your way."

Gowan looked between them with a shrewd look, and said, "And I'm sure my lack of Ministry affiliation has nothing to do with your friend's glamour."

"Gracious," Snape returned, poker-faced, "I can't imagine why such a connection would come to your mind. And he's not my friend."

Gowan grinned, patted Snape's arm, and said, "Of course not. What can I have been thinking. Severus Prince has no friends."

"Damned right," Snape sniffed, turning his beak up and getting a laugh for it. His mouth quirked, and he said, evidently more seriously, "We haven't overlong, Dickon, and I can't leave him here."

"Come back, then," Gowan said, ushering them through an unassuming grey door that read Employees Only, after turning the latch farther than it looked like it ought to go. "I'll let you do some taste tests while we fit him if you'll make us a brew," he proposed.

"Done," Snape said instantly, closing the door behind them, and disappeared into a cabinet.

Chapter End Notes

* This is a reference to the fact that the Sherwood's best-known son was an outlaw (and also probably not from there, and definitely not from then, if not entirely fictional) who, like Slytherins, famously wore green.
No Cobblers Needed

Chapter Summary

Sirius gets his hand on his wand and makes Severus deeply uncomfortable.

Chapter Notes

The chapter title references a quote by George Hegel: We do not need to be shoemakers to know if our shoes fit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The moment his hand wrapped around the fifteenth wand, magic unfurled in his blood, heady and fizzing with rightness. The stolen wand had acted for him, sullen but workmanlike. It had never filled his veins with joy or welcome.

Suddenly it was Ollivander's musty shop around him, instead of the clean green and amber lines of Gowan's shop, dust in the air instead of chocolate richness, dust and dim grime and definitely no white tea with a flower unfurled in the glass pot (Snape had exclaimed, "Christ, Dickon, pandering enough to the hausfrau?" and looked almost as though he wanted to laugh as at a friend). The face before him wasn't broad and friendly, but a gnomishly inquisitive one that measured him like a tailor but didn't ask a single question.

Gowan had asked dozens, during the measuring. Although his questions had all been meant to find out what he was like rather to identify him, only Snape's look of sadistic and morbily fascinated but unsurprised enjoyment had kept Sirius from balking.

Maybe there was something to the questions, though; Ollivander had taken over an hour to fit him, and that with only three cores where Gowan seemed to have an inexhaustible variety. His wand, his wand, the one that felt right, was alder and thestral wingbone, and he'd had it in his hand in under twenty minutes.

Snape had bullied him into buying a new holly and dragon heartstring one as well, although the fit felt paler. That, he'd argued, was the type of wand the Ministry had on file for Sirius. Sirius ought, he'd said uncompromisingly, to have one they could take away and break and be satisfied.

Sirius immediately started sneaking surreptitious glances at Snape, wondering where his second wand was.

To his dark delight, his little glances, as Snape and Gowan frowningly discussed Callum's prospective business, seemed to make the man fidgety inside his skin, although his control was better than to flush. Sirius started, whenever Snape was looking away from him but not inattentive, to drag the glances out, up, and down, very obviously seeking out the shapes beneath Snape's clothes.

Not being stupidly sixteen anymore, though, he stopped when Sniv had another wracking hiccup
and put his hand down halfway to a piece of that pear-and-honeyed-goat-cheese chocolate that Gowan had apparently not been kidding about.

Gowan got as far as a frown and an, "Ey, our Se—" before Snape cut him off with a sharp, "Do not enquire," which he actually obeyed. He started giving Sirius dark if-you-weren't-a-customer looks, though.

Sirius did rouse himself from the feeling of a fitting wand in his hand long enough to demand, "And how is this my fault?" and roll his eyes at the answer.

This, a dour, "Everything's your fault, Tanner," seemed to appease the wandmaker. So obviously they really did know each other.

Really, though, he was too closely occupied with the curve of the haft in his palm, and the magnetic attraction of his eyes to every possible holster that could conceivably be concealed in Snape's seams. Long seams, on long limbs, although Snape was the shortest one in the room.

It occurred to him to wonder what Snape saw, when he looked back. Bits missed in shaving, as Sirius could just see Snape's own haphazard part? Up his nose, as the not-set-quite-right-ness of Snape's was emphasized from slightly above? Were Sirius's wasted jaw and the vulnerability of his adam's apple as much on display, with Sirius's hair tied back, as the knives of Snape's cheekbones were even through the curtain of hair? His collarbones weren't at Snape's eye level, but they were on the level to be fallen on with Snape's eyes at rest, weren't they?

Not that Snape's eyes ever were at rest. Or Snape himself. Even now, sitting calmly over tea, he was tense, at the ready, poised to take off, more wound up than the bindings around his ribs accounted for. Would he look like the same person, with his face relaxed, his shoulders down? What would his eyes look like in a tease that wasn't unkind, his mouth curled without malice?

No, Sirius knew that last one. Heavy lids on a sunny bed, a hand rising to tangle in his hair, a lazy, curling smile with the trust in it so far assumed as to be below the level of an expression. Hard, warm fingers tracing down his cheek, lingering at his lips.

His tea had gone cold, and Snape and Gowan were finishing up. Sirius put out his hand to shake, left coins in Gowan's palm like a gentleman. He said his goodbyes on automatic and tailed his nemesis out like a dog, the memory of cedar and juniper his leash.

Chapter End Notes

A word regarding heights, brought to you by this chapter was short.

Wikia has one reference for Sirius's height, which I do not credit because it's from a promotional gimmick, and none for Severus's. Having been assured by male friends that height is actually very important to the intuitive assessment pre-work in deciding which of any two guys is going to be cock of the walk, I've decided that Sirius and Severus are close enough to a height that Gryffindors would not have told Sirius to pick on someone his own size. Severus is definitely shorter, though, because he has small dog syndrome (ie: startle or contradict me and I will bark so loud you'll think I've actually bitten you).

Remus has the opposite of that, so (although it could equally be accounted for by
nothing can kill me but fire and forks with which the wise do not eat fruit), I'm not going to argue with Wikia and it's questionable non-canon citation claiming he's 6'2. All we know about James' height is that an eleven year old Harry thought he was tall in the Mirror (according to 11 year old Harry the malnourished shrimp, Albus and Minerva are also tall, Severus is just greasy), but I'm inclined to think he was tall side of average: not too big to be a seeker, not too anything to fancy himself not so much normal as the platonic ideal of manhood.

