Laocoon's Children Year Three: The Fugitive From Azkaban

by copperbadge

Summary

In "The Fugitive From Azkaban", year three of Harry's AU adventures, Harry and his friends must face many new problems: protecting Draco from his father, dealing with their new Dark Arts professor's quirks, helping Padma with her heavy school load, and standing firm against the aura of fear that is pervading the wizarding world. Please note this is unfinished and will remain so, but the fic after this in the series contains outlines for the rest of the story.

Notes

Warnings: Violence towards children, some gore; nothing worse than what you find in the books.

Laocoon's Children is incomplete. I have posted notes which "complete" year III and summarise my plans for the rest of Harry's time at Hogwarts, but the stories themselves are not written, nor do I have plans to write them at this time. My apologies for the incompleteness of this story.

My regular betas for this fic were Heidi, Judy, Tai, and Nny, all of whom are owed a great debt. Assisting on this chapter were Simon and Maeritrae.

Laocoon's Children is a parallel of the Harry Potter books, and therefore passages from the books themselves are occasionally useful. In this chapter, portions of the Knight Bus and Firebolt scenes are taken directly or rephrased from The Prisoner of Azkaban.

Edited to add 6/10/2020: I condemn JK Rowling's recent transphobic, inaccurate, and
dangerous statements on sex and gender identity. If you agree with her views, please do not read, comment on, or kudo this fanfic. I support the rights of transgender people to be called by their chosen pronouns, respected in their expression of gender, and treated fairly and equally in all things.
ITEMS OF NOTE

(Clipping: Betwys Beddau Weekly Crier, August 1, 1993)

Youth Cricket: Scythes beat Stones in improbable Upset.

The Betwys Beddau Scythes and Betwys Beddau Stones met on the field of play Saturday last for a much-anticipated rematch after last year's rout of the Scythes. The South of Riverbend Scythes and North of Riverbend Stones have been playing the annual Youth Cricket tournament these past forty years as this reporter well knows, but rarely has the game been so widely anticipated.

The reason for this year's upset as all agree is a slight, spindly lad new to Betwys Beddau and the noble game of Cricket: thirteen-year-old Daniel Malfoy, nephew of local tour guide Sirius Black. Young Daniel has taken up Cricket with a fierce determination only matched by his companion Harry Potter's well-known passion for football. With little knowledge of the game Daniel has managed to become quite the batsman and while his fielding may still need a bit of work, one might feel that for the game he plays the boy may be forgiven a few trifling inconsistencies.

The Scythes were not favoured to defeat the Stones, captained by the Indomitable Jerry Agnew (whose father Mr. Alex Agnew is well-known to these pages for his yearly Holiday Amusements) but all proved not as it seemed on Saturday's sunny morning....

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MINISTRY AWARDS ORDER OF MERLIN TO HOGWARTS PROFESSOR

(Photos Clipping: Daily Prophet, July 3, 1993)

MINISTER FUDGE presents the Order of Merlin (2nd class) to Nymphadora Tonks, former Hogwarts Professor, for bravery beyond the call of duty in slaying a Basilisk recently discovered at Hogwarts School. Ms. Tonks has declined to have a Bertie Botts Chocolate Frog Card made in her likeness but agreed to accept the award "under much pressure from the public and the Hogwarts Board of Governors". Left to Right: Minister Cornelius Fudge; Nymphadora Tonks; parents Andromeda and Ted Tonks, owners of Tonks & Tonks in Diagon Alley; Severus Snaqe, fellow professor at Hogwarts School; Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School.

Scrawled at the edge of the clipping: It's Snape, you damn fools.

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LUCIUS MALFOY STILL AT LARGE

(Clipping: Daily Prophet, August 9, 1993)

The Ministry of Magic reports today that Friday's attempts to secure Lucius Malfoy, the first-ever successful escapee from Azkaban Prison, were unsuccessful. Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt spoke with the press to assure them that every possible method of capturing Malfoy, a known murderer and supporter of You Know Who, was being employed. He went on to state, however, that Malfoy is "a cagey bloke without any conscience, and it's much harder to catch a nutter than your average sane person, you know".

Public opinion regarding Malfoy's daring escape suggests that many people believe him to have
drowned in the Black Sea off the coast of Scotland....

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There were a lot of things that the village of Betwys Beddau, as a collective, knew about the Black-Potter family. Or thought they knew.

They knew that Mr. Black was independently wealthy and probably Old Money, because young Harry went to a prestigious, exclusive school in Scotland during the year while Mr. Black kept a flat in London. Some people, on the other hand, theorised that Mr. Black was some kind of fugitive criminal or member of organized crime, because it was clear that he valued his privacy very highly. At any rate, he had enough money to support Harry without having any real kind of job. Tour guide for the local stone circle, Rhos Y Beddau, didn't count; half the time he'd do it for free.

He had enough money to support his cousin, too, although Mr. Lupin was a proud sort of man who always found some job or other to do while they were there for the summer. Some of the younger and the more astute villagers smiled indulgently on the pair's facade of "cousinly" affection, but Mr. Black was so charming and Mr. Lupin so unfailingly polite and kind that even those who disapproved of that kind of thing simply ignored the signs.

The villagers knew too that Mr. Black loved children, he must love children, because not only had he taken in his poor orphaned godson (and quite right) but also a sickly nephew who was down in the country for his health the summer that young Harry turned thirteen.

In Betwys Beddau, Harry and the other boys made him feel at home by initiating "Daniel" into the complex, Eleusian mystery of childhood cricket. They also played football among the old standing stones in the village parks and went prospecting for interesting rocks in the river at the bottom of the garden. They walked into town with Padfoot nearly every day to fetch Remus from his job and rarely a day went by that some kind person didn't stop to say hello and offer to buy them an ice lolly or a soft drink from the grocer, because you couldn't find a more charming pair of boys than Harry and Daniel. Padfoot magnanimously condescended to help them finish whatever they couldn't eat.