...Sorry, I think Severus took over there for a second. I guess he's rattled from being ogled and needed to get his balance back with the snide (he says not; I disbelieve).
Stir the Sands of Monotony

Chapter Summary

Sirius is either insufficiently or far too persuasive. Depends on where you're coming from.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning: Language. Also, this is a higher (although not highly) rated chapter. If you've been able to squint and ignore the ship up to this point, that's, uh, not going to work for you here. Also, remember those warnings about tenseplay back from the beginning? Relevant.

Chapter notes: I was going to title the chapter after a Warbeck song, but I just… just no. Actual title is by Peter O'Toole.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Halfway out of town, Snape said, "He's going to think I have you under Imperius. You look like a zombie."

"Just waiting for the I-told-you-so," Sirius tossed off.

Snape's dark eyes went to Sirius's hip, where his hand was lying protectively over the hidden holster. They crinkled a little, although the rest of his face continued to look detached and indifferent. "I did tell you so, it's true," he allowed.

"Smartarse," Sirius growled, and shoved him playfully, smirking: he'd known Sniv wouldn't be able to resist saying it, given an opening.

But his ruminations have forgotten frailty. How could they remember what every line of the body they churn over denies too thoroughly even to sneer at?

Snape's brief swallowed noise is as much pained as surprised—and repeated, when he fails to stop his back bouncing against one of the trees that lined the roads. Sirius curses and grabs him without thinking, probably doing more harm than good. "Fuck, Sniv, I forgot," he says, since an apology is owed and that's the best he can bear to give this man.

"Clumsy, thoughtless oaf!" Snape hisses, choked-off, curled in on himself over Sirius's arm, bony fingers digging right through the thick overshirt. He's heavier than he looks, drawn in like that: dense where he seems brittle.

"Where does it hurt?" Sirius demands, resting a hand as lightly as he can over Snape's back, for warmth. Against shock. Yeah. But he finds himself rubbing soothing circles against the soft prickle of boiled wool, his hand pale against the vivid blue he'd charmed into richness himself. He could
drop his head a few inches and bite into the prominent spinal column, between hair and collar, breathe warmth into it. The tight body—in his arms, Merlin save them all—really is shock-chilled, and the weather isn't helping. He's more than close enough to see that he was right, earlier; Snape's hair does have a blue-black sheen today instead of its usual oil-slick gloss.

Close enough for the scent of him to wind through Sirius's body. The heather and fennel and oregano are strong now, a spicy spiral of enticement, without the more piercing smells of other herbs that must, by process of elimination, contribute to the oil-slick. Underneath them is something personal, intimate. Something he can't name, usually masked by the absent smells. It's ghost-familiar enough to make him want to clutch tighter no matter which of them it hurts.

"Get off me," Snape is snarling. He's cranky and with good cause, but the lines of his body are strange against Sirius. Stiff with hesitation, vibrating with restraint and pain and not with anger, he isn't, tellingly, trying to in any way burn, bite, or scratch Sirius's face off.

"No," he says softly, and curls a hand around that narrow waist the way he's been wanting to for what's felt like hours, feeling wool-covered flesh still into breathless marble. He runs it up, light as he can but cursing every layer of winterwear (of which there are at least five, knowing Sniv: peacoat, jumper, waistcoat, shirt, vest, maybe a wand holster, and who knows what else), until his hand is splayed over the safer area of bone under Snape's collarbones, helping him straighten and turning him around. "Can you breathe?" he demands, low.

"Get away," Snape repeats, making no fraction of a move that Sirius doesn't mold him unresisting into. His voice and mouth are furious, but his eyes are miserable. Even Padfoot's human muzzle knows longing when he's immersed in it.

"You need to warm up," Sirius tells him, moving neither the hand over his heart (too much cloth to feel it) nor the one supporting his back. "Do that wandless thing."

"Terrible idea. I can tell it's one of yours. Swallowed a whole apothecary yesterday, remember? And my palliative against your cousin's curse has been wearing off quickly enough without help."

"I remember..." he trails off. The truth is, he remembers this body, hurricane wildcat in fights, all sharp elbows and slashing fingers and spells, hard punches and harder knees and feet, head hardest of all, but he also, almost, remembers these arms.

"In my bedroom," he says quietly, what little distance there is between them diminishing, the heat from Snape's body rising against him in the winter air no matter how bad an idea he says it is, "the one I grew up in, in the boxes Remus packed for me. There was a photo album. There was a picture, where it fell open."

"I'd imagine there was, in an album," Snape drawls, snide. Sirius can feel his heartbeat now, or imagines he can, can see the jump at his throat, anyway, the quickening, very shallow breaths. The remains of reason tell him to attribute these marks to having just had healing ribs jostled, but he never listens to anything that boring.

"Well, I only looked at the one so far. I thought it was of you and Reg," he admits slowly, and, in the moment before Snape goes stiller than still, "but now I don't think it was."

"You—"

"I think that was me using you as a pillow," he says, still slowly, hand migrating up to Snape's sharp, rabbit-frozen face, up the pale throat. His hand closes gently over skin soft enough to mean the paranoid git uses a charm or potion for it, won't let a razor near his throat even when he holds it
himself. Sirius hadn't been imagining that quickened pulse. "That was me reading a book for new teachers to you while you took notes. I should have known; Reg never let his hair curl, or get so long. That's not a smile I ever saw on him; he was more uptight than that. That was me, wasn't it."

Snape shudders against him, says quietly, "Let me go."

"It was me."

"We're on a public street."

"Tell me the truth."

"Say my name."

He pauses to regroup. Not an easy task; his arm has drawn Snape right flush against him, every long line of him. That arm is nestled, now, into the small of the spare back. As though it belongs there and always has. "What?"

"When you can say my name," Snape says, turning his face away, "I'll consider the possibility that you remember enough to hear the truth."

"Severus," he says, instantly. It feels strange in his mouth, wrong, as though this is the first time he's said it on its own ever. It is, as far as he remembers, but surely, if he's right, it can't be.

"Proves nothing."

"Seth?"

"You got that from Callum. You're not a muggle, to call me that. Remember it on your own. You'll have to: no one living can tell you but me, and I won't."

He hesitates. Reminds himself he was a Gryffindor once, before the grey shadows and the cold spiderwebs spun over his soul had shrouded him. Says, more quietly still, "It would be a stimulus if I kissed you, not you telling me anything."

At this distance he can see the blood rush to the thin mouth, see the slight darkening, although no one can tell when Snape's eyes have dilated. He can certainly see them pulling in to be moistened, those stiff lips, can just about feel the swallow. But Snape's voice is certain and determined, although nowhere near angry on the Sniv Scale. "I will not be your experiment."

"I'm not one of your tarts or trulls, Black," Sirius quotes him; he's sure he's quoting him. "I am not to be toyed with."

Endless black eyes stare at him out of a white, white face, startled, helpless. It may not be saying much these days, but it's the most compelling thing Sirius can ever remember. He pulls his arms tighter (carefully!), his hips closer. Their welcome is clear, anyway, even if his isn't. "Oh," Snape says faintly, his eyes drifting closed, apparently in exhausted, "B—let go of me. Let me go, we're in public." But his hands are flat on Sirius's chest, molding to him.

"We both know how this works," Sirius tells him, his grip unrelenting. "There are moments you can't put on simmer. It's fall farther in, or pretend they never happened and enter a whole new world of unending humiliated awkward."

"There are people staring," Sniv protests unenthusiastically, eyes low, his hands falling slack to Sirius's forearms.
"Screw 'em. Obliviation's not illegal. SOP with muggles."

"Bloody awful thing to do to someone, though, you should know."

This from a Marked man. But Sirius has more sense than some people coffee remus coffee like to give him credit for, and just says, "They should have minded their own business."

Snape almost laughs. "Who does that on a public street with mane-brained melodramatic morons reenacting bodice-rippers with highly inappropriate partners?"

"Chalk it up to bad luck, then."

"You're not going to argue inappropriate?" he's asked, with the tilt of an amused eyebrow.

"Not worth the argument. Also, not untrue. What are you waiting for?"

He holds his breath a long moment, watching Snape fight with himself and waver, memorizing the feel of the sun on his skin, the crisp wood-and-earth flavor of the cold air, the press of them together, even the growing sense that there are eyes on them, sliding over them as walking people don't quite stop and don't quite stare but definitely take notice. One man jeeringly calls for cigarettes. The slang must have changed; someone smacks the bloke with an odd scraping thump, like hitting a tarp, even as Snape twitches like it's hit his oversized hex-first button.

Snape's struggle takes so long that Sirius breaks before it's done. He asks, very quietly, "Were we happy?"

This gets him a short bark of a laugh, and a, "You and me? Sunshine and roses? '81? Pull the other one."

"Were we good together?" he insists, his hand gently demanding on that hollow face, winter-cool skin soft but un padded over sharp bones.

The moment teeters again, stretches, battles against itself. The surrender is hard hands clenched in his hair, a defeated, "Fuck you. No, really, I mean it," pressed bruisingly into his mouth, a wand-stab of obliviation at the crowd twisting oddly at his scalp when Snape refuses to let go of his hair to do it, and the spin and jolt of a portkey.

He does spare a second to make sure Snape hasn't brought them into, say, a circle of hooded psychopaths, just to pull an example wholly at random out of thin air (thick, stale, dusty air, actually) but not enough to let his stomach settle.

That vicious mouth is right there, after all, velvet as its voice under his, combative as its owner. What they say about muscle memory being more stubborn than the brain's must be true, because legs that he remembers have kicked and kneed him a thousand times have spread him, backed him up against an extremely dusty bookshelf. Hands that have punched him and clawed at his eyes are digging into his arms and the back of his jumper. All of that, and no room to back away, and Sirius doesn't appear to be nervous.

"Where are we?" He tries to ask without pulling away from the teeth on his lips.


"Couch," Sirius mumbles, his arm around Snape's waist drawing tighter, trying to recapture the number-one source of venom in his diet.
Snape doesn't fight him—clings to him, fiercely, even, for a long moment, Sniv does, fights against the bandages to do it, Merlin, licks and bites his lips to send sharp, dizzy little darts all down his nerves, clenches fingers tightly in his hair.

He draws back far too soon, pulling completely away. "Floo," he says firmly, eyes unpleased but determined. "I told you: I have classes this afternoon, and things to do before then."


Snape shudders, eyes falling half-closed, but he says decidedly, "No. Not your experiment, not your toy, you have no sense of fitness or occasion, you utter Neanderthal, and you don't know what you're getting into—shut it: you don't. I won't take the fallout when you realize it and balk. Find my name, then we'll talk if you still care to."

"Sure," Sirius says, with a smirk, bending over him for one last, long groping kiss that has the insufferable know-it-all shuddering against him, caught between clutching and shoving him away. "We can wait to talk till then."

"Hate you," Sniv snarls into his mouth, yearning desperately into him with stained fingers twisting in his collar, "hate you, hate you, arrogant, condescending, meaning-twisting true son of a deranged viper, no excuse for it, the hell is that floo powder…"

Chapter End Notes

If anyone wants to see the photo again, it's in chapter 15.

Next: itty bitty (kitty committee?) interlude in which Severus changes everything without doing anything differently.
Chapter Summary

In which Severus changes everything without doing anything differently.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Here's the problem with the floo: it doesn't take long enough for bruised mouths to pale.

Remus noticed right away. If they'd avoided him when Sirius was supposed to be giving him his wand back, it would have set off all his alarms. So that was out. Sadly, he not only was a perceptive person but had a fully functional nose. It was a better one even than Sirius's.

The looks he gave them each promised them both that the scoldings would be epic. Sirius tried to remember how it should feel to care so he could pretend to. Snape, naturally, just sneered and swept away up the stairs, only a little stiffly. Sirius could hear the water running, and felt he'd trade the new holly wand to know if it was hot or cold.

"What the HELL!" he demanded, when Snape came down a few minutes later, startled out of his inward (and increasingly filthy) reflections. "Your hair gets greasy when you wash it?!

"Take a flying leap, Black," Snape said mock-pleasantly, moving past him to the floo in a billow of black wool and a lingering cloud of liniment, vinegar, lemons, and herbal oils, trailing the fizz of protective runes. "Some of us have work we can do."

The biting-back-a-scolding-until-Molly's-gone look blinked itself off Remus's face, briefly replaced by do-you-infants-ever-get-tired-of-bickering. Then he visibly registered Snape's tone, recognized that he was confused, and decided to stay out of it.

Score two for Sniv, Sirius supposed, sulking. Then he realized what Sniv had been reminding him of, and only stopped grinning like (frankly) Bella when he realized Moony was staring at him in mild terror.