Mr. Lupin, while somewhat less outgoing than Mr. Black, was more sociable in the general sense. He worked in town, after all, and so saw the villagers more regularly. They knew that he too was fond of children and particularly fond of his big black Newf, Padfoot, the most intelligent dog that the villagers had ever encountered. Mr. Lupin was of a weak constitution himself, but when well he was a hard worker.

What the villagers didn't know about the peculiar family, of course, would have filled a book. But they were unaware of their own ignorance, and thus treated them as no more than a curiosity. Mr. Black's marriage prospects, Mr. Lupin's scholarly turn of mind, Harry Potter's frank and friendly outlook, Daniel Malfoy's shyness and surprising skill with a cricket bat -- these were as far as gossip went.

Had the villagers known that their little town harboured and sheltered a werewolf, a shape-shifter, and two adolescent wizards, Merlin knew what they would have thought.

It was early August, only a few days after Harry's birthday party, and the sun was out in full force in the little Welsh town. In a grassy lot near the main road, most of the Betwys Beddau under-sixteen set were rehearsing a pageant of the town's history, with Harry and Daniel (who would be gone by the time it was performed) as spectators, assistant directors, and general errand-boys. Padfoot lounged under a nearby tree, sleepily watching the proceedings and waiting patiently for Master to emerge from Meredith's Cafe nearby. Very few people were out on the road, except for
one elderly man with a prodigious beard, carrying a walking stick in one hand and wearing an enormous, broad-brimmed straw hat.

Inside Meredith's Cafe it was bustling, as was usual at that time of day. The town was not so big nor so busy that a late-afternoon break couldn't be observed, and everyone left their offices and shops at two o'clock to go to one of the three cafes in town. Remus had once called this the "Tea-esta" after which Padfoot had soundly bitten his ankle.

The bookstore hadn't needed Remus this year, they regretted to tell him in June, so he'd found employment at Meredith's instead. He was good at waiting tables, because he was polite, and he excelled at making drinks -- hot drinks, cold drinks, blended drinks, and the occasional alcoholic drink if he were slipped a few extra coins and nobody was paying very close attention. After all, he said to Sirius, he'd had seven years of Potions classes.

So while Lynn was on table duty and Marcus worked the cash register, Remus handled drinks. An order would be placed, Marcus would put their name and drink preference on the cup, and Remus would prepare the drink and sing out the name after the patron had paid.

"Abby, your tea's ready," he called, passing the cup across to a young woman who grinned flirtatiously at him and took a seat nearby. "Nicholas? Where's Nicholas?"

"Over here!" said a man about his own age, gratefully accepting an iced coffee. Remus checked the next cup, scooped some vanilla ice cream into the blender, added a cup of lemonade from the refrigerator, tossed in a dash of sugar syrup, and whizzed the whole thing up, pouring the results into the cup and capping it before bothering to look at the patron's name. He opened his mouth to call it, but the name came out remarkably quietly.

"Albus?" he asked, startled. He lifted his eyes over the edge of the counter and blinked a few times.

"Hello, Remus," Albus Dumbledore said with a smile. "Is that my lemonade cream?"

Remus passed it across with a shaking hand.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. Dumbledore sipped and smiled appreciatively.

"There is nothing to concern yourself over; this is a social call to ask a favour, nothing more."

Remus wiped his hands on the towel hanging from his belt and licked his lips nervously.

"I believe I shall take my lemonade cream and go watch the play rehearsal that appears to be occurring across the street," Dumbledore continued serenely. "When you are at liberty, please feel free to join me."

Remus passed the next twenty minutes in a state of vaguely fretful confusion, until at last the tearush died down and he could take his break. He found Dumbledore sitting placidly on a low tree branch that he was certain had never been there before, under the same tree that Padfoot had been using for shade. Padfoot, muzzle buried in the paper cup, lifted his head and panted at him.

"It is so soothing to see children at play," Dumbledore observed, indicating the pageant rehearsal with a nod of his head. Onstage, someone was being stabbed to death. "So long as one does not harbour any illusions about the content of a child's mind."

"They're good boys and girls," Remus said uncertainly.

"No doubt. Won't you sit down?"
Remus sat next to Dumbledore, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. "Something must have happened for you to come here," he said. "Is it Lucius?"

"Mr. Malfoy has not yet been found. I suspect, as I am sure you do, that he is being concealed and protected by Peter Pettigrew."

Remus nodded. "What about the Tonkses? They're all right?"

"Indeed. Nymphadora thrives, and they send their love. Severus expressed no desire at all to be remembered to you, but he has asked me to ensure that Harry and -- "

"-- Daniel."

"-- Daniel are well looked-after. Which reminds me, I have their Hogwarts letters," Dumbledore said, passing two thick envelopes to Remus, who tucked them absently in his back pocket. "So you see I am not here as the bearer of bad news. It was you in particular I came to see."

"Me?" Remus asked. "Why on Earth?"

"I come with the full weight of the Hogwarts Board of Governors and School Trustees to offer you the position of Professor of Dark Arts at Hogwarts for the coming year," Dumbledore said. Remus fell backwards off the tree branch.

Padfoot leapt up at once and ran to him, but Remus was already struggling up onto his elbows. "You're mad!" he said to Dumbledore, forgetting for a moment that he was speaking to his former Headmaster. "You can't give me a job!"

"That remains to be seen. I am empowered to offer it," Dumbledore replied calmly. Remus stood up and rubbed the back of his head. Dumbledore looked up at him mildly.

"We both know it's cursed, Headmaster," he said. Padfoot stepped across his feet and glared menacingly at Dumbledore.

"Be that as it may, you will do well to remember that you are immune to many common curses and hexes," Dumbledore replied. "The pay is excellent, of course, and -- "

"Two of our Dark Arts professors were eaten by things when we were at school!"

"Remus," Dumbledore said warningly, glancing at Harry and Draco. Remus followed his gaze, sighed, and settled down on the low tree branch once more. Padfoot placed himself ostentatiously between them.

"You can't honestly think I'd be any good at the job even if I were mad enough to take it," he said in a softer voice, one hand placed warningly on Padfoot's neck.