Chapter End Notes

Since Sirius doesn't know about Occlumency yet, he can't realize or narrate that Severus (and Harry) are up against telepathic memory-viewers and that it's therefore a good idea (rather than only good fun) for Severus to cloak his contributions and helpful hints in nastiness. Leaves him less to have to hide when Tom the Steam Engine rips through his head.
Filter, Focus, Cheese!

Chapter Summary

Sirius is forced to do some thinking by ambiguous(ly gay) socks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sirius found it somehow warming that Sniv hadn't bothered to tell him not to reveal his new wand, or how to avoid it. The closest thing you could get to a compliment from the cantankerous old goat, maybe.

He ended up taking the photo album into the bathroom the next day. Molly had told him that she wanted to have it prepared for the kids by the time the hols rolled around, So he went in with the book, his (very own!!!) wand, a scrub bucket, a spray bottle full of doxycide and spent the morning... mostly staring at its closed cover, truth to tell.

He'd just about nerved himself up to open it when she pounded on the door to ask how he was doing. He told her—truthfully—that he'd only managed to repair and clean the bathtub so far, and agreed with her groan of, "Oh, this house!" with such pathos that she promised chocolate biscuits for tea.

They would please Moony more than him. But that bottle of mead had been taunting him, from its place on his shelf, with the dilemma of drinking it or throwing it out the window. It was too much on his mind for other drink to really be tempting either. The idea of drinking anything else beyond a glass of wine with his dinner felt somehow like a surrender, like a sellout. Biscuits would at least be uncomplicated.

At this thought, he had one of his flashes of sense-memory and knew that biscuits were only as uncomplicated as the person who'd baked them. It might have been more of an hallucination than a memory, though. Probably it was. Surely even Sniv wasn't weird enough to make herbal shortbread.

Besides, it was good to see Moony happy, even if for only as long as it took for the aftertaste to fade.

Unexpectedly getting the tapped-fishbowl effect had spooked him, though. He had to settle his mind by transfiguring the pipe into a longer one that ended in a showerhead and doing a lot of fiddling before he was ready to try again.

When he felt able to take another crack at the album, the shower had been functional for a good ten minutes and it was nearly time for that tea. The soft brown leather crackled open for him, its vicious hexes and wards submitting to his fingers, as before, without so much as a fizz of protest.

Most of the pictures were of him. In them, he was the age he still thought he looked, until he passed mirrors. Twenty, and fit well into his clothing, his hair tumbling everywhere or clubbed back haphazardly, shining.
Here he was playing Exploding Snap with Remus, who was clearly tolerating him, turning to roll his eyes at the camera in an attempt to share commiseration. Here he was eyeing a tall drink, very oddly colored indeed, with mock suspicion that faded into a grin as he toasted the camera and quaffed it. The back of his head descended to pick up the pieces of those very plates he'd seen crazed from being too often broken just like this, then turned to mouth *oh, shut it, you smug git*, at the photographer, with the kind of lack of heat that meant it had all been spent, nothing but ruefulness left. The front of his head was sticking out its tongue and then posing like a peacock over some kind of meat dish, a pile of potatoes, and a soufflé shaped like Auror Headquarters, waving a small medal with a huge grin.

Sirius hadn't been an Auror. He'd... he'd...

They'd made things. Toys, and other things. He must have been proud of them, because he couldn't remember what they were. But he felt like he would remember, someday: an odd feeling, frustrated and hopeful all at once.

And he remembered squabbling comfortably with Lils, remembered her whapping him over the head with a rolled-up newspaper, Jamie smirkingly telling him she was too pregnant to hit back. Remembered James always so gleeful about what he called My Rosehip (and Lily called The Watermelon Monster) it was indecent.

Remembered resenting their new family when his brother was dead. Resenting the new, delicate-fingered blob that took up all their thoughts and time, left him with more than his share of the work. The leaky lump that had turned Prongs a little into someone else, someone who wasn't so much Sirius's brain-twin. Remembered trying to be happy for them with that snarl roiling in his belly.

And he remembered, too, being slowly, grudgingly won over when Harry developed a smile, lethal eye contact power, a personality, a grip like a steel sloth on his toy broom, the ability to not wee quite every time in the face of anyone who dared to change him. He'd been so sunny and unburdened. A cuddler from really early on, never a crier like Reggie.

Sirius looked down with his jaw hard. Turned a page.

Here were two sets of socked feet, one black with thin, vertical grey stripes. The other set was a utilitarian and slightly dingy white with reinforced toes. They rested peacefully on each other for a moment. Then the black socks began shoving the graying ones teasingly, companionably.

Here he is (his fists clench) striding into a picture of Pe—with Wormtail. The rat spins around and looks, for just a moment, as though he's about to have a heart attack before smiling gladly at the Sirius in the picture. Just a moment, he thinks, calming himself, one of many, thought funny at the time.

But the picture starts again, and he sees what the mist of red over his eyes had hidden before his head cleared. He sees Wormtail by himself: in Diagon, but right up by the corner of Knockturn. He sees Wormtail staring at the signpost.

Not Wormtail. This is Pete, who Wormtail had killed slowly, in the dark and in secret. Pete, whose baby face he had used to destroy the rest of them, too.

His curls are still bronzed and healthy and full. He's not crouched but his old self, himself: fairly short but standing straight. Still only chubby enough to look soft, like a small, comfortable, bucktoothed angel. Very small, they'd used to joke: one of those cherubs in nappies. Pete had grumbled about one of his girlfriends saying the same thing. Had tried to look, for the sake of manly dignity, more put-upon than thrilled.
Still Pete. Staring at the signpost, shoulders hunched, face miserable. Startling out of his skin when Sirius slaps him on the back. Smiling fakely. Included in the kind of album that a person might take out to leaf through in a mist of rosy nostalgia.

Not because the photographer had thought his startle and grin was funny. No, that wasn't right. This album wasn't full of funny, it was full of intimate. It expected soft smiles of its audience. Not schadenfreude. Not even the friendly kind.

No, it was because the photographer had thought that misery and the bright, sickly smile that swallowed it suspicious. Included in the warm fuzzies because the photographer had thought it was suspicious, and hadn't been able to say so directly.

Wormtail after all. Pete, their earnest mouse, half-eaten already.

Not enough evidence to confront anyone with? Not enough to confront Sirius with, when Pete had been the friend they were all protective of, proud of in an avuncular way that had been as intentionally insulting as it had been genuine? Not enough to confront the Order with? To confront the Marauders with, when the photographer was (had to be) someone whose suspicions they would all have shouted down as being the result of past grudges settling on a weak link?

Had the quadruple-thinking paranoiac even felt certain in his suspicions, himself?

Hell, had he been trying to seed suspicions he didn't believe in himself, still an agent for the other side? Or diverting attention from a real threat by using their bias against him? Show them a real threat in such a way that that they'd never believe it, and he could have waved his good information, however badly delivered, to secure his position after Peter was unmasked. Double bluff, triple?

Sirius realized he'd apparently decided it was Snape who'd taken most of these pictures. Including the entwined feet. The picture that could, judging by the angle and size, only have been taken by the owner of one pair of said feet. Snape, who'd gone to Dumbledore… when had he? That could mean, depending on the answer…

…Too many possibilities to sort out without more information.

Instead, he delegated the problem to his backbrain and started unenthusiastically cleaning the mirror. It woke up halfway through and started berating him for not putting his elbows into it. And also for letting his skin and hair go to pot; he had had such potential as a boy…

Fortunately for the mirror, he remembered he had a new wand. One that loved him and would cast without fuss or drama, without any annoying sputtering or sparks or overdoing things or apathetic underpowered listlessness. So it got hit with a silencing spell instead of the towel rod.

He reported downstairs dutifully for tea, taking care first to cover himself in dust and smudges. He cleaned himself up as instructed, ate a biscuit sweetly and graciously while surreptitiously pocketing the other one for Moony, and thanked Molly like a good boy.

Those twins of hers didn't know how good they had it. She took his politic smiles as sincere.

Then he went upstairs again (not as far up) and pounded on Snape's door. Silence. He pounded again. A whimpering little noise (not especially compelling when he was in this mood), followed by a choked off gasp and some rhythmic thudding. He pounded some more.

Finally the door wrenched itself open. Snape was in his charcoal-grey nightclothes and that same blue and bronze dressing gown, its colors and his apoplexy making him less ink-and-snow than
usual. His limp hair was clean-looking but all over the place, and there was a rapidly-fading red mark on his forehead. "YOU LET—" he started to bellow, but his entire throat spasmed on pain. The very split-second it relaxed, he hissed, "You let me take you out!?

"Er, yeah," Sirius drawled. "Have a nice nap?"

Snape ignored this, and continued to hiss furiously, "I told you two peabrains not to let me do anything mad! I told you I was going to have judgment issues after that barrage!"

"As far as I'm concerned, it was the most intelligent thing you've ever done," Sirius told him, also not altering his tone.

He'd acknowledge and bask in what it meant that Sniv was upset about the outing rather than the groping later. When he'd finished yelling at him.

"Anyway, nothing happened. Besides, you insisted. Also, in which deluded corner of your dungeon-drowned, fume-addled, cats-cradle of a brain was I going to say no to a morning out of this purgatorial rubbish tip?"

"Gah."

Sirius wagged a finger at him, and said, "Oh, no, you're not making me laugh, I'm too hacked off."

"Make you— You're too—!

"Look familiar?" He took the photo album out of his pocket and waved it in Snape's face like a very thick postage stamp.

Then he had the very great pleasure of watching that face close down and go wary. Unshrinking the book, he turned to the Page In Question and demanded, "Did you take this before or after you crawled back to Dumbledore?"

"I take exception to both 'crawling' and 'back.' What makes you think I took any of them?"

"I know you took them, and if you want evidence produced, you apotheosis of a pedantic pillock, the rest of us usually took posed shots, mostly in pairs or groups. Except Remus, and he always gets a blur or his thumb in. These are almost all, what-do-you-call-'em, slice of life, stolen moment, whatever. And most of the ones I've seen so far were just me, and definitely stolen."

"Like kisses, his hindbrain supplied helpfully. He dropped a piano covered in anvils on it.

Snape blinked at him, eyebrows shooting up but something thawing in his sharp, still face. Calmer, his deep voice almost mellow, he noted, "Often you succeed in making people forget you were born with a functioning brain."

"Was that a compliment buried in there?"

"Certainly not."

"Oh, good. I'd hate to wake up in hell and find I'd forgotten my skates."

"It was two, and your inability to count negates them both. It's a pity they must be retracted: I was hoping for cardiac arrest."

"Saved by the famous Snape charm. I feel really lucky."
"You always were luckier than you deserved," Snape said, his eyes unreadable. "Suppose, hypothetically, that I were to claim I had been the photographer. What then?"

"Then I'd repeat my first question."

Snape paused, and said carefully, "In that scenario, it wouldn't be a question I ought to answer for you. But considering this one might guide you: under which circumstances would I have been allowed into a position in your life to be able to take these, if they are my handiwork or indeed involve me in any way?"

After boring down on this suggestion to see if there was anything wrong with it, Sirius said, just as carefully, "You mean I wouldn't have let you within fifty feet of me without a damn good reason to trust you."

"Would you have? Leaving aside attempts at pounding my face in."

"Attempts?" he asked loftily, diverted. "Seems to me—"

"How quickly they forget re-growing their fingers," Snivvy sneered. Sirius flashed him two fingers (which he did not, actually, remember having to re-grow), and thought he almost saw the ghost of a flicker of a smile.

Going sober again, Snape went on, "I'm not going to influence your internal chronology. Or supply your remembrance of what that reason was. But whether or not you were influenced by the Headmaster's opinion, we both know that no, you wouldn't have, and nor would I. This close, perhaps," his long hand rose slowly enough to curl into Sirius's collar, the backs of his nails brushing suddenly shivering skin. Glancing at the book, lowering his hand to the one holding it, he finishes, "but not that close."

The hand at his throat had left a prickly heat. Now that heat is blooming at his wrist, making his fingers ache. Sirius finds his vision drifting over tousled black hair, down past quillstroke eyebrows and sleep-spiked lashes, dipping over the sharp curves of bony cheeks before his own lashes paint the world black as eyes.

His palm is warm, moving of its own accord with heavy silk sliding under it as it settles into the narrowest place in a narrow back. It slides under the belt, drawing the smaller and yes, even now skinnier man against him until their mouths seem to fall together, simple and certain. A sigh sneaks into him. He chases it down, licking his way to its source until his hand has tangled its way well into hair that hasn't left the seventies behind, and his hand isn't merely pressing into but supporting a weakening weight.

Snape disentangles himself, licking his lips, and then licking his own more nervously and biting at them, which Sirius thinks, his eyes heavy, is completely unfair. "Why do you care?" he asks, with narrow eyes and a swollen mouth.