"I know you have spent many years studying ways of combating the Dark Arts while you were searching for Peter," Dumbledore said. "You seem to have an uncanny talent for discerning when trouble is looming on the horizon, and moreover, you are a figure of authority in young...Daniel's eyes."

"What has he to -- oh. Oh, I see," Remus said grimly. "Lucius."

"We have no reason to believe he has forgotten his only son and heir. You have the ability to
"You're playing dirty, Headmaster," Remus said. "Does the school board know what I am?"

"Do they need to?"

That elicited a small smile from Remus. "No, I suppose not. It'll be hard to avoid telling the staff..."

"No; they would have to be informed. Poppy knows already, of course."

"And Snape."

"He has kept your secret this long. Besides, I have presented you to him as a challenge."

Padfoot whined. Remus looked perplexed.

"A challenge?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore offered him a newspaper clipping from yet another pocket. Remus stared down at it for so long that Padfoot began to gnaw on his shirtsleeve.

"It was perfected in July," Dumbledore offered. "I know you'd been following the journal articles for years, but they've kept it all very secret. Fortunately, Severus was one of the members of the extended research team."

"He can brew this?"

"He believes so. He's been allowed to brew a test batch for the experimental subjects. They are still alive. He would be capable of providing you with the potion each month, in return for research assistance. There is still some pain, I understand, but the human mind is retained much more fully..."

"Human," Remus whispered, not looking at anyone now. "I could remember the moon. I'd be safe to be around."

"Alas, the potion does not travel well. Your presence at Hogwarts is required," Dumbledore said. Remus was silent. "I have faith in your abilities, Remus; you might try it yourself some time. Come to Hogwarts. Try the potion, try teaching, and protect your son's best friend."

Remus looked at him sharply. Dumbledore smiled winningly. Padfoot, finally driven to it, ran behind the tree and emerged as Sirius, shaking his shaggy hair out of his eyes.

"You're not bribing him with some potion," he said, pointing a finger at Dumbledore accusingly. "If Snivellus can make it, I can make it, and you know I'm well-connected enough to get a copy of the recipe."

Dumbledore gazed mildly at Sirius' finger.

"Do you wish Draco dead?" he asked quietly.

"Since when was it Moony's job to protect him? Get Snivellus to do it, he was Lucius Malfoy's bumboy at schoo..."

Sirius found himself suddenly unable to speak. He clutched his throat, swallowed, and glared at Dumbledore.
"As I was saying," Dumbledore continued, "The responsibility for the protection of our children
does not fall only on the shoulders of those intimately connected with them. As Mr. Black may be
intrigued to know, I myself educated him over the strong objections I held to his family's beliefs."

Remus hid a smile.

"The decision is ultimately yours to make," Dumbledore said to Remus, emphasizing yours
slightly. "But there is also the fact to be considered that Lucius Malfoy may not only be after his
own son. He may be after Harry as well."

Sirius paled, glancing at Harry, who had yet to notice the antics of his elders.

"Revenge," Remus murmured. "Yes. And if Peter had a hand in it..."

Dumbledore was very eloquently silent.

"May I have a day or two?" he asked. Sirius was still rubbing his throat, trying to throw off the hex,
but without his wand he wasn't getting very far.

"Of course. I'll send someone for your answer in three days. Give my regards to the boys; tell them
I could not stay to say hello."

He rose and smiled at Sirius, who coughed and growled. Remus put out a hand to stop him,
however, as Dumbledore made his way back to the road and continued walking towards the path to
Rhos-y-Beddau, the ancient stone circle (now submerged in peat) at the edge of town.

"Bastard," Sirius said feelingly.

"He has the best interests of the children at heart," Remus replied.

"He wants us to think that," Sirius retorted. "Moony, you know that job is cursed."

Remus sighed. "Yes, and he rightly pointed out that some curses, many in fact, don't work on me."

"But this one might! I don't want you eaten!" Sirius dropped onto the branch next to Remus.
"Besides, that would mean we wouldn't be able to stay in London this year, and you know you'd
miss Diagon."

"There'd be Hogsmeade. You could take a cottage there. I'd have floo access, there's no reason I
couldn't come home every night. And at lunches," Remus suggested with a grin. Having two
thirteen-year-olds living in the River House, which was small and not terribly thick-walled, made
for a rather stifled sex life. Sirius' frustration with it was beginning to show.

"You're managing me."

"Am not!" Remus answered, looking hurt. "I'm rationally -- oh bugger, my break's up," he said
suddenly. "Listen, I'll see you at the River House, I'm off at four. Don't tell the boys anything and
don't try to argue this out with me in front of them."

"It's going to affect them, you know! It's not exactly easy when your..." Sirius fumbled for the word
to express what Remus was to Harry. "Well, it's not easy knowing the person who's grading your
papers, is all!"

"Severus does it. I've got to go, we'll ask Harry about it after you and I are sorted," Remus said,
running back across the grass.
"WHAT ABOUT THE MOONS?" Sirius yelled after him, and several people coming out of the cafe stopped to stare.

"Argument about astrology," Remus said to them as he brushed past. Sirius, sulking by the tree, ignored the funny looks they gave him.

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Harry had once told Draco that Remus didn't need any money, since he and Sirius had loads in Gringott's, but that Remus liked to work because he felt useful and anyway it was good to keep his hand in. Draco had replied that he thought he understood that, and it was likely he understood it even better than Harry or Sirius. Remus felt an instinctive affinity for the shy child as well -- he remembered what it was like to be the quiet one.

Remus liked to work. He'd been raised to it and the few years spent trying to hold a steady job before Sirius took him on at Sandust Books was the most depressing time in his life. Even now, with the Black wealth and his own savings supporting them comfortably, he liked to keep busy. Sirius did too, even though he didn't admit it; he'd spent half the summer bent over a drawing board, designing new toys for Madame Schaeffer's Scholars' Emporium. Harry, who was a rather better artist than Sirius, occasionally assisted.

And, a long time ago, Remus had liked the idea of teaching at Hogwarts. It was a long time ago, when he was fourteen or fifteen and thought Minerva McGonagall was the most wonderful teacher in the world (well, he still thought that) and before he'd fully realised just how limiting his lycanthropy would be as an adult. At fifteen he could almost bounce back in a day. Now -- well, now he was in his thirties, and the Change slowed him down a bit more.

But still. Teaching, and teaching something he was good at...

Well, Sirius might be louder and less tactful and a good deal more obstinate about small things, but for sheer bullheaded stubbornness where it really mattered, you couldn't beat Remus Lupin.

Two days after Dumbledore made his offer, while Harry and Draco were puttering around making themselves breakfast in the kitchen, Remus rolled over onto his back and stretched his arms behind his head, shoulder-joints cracking in a satisfying way. Sirius grunted and turned on his side, stealing the blankets.

"Sirius, I'm going to take the Hogwarts job," Remus said. "We're not going to argue about it any more. As long as Harry is all right with having me as a teacher, I can't miss this opportunity."

Sirius opened his eyes wide enough to see the set of Remus' jaw.

"Well, if you'd sounded that decisive when Dumbledore was here," he yawned, "I wouldn't have bothered fighting with you."

Remus began to laugh. "What?"

"Moony, if you had any sense at all, you'd know by now that as long as you tell me something instead of ask it, I'm going to cave every time."

"Really," Remus said, turning his head. "That could make life interesting."

"Life isn't interesting now?"

Remus grinned. Sirius knew that particular grin, and would have taken full advantage of the
impending excitement it had to offer, but there was a pounding on the door.

"EGGS AND BACON IN FIVE MINUTES!" Harry called through the door.

"When did we tell him he could start frying bacon on his own?" Remus asked, sighing.

"I think it was part of our plan to give him more responsibility," Sirius said. "Which was your idea, by the way."

"Bugger. Well, there'll be bacon, anyway," he said, rolling over to straddle Sirius' hips and kissing him on the forehead. "Thank you, Sirius. This means something to me."

"Yes, well, you're in charge of finding me someplace to stay in Hogsmeade," Sirius grumbled. "And nothing stone or drafty, either, it's cold as blue fuck in Scotland."

"Duly noted." Remus slid easily off the bed and reached for his housecoat. "Come on, Harry'll sulk if the bacon's cold by the time we get out there."

Draco was devouring an enormous egg and bacon sandwich when Remus appeared in the kitchen, blinking at the bright sunlight streaming through the windows.

"Morning," Remus said. Harry passed him a warm plate of eggs, bacon, and several slices of fried bread. He reflected that early mornings weren't quite so bad when the reward was fried things.

"Sirius coming?" Draco asked.

"Mmhm. Listen, I need to have a word with you two," Remus said, sitting down and cutting his bread into soldiers.

"If it's about the river, we didn't do it," Harry said promptly.

"And if we did you couldn't prove it," Draco added. Remus rubbed his eyes.

"We'll come back to that, because I know you're not really stupid enough to disclaim knowledge of something ahead of time, but for now, no. It's about Hogwarts."

Harry tilted his head as he slid the rest of the bacon, along with quite a bit of grease, onto Sirius' plate.

"The Headmaster has offered me a job at the school," Remus continued. "Teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Wicked!" Draco said. "Does that mean we'd have to call you Professor Lupin?"

"Yes, and that's what we need to talk about," Remus said, as Sirius walked in and took the plate Harry offered him. "I've decided to take the job, but I want to make sure it's all right with you two. It's not easy having a parent at school -- "

"Yeah, Dora graded Neville really hard, 'cause he's her brother," Harry said.

"Well, yes. And other students might think badly of you. And, if I had to give you a detention, I would," Remus continued.

"Moony, I have a thought," Sirius said suddenly, as he entered the kitchen. "Do you suppose you could talk Filch into letting you into his files and steal back some of the stuff he took off us -- "
"-- twenty years ago? No," Remus said firmly. "Besides, he's probably thrown it all out, and stop distracting me."

"Yes, Professor," Sirius muttered.

"So I want your thoughts and your approval before I tell him yes," Remus finished, looking from Harry to Draco and back. "It'll affect you as much as it does me. I'll be living at school with you, and Sirius will be nearby as well."

Harry glanced at Draco. "I think it's brilliant," he said with a shrug.

"I'm with Harry," Draco agreed.

Remus hesitated for a fraction of a second before nodding. "Settled, then," he said.

"Is Sirius coming up to live at Hogwarts too?" Harry asked. Sirius glanced at Remus.

"Er...probably not at Hogwarts," Remus said.

"Well..." Sirius pursed his lips. Remus gave him a questioning look. "Padfoot could. Professors are allowed a Familiar, aren't they?"

Remus burst out laughing. "You're proposing to spend an entire year as a dog?"

"Not the whole year. Just the bits of it where I follow you to class, bite anyone who's misbehaving, and snag sweets from all the students."

"You'd do that anyway."

"My point exactly."

Remus rolled his eyes. "We've nearly a month to decide all that. I think it's far more sensible of you to take a cottage in town and we'll have it hooked up to the floo in whatever rooms they give me. And you two had better keep quiet about it," he said, pointing with his fork at the boys.

"We're thirteen, Remus," Harry said scornfully. "We're almost grown!"

Sirius tried not to laugh under his breath.

"Good, then I will trust you," Remus said agreeably. "And for the next month you may refer to me as Professor."

Sirius snorted into his fried eggs, but when he looked up, Remus was regarding him with quite an interesting look on his face.

"You too, Sirius Black," he said with a grin.

Sirius decided this Hogwarts business might be entertaining after all.

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The messenger that Dumbledore sent to speak to Remus wasn't Snape, as he and Sirius had assumed it would be; it was a tabby cat with squarish marks around her eyes. She was waiting for them when they returned from a lunchtime outing, calmly washing one paw and sitting on their welcome mat.
"Deputy Headmistress, this is a pleasure," Remus said, opening the door and allowing her to lead the way inside. "I assume the Headmaster has sent you?"