"Wish I bloody well knew," Sirius tells the walking nettle resentfully.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Rosemary shortbread is amazing, if you don't tell yourself shortbread is dessert and should be sweet.
Next: Sirius is finally, finally, finally allowed to know something. Hurray! Life is wonderful! All is—HEY! YOU TAKE THAT BACK!
All Mimsy

Chapter Summary

Sirius is finally, finally, finally allowed to know something. Hurray! Life is good! All is—HEY! YOU TAKE THAT BACK!

Sniv rolled his eyes, but with the barest twitch of a smile lurking about his mouth. Like a stalker, Sirius told himself, ha, severely. He was reminded, "When the pictures were taken. Why do you care?"

"Oh," he recalled, blinking the moment away. This was stupidly hard to do, what with the ghost of contact making his whole front feel cold by contrast. "This picture of that bastard," he told Snape, re-opening to the picture set by Knockturn.

"Well?" Snape demanded, after giving it a cursory glance.

"You put that in there because you thought there was something wrong with him and couldn't say it to my face," he accused.

Sniv gave him an oh, really, as if I'd fall for that one look, but allowed, "Whether I said anything to you or not, I did think there was something wrong with him."

"How?" he demanded.

"I was working extensively with a number of werewolves at the time, including Lupin, as part of my apprenticeship."

"No, you weren't," Sirius blurted indignantly, and then had to stop and work out what he'd meant by it. Victorious, he declared, "You were not working with Moony. You kept pitching him off."

His triumph isn't rewarded with a scowl, or a smirk, or even a grin. What he gets is, purely, a sunburst smile without mouth participation. It punches the breath out of him.

"I did," Slythe agrees, shining quietly at him though sober black eyes. For just a moment, Sirius feels as though they're holding each other again. Feels petted, firm and slow over his head and back and arms, feels rubbed just beautifully between his eyes and behind his ears, feels kissed, deeply. They aren't touching, not anywhere.

Then Snape was all business again. Jarred by the suddenness of it, Sirius felt as though he'd lost hold of something important. Vital. Lost hold of some piece of himself he couldn't do without.

It was gone now, though, and he really did want to know what Snape was talking about (for once). The indecision was like chasing his tail on a frictionless floor, leaving his attention too scattered to have a hope of calling back whatever it had been.

"I was simplifying," Snape went on. "No, we weren't letting werewolves whose lives weren't already hopeless help. Not in the early stages. And at that time he was better off than almost anyone. But he did keep turning up, and he was furtively active in the community."
"Heh. You said fur-tive."

"Dear god, shut up. —And no, before you preen. No and no, and again no. No, you are not mistakable for a deity."

"You are the world's worst spoil-sport. Swear to Godric, you're worse than Remus."

"I should hope."

Sirius snorted, skating over the tinge of bitterness in Snape's voice. The man clearly had had no idea how many bad ideas Remus had patiented and reasonabled and sad-eyed them out of. It wasn't Moony's fault James had turned into an undivertable force the moment he'd had an audience, or that Pete had counted as an audience with him. "Okay, okay. And?"

"And during my... extracurricular hours I was obliged to encourage an acquaintance with... others. If the leak had been Lupin, as you all seemed to suspect, I would have learned of it from one set of sources or the other. Our lab wolves would have been wary of him, and the other set would have bragged. Unquestionably. At length."

"Unquestionably, huh?"

"At length. It had to be one of your cabal, and I was convinced it wasn't you by then. Of course, I later became convinced that I must have been wrong. It seemed certain, afterwards, that you must have insisted on being inappropriately Sorted as cleverly as the Headmaster must have, must have been an astonishing actor and a better occlumens than myself—and therefore, of course," he added clinically, "that your return to the Dark Lord would serve as the precipitate of my own lingering death. But at the time I was certain it wasn't you."

"Occlu-what?" Sirius asked yet again, to avoid having to think about the last part of that, or remember how insanely, frothingly focused on neutralizing him one way or another Snape had been in the Shack and have to be Merlin-forbid understanding about it.

He was ignored. Yet again. "Nothing could have turned Evans without causing her to act sick to death with the pressures of duress and self-loathing, and she wasn't showing those signs. Nor any of the dreaminess associated with Imperius. None, at any rate, that wasn't clearly and nauseatingly infant-related. Potter was too bullheaded and narrow-mindedly self-righteous—"

"Would you lay off?"

"Never." Sniv glared at him, eyes flashing like battle-axes.

Sirius returned his death glare. It was a long, crackling moment, but they decided in tandem that their respective points had been made.

Snape went on after one steadying breath, perfectly calmly. "But I had it on good authority that he was immune to the Imperius, as his brat is, and nothing else would have swayed a black-and-white-goggled goon like that—"

Sirius rolled his eyes.

"—without the use of a hostage or equally powerful duress. As with Evans. And, as with Evans, he wasn't frayed more than was explicable. He continued to be an utter toerag with unshakeable nonchalance," he finished on a sudden snarl from deep in his throat.

"You know you didn't actually know him, right?"
"To know a person's heart, watch him with the helpless he thinks beneath him," he snapped.

"Speaking of," Sirius said, casually arch. "I keep getting these letters from one of your students…"

"Those menaces are not helpless and that one is about as far from it as can be imagined. But they're going to be helpless if they don't shape up and decide it isn't unfashionably swottish to learn practical skills."

"And you were helpless? But I hear you're a bit of a bastard to small children, is my point."

"Though you say it who shouldn't! Four to one! And the way you treat Kreacher, the way you treated P—the way you treated him even when he behaved properly."

Sirius saw red there for a minute, but let himself settle at the lightning-quick return to Kreacher. That was practically grovelling, from Snape. There was no actual apology, of course. In fact,

"And let's see you be kittens and starshine when it'll be heard about and Passed On within the hour if you're so much as overtly evenhanded and you know eight cauldrons might blow up in the faces of children under your care at any given moment," Snape clipped tightly on with storming, bitter, dagger eyes. "Or perhaps you've forgotten why I'm forced to bed under your roof." Then there was a moment where they were both waiting to see if he was going to jar his ribs hiccuping from remembered stress again.

When he didn't, Sirius reminded him, "One of us seven, you were saying."

"—Yes. It might have been one of the Longbottoms; I was watching them, as well; hard to tell how much jumpiness is only natural, in their situation. But Pettigrew…" he hesitated, flashing Sirius a searching glance.

Sirius couldn't quite tell whether it was a glance groping for words, or one measuring him. The latter, he decided. Eh. This was information and not a slap in the face; Sirius could tolerate the name for information. "Well?"