Sirius shut the door after the boys and the cat stretched and transformed, ending up as a tidy-looking witch with square spectacles on.

"He has," she said with a small smile. "Hello Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black. Harry, Draco."

"Professor," Harry and Draco mumbled by way of greeting.

"Won't you have some tea?" Remus said.

"I'm afraid I can't linger; I'm needed at Hogwarts again by two," she said.

"Of course. Please tell the Headmaster that I've decided to accept his offer," Remus replied. "Contingent on one or two points, but I'm sure those will be no bother."

McGonagall smiled more broadly than Harry and Draco thought possible. "Wonderful, Remus. I'm certain you'll be an excellent professor."

She reached into her sleeve and took out a wooden scroll-case, sealed at both ends with wax bearing the Hogwarts imprint. "This should contain all the necessary information. Albus would prefer you sent him your lesson plans via Muggle post -- there's an address in with your papers -- and ride up to Hogwarts with the children on September First."

"That's easily enough done, but..." Remus glanced at Sirius. McGongall waited. "Well, Sirius had thought about moving up to Hogsmeade. It'll make it a bit rough on him if he can't get there until the term starts."

"Your duties will, of course, require you to room at the castle," McGonagall said significantly.

"Yes, I know, but Sirius would like to be near his godson and his cousin's son, considering everything," Remus answered easily.

"Mr. Black may take a room at the Three Broomsticks until he finds suitable lodging; surely that will be acceptable," she said. Remus sighed.

"I suppose it will have to be. Are we permitted to come to London a few days early, to see Andromeda and buy the boys their school things?"

"I don't believe the Headmaster will object."

"That's fine. Tell the Headmaster I'll take the Knight Bus to London with Harry and Draco, and we'll catch the Hogwarts Express as usual," he said.

"Of course. Good afternoon, Professor Lupin, Mr. Black. Boys," she added. Harry and Draco grinned impudently at her as she passed.

"She doesn't like me," Sirius said, watching the tabby cat wander up the lane to Cwndu Road.

"I think she doesn't like us," Remus answered.

"She loved you at -- "

"That's not what I meant."
"Oh. *Oh*, do you really think?" Sirius said, turning to look at Remus, who shrugged.

"It may be she simply disapproves of Professors bringing along an entourage," he answered. He looked at Harry and Draco, who were sharing some kind of private joke. "Well, lads, that's done then. Which reminds me, we'll need to speak with Narcissa, or at least have Andromeda speak with her, when we get back; Draco's got to get his Hogsmeade permit slip signed."

"I'll talk to Andromeda about it. I think she likes needling Narcissa once in a while," Sirius said, ruffling Draco's hair. Draco beamed up at him and Remus smiled; he'd suspected years ago that Draco hero-worshipped Sirius, and the summer had only confirmed it. Early on, when he'd just arrived, Draco had clung to Padfoot constantly and followed Sirius around like a pale shadow.

"And I had better start working on a lesson plan," he announced. "I wonder if I still have my old Dark Arts notes..."

"You don't need notes, Moony! You're a walking encyclopaedia!" Sirius grinned.

"Yes, but it'd be nice to remember what was taught at which level," Remus said. "Though it was patchy at best, wasn't it?"

Sirius frowned. "Yeah. The curse."

"Is it real, then? The curse?" Draco asked. Sirius gave him and Harry a gentle shove into the kitchen and followed then in. He sat at the kitchen counter while Remus went to the icebox for some milk.

"Nobody knows if the curse is real or if it's just a self-fulfilling prophecy," he said. "Some teachers while we were there just flat out ran away after a year, as far as we could tell. And you know, Dark Arts is nothing to muck about with."

"Oh god," Harry said. "It's the Talk."

"Talk to your kids about the Dark Arts!" Draco mimicked a popular wizarding wireless advert. "They'll listen!"

"Quiet, you two," Remus warned.

"As I was saying," Sirius continued, "We had -- was it eight or nine, Moony?"

"Eight and a substitute," Remus replied. "Dumbledore certainly treats it as if it were real, you know."

"Dumbledore treats *Father Christmas* as if he were real. We had a couple of professors with nervous breakdowns; one of them was eaten by a rogue hippogryff and another by a dragon. One or two were yearly substitutes who weren't planning on staying any longer, like Dora."

"You will be careful, won't you Remus?" Harry asked.

"Wouldn't want you getting eaten," Sirius added. Remus smiled.

"I survived seven years there as a boy," he said. "I know Hogwarts better than anyone, except maybe Sirius and the Headmaster. I'm not worried."

"You don't know this," Sirius said to Draco, "But before Harry came to live with us, Remus traveled the world in search of adventure. He's been all over. He'll be fine."
Remus smiled tolerantly.

"Were you really an adventurer?" Draco asked.

"I wouldn't call it that. I did a lot of research, and I did travel, but I never went looking for adventure. It'll be interesting to try teaching what I've picked up to others," he mused. "I wonder...I think my notes are out in those cartons in the garden shed, the ones that we never unpacked. You boys want to go exploring?"

"Yeah!" Harry said.

"Did you really keep all your old school notes?" Sirius asked curiously, as Remus led the boys down the hall to the back door of the River House. There was a little shed to the left of the path that led down to the river, tightly sealed and dusty-windowed.

"Of course. Didn't you?" Remus asked.

"Never took notes, did I? Besides, anything I had left over from Hogwarts was in a box in Sandust," Sirius said glumly. Remus gave him a sympathetic look. Five years later, the burning of the bookshop was still a painful topic.

He unlocked the door and threw it wide, revealing a messy interior with a few cardboard cartons, one or two empty crates, and a very dusty potting table on one side with fungus growing out of it. Draco and Harry stayed on the threshold, peering around the doorway and inside. Remus lifted one of the boxes onto the table, avoiding the mushrooms, and opened it.

"Moody put some never-damp charms on everything, but they might be wearing off..." Remus peered into the box, wrinkling his nose. "Sirius..."

"Mmh?" Sirius asked, spit-shining one of the windows so that more light could come through.

"Is this yours?" Remus inquired, lifting a pair of boxer shorts from the carton. Harry and Draco began to laugh.

"I've been looking for those for years!" Sirius crowed.

"This is all clothing...Sirius, Merlin, no wonder you had to buy all those shirts when we moved here. Half your clothes are in this box," Remus said, shoving it over to him. Sirius took out a couple of t-shirts emblazoned with band names from times long past. He threw them at Harry and Draco, who struggled into them, still laughing.

"Split Enz," Draco said, looking down. "Is that a place?"

"It's a band. Old girlfriend gave me that," Sirius said. "Never listened to them myself."

"Look, I got Pan Demonium!" Harry held out his shirt for Draco to admire. "Remus has a phonograph of them somewhere."

"The sins of my youth revisited," Remus murmured. "I fancied the lead singer."

"What, the one that transfigured horns for himself whenever he performed?" Sirius asked, helping Remus shift another, heavier carton.

"Listen, I didn't say it was a tasteful decision. Phew, this is it!" Remus exclaimed, as a cloud of dust rose up from the inside of the carton. Thick, tightly bound rolls of parchment were stacked on
top of a pile of black fabric that itself lay atop a dozen old schoolbooks. Each scroll was bound with twine and labeled -- *First Year Potions. Sixth Year Arithmancy. Third Year Defence.*

Remus sifted through the scrolls, taking out nine all told, and then lifted the fabric out from under the rest. He shook it, then held it up in front of himself. "Well?"

"Is that your Hogwarts robe?" Harry asked.

"Sixth and Seventh year. It's the one I wore when I passed out of school," Remus said proudly. There was the Gryffindor insignia on the chest; a Prefect's badge was still pinned to the collar, and one of the sleeves was wrapped in gold braid.

"Prefect and high academic honours," Remus said. "Not bad for a scholarship boy, eh? Sirius had high honours too, but James --"

He hesitated suddenly, glancing at Harry.

"James had high honours and his Head Boy braid, and it snagged on a banister and Lily had to fix it with a transfigured hairpin..." Sirius said nostalgically. "And at the party after, he took all his braid off and tied it up in her hair."

Draco looked sidelong at Harry, who was listening hungrily.

"Well. That's the notes I need, at any rate. You, troublemaker, take this back up to the house and figure out if you still want any of it," Remus said, putting the carton of clothes in Sirius' hands. He gathered the scrolls up in his own long, capable fingers and gestured them all out.

"Sirius, can I have this one?" Harry asked, pointing to his shirt as they made their way back to the house. Remus paused to lock the door, listening to them talk.

"I don't need it. Draco, do you want Split Enz?"

"Nah. Have you got any Deaf Wizard?"

"I think so -- how do you know about them? They're not for your tender ears, that's for sure."

"Neville nicked some from Dora ages ago. Them and The Merlingerers."

Remus smiled. Harry and Draco were flapping around in shirts a few too sizes too big -- well, Sirius was a broad-chested man -- and Sirius was trying to sort out when kids who used to listen to Faerie Tails discovered hard wizarding rock. And there he stood with a handful of memories from school, the first step in returning to Hogwarts, which he loved. Oh, he had loved Hogwarts.

Even with Lucius Malfoy on the loose, this was going to be a good year. He could feel it.

***

Professor Flitwick, Professor McGonagall, and the Headmaster were terrifying enough when seated together, although a little bit of Padma's mind was giggling uncontrollably at the tableau they made, like a rising bar-graph. A larger part of her mind was, however, consumed with curiosity about the tall, dark-skinned man sitting next to the Headmaster.

The rest of her was nothing more than a bundle of anxious nerves. They were all sitting on the other side of the desk from her.

"Mrs. Patil, Miss Patil," the dark-skinned man said, standing as she and her mother entered.
"Please, sit down. My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt; I'll be conducting your interview today."

"Thank you," Padma said politely, sitting on the edge of her chair. She glanced at Flitwick, her Head of House, who gave her a cheerful wink.

"We're very grateful for this opportunity," her mother added, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Padma's well aware of what a privilege this is."

"A privilege and a large responsibility," McGonagall said severely.

"She has read the official caveats, Minerva," Dumbledore said, "and no doubt understands them much better than I do."

"Mrs. Patil," Auror Shacklebolt said, "I've received your letter of petition, as well as letters of recommendation from the Deputy Headmistress, Headmaster, and Miss Patil's Head of House. I was a Ravenclaw myself, you know," he said to Padma, who smiled at him. "I'm inclined to approve your petition, but we're all aware of what happened last May. I'm concerned about Padma's ability to handle the stress of an increased workload and, of course, we're always required to ensure that this isn't because of...parental pressure," he said delicately. "I'd just like to ask you a few questions, Padma. There are no right or wrong answers -- you'll just have to trust that I will make the right decision. Do you understand?"

Padma nodded and took a deep breath. Her mother squeezed her shoulder reassuringly.

"All right then. Let's begin..."

***

"Harry -- Draco -- it's nearly time."

Harry rolled over and glanced at the yellow-lit doorway where Sirius was standing. "Muh?"

"Come on lads, up and awake."

Draco had spent his summer sleeping in a bed crammed against the wall of Harry's room opposite Harry's bed. Now he rolled over and sat up, automatically avoiding banging his elbow on the wall or his hand on the bedside table the boys shared. Sirius flicked the lights on and both boys winced.

"Sorry," Sirius said, as Harry sat up and reached for his shirt, shedding his pyjama shirt and tossing it into the open trunk at the foot of his bed. "Get dressed -- Remus has gone to fetch the cab."

Betwys Beddau only had one cab, and its driver was a retired military man named Carl. He had agreed to drive them to the outskirts of Llangynog, the closest large city, where they would catch the Knight Bus to London and stay with Andi and Ted for a few days. Hedwig had arrived in mid-August with a letter from Andromeda, saying she was expecting them, and took one back from Sirius thanking her and giving her the day they'd be there.