Snape nodded a little, satisfied. "He'd begun to strike everyone as more nervous than he'd been. I don't mean that was intrinsically unusual; everyone was on edge. There is, however, a difference between nervous and hounded, between sick with nerves and unwholesomely sick with conscience or corruption, and…" he shrugged. "And apparently I ought to have trusted my own instincts more staunchly, and insisted on their conclusions being given weight. I was rather unwell, myself, at the time, though; I barely trusted myself to fasten my own buttons."

Sirius stared at him, at that admission. "You didn't. Tr—you."

Snape shrugged, and said, with a sardonic look at the album, "Evidently with good reason. Now, if that's all."

"You're deflecting!" Sirius crowed, pointing at him.

Sniv narrowed his eyes, and said in a flat tone, "If you start force-feeding people fizzy sweets, I shall stab you through the eye with the hairpin of someone who wants framing."

Sirius had to admit he was a bit lost there. This being made clear to him, the bastard very sweetly explained, "The Headmaster pulls off pretending the Hat didn't want to sort him Slytherin much better than you do. It's with mad style, but at least he has some."

"Choke on a hedgehog," Sirius suggested sweetly. "You were saying you were unwell?"
"I was not saying. I had said. No continuation of discussion of the subject was implied. As there is not going to be one."

"I'll figure it out," he singsonged.

"Or you could make yourself *useful* for once," Snape drawled at him, full-on Snivvy-snide. "I think I'll start calling you Ashputtel. Anyone would think grubbing about scrubbing floors was all you're good for."

"MOONY, HE'S PROVOKING ME," Sirius yelled, turning to the stairs and cupping his hands.

Remus yelled back, faintly, from probably the sitting room, "Staying out of the middle is best for my mental health."

"I suppose better late than never applies to developing wisdom," the bastard sneered. "Due credit must be given for native growth, I suppose, since he certainly hasn't found any in your library. Why don't you go down and visit the books, Black? We're just past the time of month for anything else to eat you."

The wall behind where he'd been standing didn't crunch nearly as satisfactorily, while breaking Sirius's fist, as that arrogant beak would have.
Better to Clean in Grimmauld Than Rule In... never mind.

Chapter Summary

In which Sirius catches a clue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"He has a point," Arthur said while Molly was fixing Sirius up, and he peeled his eyes wide at them both in shocked betrayal.

"He means about the library, Sirius, don't be silly, of course our Remus wouldn't hurt a fly," Molly scolded.

Sirius looked at Remus. Remus attempted to look like someone who would never hurt a fly. And who had certainly never had to pound any quite large and unsportsmanlike men living rough into ragged pulps to gain enough status to be introduced to their alphas. He was depressingly good at it.

"What? Of course I mean the library," Arthur agreed, blinking. On Remus, that expression would have been as fake as a very fake thing. Arthur, by contrast, clearly had never considered that what he'd said could have had any other meaning and still wasn't clear on why Sirius's hackles had gone up. "Have you tried to go down there?"

"Are you kidding? It was creepy enough when I was a kid," he said, making a face.

"I think the word would probably be 'unspeakable' now," Arthur said.

"All hope abandon," suggested Remus with a little shudder, shaking his hand out in rueful memory.

Arthur agreed, "Biting books are the least of it. Bill and I went down when we first got here. We thought it might have... well, something useful. We didn't make it to the bottom of the stairs."

"Bill couldn't," Sirius repeated, his eyebrows crawling up. "Isn't he a curse-breaker? For Gringott's, I thought."

"Not much of one in this house," Arthur sighed. "No one can get anything done here."

"Wait," Sirius said, turning to Molly, "That's what you were saying in the kitchen before."

"Oh, I didn't think you'd remember that," was all she said, and with stingingly obvious charity held back from finishing, because you were drunk. "No, no one's magic seems to work very well here, that's why the cleaning up has been taking so long. Bill found some kind of blanket spell in the tapestry-"

Sirius laughed dutifully before realizing he wasn't supposed to. He coughed.

Molly frowned at him, and said, "He said it was making itself unreadable, but he could tell it was meant to affect the whole house."
"When's he back?" Sirius asked, frowning. "It might be bloodline-warded."

Molly rolled her eyes, and said, "Sirius, dear, it's been moderately clear to everyone for some time that your entire wretched house is bloodline-warded," and, as before, very loudly didn't say *nice of you to take sober up and take notice.*

"I'll ask him to floo by when he's done with work," Arthur told them, managing not to actually sound kind or diplomatic. No wonder Snape never had a go at him. "You can take a look at it together."

Chapter End Notes

Next: the mental health benefits of having more friends and snogging than pink toads in one's life are plainly illustrated.
And I Have to Admit...

Chapter Summary

In which the mental health benefits of having more friends and snogging than Umbridge in one's life are plainly illustrated.

Chapter Notes

chapter title from the Beatles' Getting Better.

So everyone's clear that we've been diverging from canon since Cedric Diggory's wake, right? Although the things that happen here don't (or at least weren't supposed to) conflict with the things Harry saw and knows, this fic is headed more towards my short fic the Pillars of Ycrem than towards the Beyond the Veil chapter in OotP.

Therefore, the spat over Harry's Occlumency lessons probably didn't go word-for-word the same way in this 'verse as in canon. It would have had the same general feel to Harry, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Sirius had expected any kind of positive reinforcement from Snape for grubbing about in beyond-filthy and often carnivorous corners to provide him (okay, Dumbledore) with access to rare and esoteric books, he would have been deeply disappointed. He got it from everyone else, of course, all the petting he wanted. Which was nice. He felt no shame about enjoying being petted however many legs he was standing on.

From his personal torment, instead of that there were new pointed sneers to send him frowning over wizarding-law books, and over ancient texts with his old cryptography notes. Also prickly mysteries to poke at with a stick and stalk and grope until they melted all over him.

That was better than praise from anyone else, even if Snape kept pulling back far too quickly. He was being typically stubborn about keeping to his line until Sirius 'knew what he was getting into,' As though he thought now that anything about Sniv would ever, ever, ever be the easy, comfortable, or pleasant kinds of good. It was obvious who Snape was really trying to protect, holding back until he was sure Sirius knew the whole of him. No matter what people might say about him, though, coffcoffMollycoff, Sirius had enough sense not to let on he knew.

And, having sense, he thanked Merlin profusely that Harry was too young to recognize, when he saw it, a fight that badly wanted to end up horizontal and was partly a letting-off of steam over both parties knowing that not only couldn't it, but they wouldn't have a good chance at any privacy at all for days.