Harry and Draco stumbled out into the chilly air, lugging their trunks, and reached the main road just as the cab arrived. Sirius stood and talked to Carl amially, blocking his view of the fact that there was no house anywhere nearby, while Remus helped the boys put their trunks into the boot. His and Sirius' belongings, as much as they would need for the year, had been shrunk into a third trunk which was settled between the boys and Sirius in the back seat.

"Back to school, eh?" Carl asked them, as Remus climbed into the front.
"Yes, sir," Draco replied.

"Best years of your life. Whereabouts is it again?" Carl asked Remus.

"Up Edinburgh way," Remus said.

"Not some poxy place like Eton eh?"

"Not exactly," Remus said with a grin.

"Sounds a nice outdoorsy place."

"It is. Harry does sport, don't you Harry?"

Harry snickered.

"Reckon young Daniel will too, won't you, after this summer?" Carl inquired. "Never seen a better natural batsman in m'life."

"I...I might," Draco stammered.

"Sure, you should try for the house team," Sirius said. "Harry'll have a word with your Captain, won't he?"

Harry shrugged and grinned. "I don't mind trouncing Daniel."

They talked of schools, mainly of Carl's memories of his own youth, until they reached a hotel just outside Llangynog.

"Bus for us from here -- ta, Carl," Remus said as he paid him. They waited until he had disappeared, then looked carefully up and down the street.

"What is the Knight Bus, anyway?" Harry asked, as Sirius took his wand out of his pocket and casually pointed it outwards at the road.

"Wizarding transport -- I prefer trains, but this is a less noticeable way to get to London," Remus answered. Just then there was a loud bang and a screech of brakes. Draco stumbled backwards from the kerb.

Before them stood a violently purple triple-decker bus carrying the legend "THE KNIGHT BUS" in gold lettering on the front and the side. A conductor in a purple uniform leapt out of the bus and began speaking loudly, reading from a little card held none too subtly in his palm.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, auxiliary transport for witches and wizards. Just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I am your conductor this morning --"

"Right, right," Sirius said impatiently. "Fares gone up this year?"

The rather spotty young man turned the card over. "Eleven sickles for a single fare, orange juice and croissant for fifteen, newspaper eight knuts extra."

"Four breakfast fares and a newspaper, please."

The conductor rang up four tickets. "Three galleons, nine sickles, sixteen knuts."
Sirius paid and Remus shepherded the boys aboard, then reached around for the trunks.

"I'll do that, sir!" Stan-the-conductor said, hurrying forward. Remus watched in amusement as the young man struggled to get all three trunks aboard. He tipped Stan a galleon while Sirius wasn't looking.

"What's the ride like to London this time of day?" Sirius asked the driver.

"Oh," the man said in a scratchy voice, "Got a couple'a pickups to do first. Ever'on's goin'ta Lonnon this time'a year, aren' they?"

"Might as well settle in," Remus said, leading them to one of the many small round tables lining each side of the bus. Sirius sat down with a pleased sigh and picked up the croissant that appeared at his place. Harry and Draco eagerly sat nearby and tore into the chocolate croissants at theirs.

"Sports page?" Sirius asked, offering it to Remus.

"Good god, the Cannons won? Is the world ending?" Remus said, studying the headlines.

"Nice to have Magical news again," Sirius said. He glanced down at the front page, then quickly folded it over and smoothed down the crease.

"My dad's on the front page, huh," Draco asked. Sirius looked at him, then pleadingly at Remus. Remus chewed on his lower lip.

"Draco," he said slowly, "You're probably going to have to get used to a certain amount of family business being aired publicly, until all this is over."

"I'd like to see it," Draco said, in a remarkably authoritative voice. Sirius shrugged and passed him the folded front page. Draco unfolded it and smoothed it out on the table. Harry leaned over his shoulder.

MALFOY STILL AT LARGE, the headline read.

"The Ministry of Magic confirmed today that Lucius Malfoy, one of the most infamous inmates of Azkaban prison, is still eluding capture," Draco read aloud. "We are doing all we can to recapture Malfoy, said the Minister for Magic this morning, and we beg the magical community to remain calm. Meanwhile, witches and wizards live in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago -- "

"Surely they're aware that wasn't Malfoy alone," Remus said, brows knitting.

"Peter's old news," Sirius grunted. "Enough. You'll hear about Lucius Malfoy at school, I'm sure, some children being the pissant little scrubs they are."

"Not from Slytherin he won't," Harry said angrily.

"It's all right," Draco said, folding the paper in half. "Besides, I'm only half-Malfoy, right?" he asked, glancing up at Sirius, who grinned.

"So it seems. Hey -- Harry, look at this!"

Harry looked at the paper, which Draco had turned over to the below-the-fold headline. "Ministry of Magic employee scoops grand prize -- that's Mr. and Mrs. Weasley!"

"Arthur Weasley, head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw. Oh, well done Arthur," Remus said, reading
with his head tilted to adjust for the awkward angle. "We'll have to try and catch the Weasleys in Diagon and congratulate them."

"Molly can't possibly still be angry about the Anglia," Sirius agreed.

They spent the rest of the ride to Diagon, amidst the bumpings and bangings of the Knight Bus, reading the paper thoroughly and making plans for the rest of the trip: school book shopping, browsing in Mardjinn Alley, dinner out with Neville and the Tonkses. Sirius would miss some of it; he was going up to Hogsmeade ahead of everyone to start looking for a flat.

"Are you and Sirius really going to live in different places all year?" Harry asked Remus, bending his head low over the table and speaking quietly. Remus followed his gaze to where Sirius was standing at the front of the bus with Draco, watching the scenery speed past. "I mean, that can't be much fun for you, can it?"

"It won't be so bad; there'll be a direct floo portal, and professors can come and go into Hogsmeade as they please," Remus answered. "You live away from us during the school year and it doesn't change anything."

"Yeah, but that's -- different."