He was a little boggled that Harry was, at fifteen, still too young to see that for what it was. At that age he hadn't been anything like that young. He took it as a blessing, though. There were things Sirius was in no way ready to explain, given that he was still snatching at threads himself. Remus,
the git, had made it clear he was on his own for this one.

It had been a near thing, even though Sniv had been being completely horrible if you were listening to the words. But with Snape, sometimes the words were everything and sometimes they were nothing but a distraction from the best of him. Those words were only cover for the way his voice got lower and lower the hotter his eyes blazed.

Easy was boring. Comfortable was boring. Sirius had long since sickened nearly to death with boring.

It had been a very, very near thing.

And other things were much better. Dumbledore had stopped his very subtle backing away from letting Sirius have Harry for a good chunk of summer. And Remus was acting a lot less like a mother hen who smelled fox, now that Sirius felt less like looking for things to drink when it wasn't also time to eat.

Granted, he'd felt more like crawling back into his lair or a bottle once the shine of Christmas faded. There was the usual post-holiday let-down, of course. It left room for the return of his worries, like what was Remus risking when he was away from the house and what the hell was all that about with Harry and the snake? Additionally, almost the moment term started, Sniv went out of his fucking mind.

Apparently things were very unpleasant at the school. Snape was, when he unbuttoned enough that anyone could tell, teetering on the edge of frantic about some of his snakes and the instructions they'd gotten from their parents. He seemed to think these (the kids, the parents, the instructions, and probably the entire world) were criminally stupid. As if that hadn't been enough (it absolutely was), he was some other kind of going around the twist over the students he wasn't the first kind of desperate and mental about.

Sirius never got less confused over this state of affairs. Asking about it only got him growls and snarls and looks of frustrated, furious anxiety so pressurized he half-expected Sniv's brain to dribble out of his eyes.

When he'd finally pressed and needled hard enough to get past the stiff upper entire wizard, there'd been incoherent shrieking and bellowing about 'little IDIOTS who can't recognize bloody plague-carrying, poisonous, candylfloss toads when they're licked by them, and other literally-bleeding morons who sodding well DO recognize them, which is exactly the wrong fucking way 'round, INCIDENTALLY, but keep on FUCKING BITING ANYWAY!"

Sirius, personally, 'kept on' wondering if Snape was brewing, without a bubblehead charm, something that gave off bad-trip fumes. Or maybe the terrible, terrible trauma of making beer (and all right, it probably was as unpleasant for him as living in his mother's house was for Sirius, but he just couldn't take a grown man's hangups about beer seriously) was getting to him. Because, really: what?

Moody said 'probably not,' to his psychotropic fumes theory, though, which was a no you could cash in at Gringott's.

All this incomprehensible disaster (or something) meant, of course, that Snape allotted himself very little free time. More than that, though, an already strung-out Sniv who had to look at poor Harry's face (meaning James's face) was no one's idea of a treat. Even after Harry went back to school, taking just about all the fresh air in the place with him, Snape was very, very hard work.
Worth it when once you got through, though. It took the prickly little irritant barely a finely-split second of eye contact to boil Sirius out of his skin in fury or have him humming all over with belonging. Either way, he was more sure he was alive and free (free enough, free comparatively, out of there was the main thing) than he'd been in any moment he could remember now.

Best of all in some ways, everybody groaned and threw things at him when he started making up ridiculous new words for Christmas carols. It almost felt like being himself again, blithely narking all his friends off. They'd realize it was funny later.

So as really outstandingly thrilled as he was about the grey spaces in his head when he reached for good memories, and about still being more or less under house arrest and in this house to boot (and, two minutes out of three, about Sniv), and as worried as he was about Remus and Harry, things were looking up.

He wondered whether it would be most satisfying, after the war, to bulldoze the old pile, exorcise the land, and rebuild. Alternately, he might bully (or, better, bribe) Snape into aiming their mutual and disgusting googly-eyes over Reggie into aiming a guilt-trip at Kreacher that would make the little creeper fix the place up nicely. He could, perhaps, charm circus clowns and multicolored stars onto the curtains, just to make them both choke with the outrage of the overly-dignified.

There could be a garage for the Triumph, and a deep pile of autumn-colored blankets on his bed, made more woods-and-herbs-scented every night. There could be players in every room for those shiny, tiny new records along with the wireless downstairs, filling the place with all the music the Muggles had come up with that he hadn't heard yet.

Not only to drive his mother's portrait mad, of course not. Still, you lay the icing on your cakes where there's room for some, right?

Snape, when this question was posed to him, stared for nearly a full minute. Unknotting and unbending into an otherwise expressionless eye-smile, he touched Sirius's face, slid hands around him, and demanded with arch whimsy, "No, really, what did you do to that hat?"

He didn't remember the answer, exactly. He did remember enough to reply, "I didn't set it on fire to get my way like some incredibly not-subtle people." In return, he received the deeply satisfying impression that Sniv was only a personality away from sticking his tongue out and showing Sirius the backs of two fingers.

Sirius was counting the months till the day he'd unbend enough to really do it. It would be well worth waiting for, even if patience wasn't Sirius's forte. Stubbornness was. No matter how long it took, he'd wear the bastard down, and warm the starch right out of him.

Chapter End Notes

I feel there ought to be art to round the story off with, but am drawing only a blank. Suggestions and requests are welcome. No specific promises, but any that inspire me will probably get done.
"Hey, Sniv. Was it Shiv?"

"Do you imagine yourself clever?"

"And that's a yes! Excellent!"

"That's a thousand times no. Not to you. Or, ah, anyone you'd care to shake hands with."

"Oh, well. …Oh. Eurgh."

"Quite."

"So, bad associations, then. Unlikely to lead to naked."

"Black! When did you steal Minerva's gift for understatement?"

"NEWT year. She was lulled by my canine wiles. How about Sev?"

"No."

"Too obvious?"

"…Yes."

"Oh, too squishy, got you. Sevvie, then!"

"I may retch. Yes, an excellent notion. Come closer."

"Wait, I've got it. Rumplestiltskin!"

"…Right. Yes. That was it, well done. Sod off, Black."

"Yeah? You offering?"

"I don't know. Who are you asking?"

Chapter End Notes

The answer is in the story somewhere. There's a hint in the title, but it's in there, I promise.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you've enjoyed the ride!
(Severus says please do not ride the Sirius if you wish to keep your feet.)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!