Remus nodded. "That's true too. On the other hand...Hogwarts is a place with its own laws and its own reasonings. You'd understand this better than anyone. When you become a teacher you make certain commitments, certain sacrifices, because you're invested with an awful lot of power. I...didn't always do as I should have, when I was a Prefect."

"I don't believe that!" Harry laughed.

"We all grew up a lot during the war, Harry. And when we took you from the Dursleys, we had to grow up even more, Sirius and I. At school we were terrors, really."

Remus was staring past Harry now, and Harry had the distinct sensation that where he was looking was not a place but a time.

"I owe Hogwarts," he said quietly. "More than anyone knows, including Sirius."

Harry was about to ask him to expand on this when the Bus made an enormous bang and wheezed to a stop in front of the Leaky Cauldron.

"Here we are," Remus said with a sudden grin. "Come on, we'll leave our stuff at Andi's and go run amok in Diagon, sound all right?"

***

Andromeda was thrilled to see them, and just as thrilled to see them leave again; she was in the middle of fitting first-year robes to half a dozen new Hogwarts students and begged Remus to take a restless, rambunctious Neville away with him.

"We'll buy you dinner tonight," Remus said, kissing her on the cheek and following Harry and the other two boys out the door. Sirius was already outside, romping around the boys as Padfoot and playing Knock-Over, a spirited if simple game in which the object was to push someone into sprawling on their arse. It had gotten a lot harder in the past year, as the boys had shot up in height, but Sirius did love a challenge.

"How've you been, Neville?" Remus asked, as they dawdled their way down Diagon towards
Gringott's, where they could change their Muggle cash for Wizarding and make a withdrawal from Draco's trust.

"Brilliant," Neville said. "Harry, I have something to show you. You too, Draco."

He led them down to Quality Quidditch Supplies and elbowed through the crowd with the other two close behind. Padfoot begged for sweets from the children clustered around the display window and Remus leaned forward to try to get a better look.

"It's a new prototype," Neville said. "Professor Snape pointed it out to me."

"When did you see Professor Snape?" Draco asked.

"He's always around, mooning after Dora," Neville said absently. "Look at this."

He gestured at the window. Harry actually gasped.

The broomstick in the window looked almost as if it was moving, though it was resting on a sleek silver stand. It had a wild look about it, predatory in fact. Harry found himself staring at it, nose pressed to the glass despite Remus, in the back, scolding him for it.

"Fastest broom in the world," Draco whispered, awed. Harry studied the little placard below the amazing broom intently.

THE FIREBOLT! FASTEST BROOM IN THE WORLD!

THIS STATE-OF-THE-ART RACING BROOM SPORTS A STREAM-LINED, SUPERFINE HANDLE OF ASH, TREATED WITH A DIAMOND-HARD POLISH AND HAND-NUMBERED WITH ITS OWN REGISTRATION NUMBER. EACH INDIVIDUALLY SELECTED BIRCH TWIG IN THE BROOMTAIL HAS BEEN HONED TO AERODYNAMIC PERFECTION, GIVING THE FIREBOLT UNSURPASSABLE BALANCE AND PINPOINT PRECISION. THE FIREBOLT HAS AN ACCELERATION OF 150 MILES AN HOUR IN TEN SECONDS AND INCORPORATES AN UNBREAKABLE BRAKING CHARM.

PRICE ON REQUEST.

"Ash and birch?" Harry asked Neville. "Is that smart, do you think?"

"Blowed if I know, you're the Quidditch man," Neville replied.

"It's definitely new," Draco said.

"Irish International Side's just put in an order for seven of them," said a man from the shop door. "Hullo Nev!"

"Hullo sir!" Neville called. "Look who I brought!"

"Blimey, it's Harry Potter," the man said. "Thinking of buying one, Mr. Potter? I hear you're going to be playing for England in a few years."

Harry grinned at him. "When I'm making pro-Quidditch salary, maybe. Price on request, huh?"

"Ten percent off for the Boy Who Lived," the man said with a wink, and disappeared back inside. Remus finally managed to "excuse-me" his way through and tweaked Harry's ear.

"No noses on glass," he scolded.
"Remus, look at it!" Harry said. Remus gave the broom a professional once-over and nodded.

"It's solid craftsmanship," he said. "Might want to wait and see how they do in play, though. Besides, you have a perfectly good Nimbus, lad."

Harry grinned and scratched Padfoot's head; the dog had his paws up on the ledge and was covering the glass in snouty nosemarks.

"Come on, let's go get your books," Remus continued. Harry saw him exchange a significant look with Padfoot, but assumed it was simply a scold for snouting up the glass.
"Spaghetti," Sirius said, offering the menu back to the waitress who was hovering over him. She smiled prettily at him and almost squeaked as she took his menu. He'd forgotten what life in the Wizarding World was like; people stopped and stared and pointed at Sirius Black, heir of the Black family and dapper bachelor about town. The waitress was almost visibly drooling.

"You always get the spaghetti," Andromeda said, grinning at him teasingly. "How boring, Sirius!"

"I like spaghetti," Sirius answered.

"Shrimp linguini, please," Remus said. The waitress smiled at him too, took his menu, and dashed away to giggle about Sirius with her comrades. Ted refilled their wine and leaned back, holding up his glass.

"To London again," he said, and the other adults toasted. "And to wherever you slink off to during the summers. It's done Draco a world of good."

"I enjoyed myself," Draco said shyly.

"I can tell. You're brown as a nut," Andromeda said. "Nice to see some colour in your skin. Merlin, you boys grow up fast," she added, patting Neville on the shoulder.

"Watch out," Remus said to Ted, grinning at Andromeda. "She'll be looking for boot-faced cats again soon."

"Mum isn't happy unless she's got someone to spoil," Dora agreed. "Ah -- be right back," she added, and everyone followed her gaze.

"Did he have to come?" Sirius asked Ted in a low voice.

"Play nice or kiss your kneecaps goodbye," Ted answered, and raised his hand in greeting to Severus Snape, who had just come into the restaurant. Dora threaded her way through the tables and hugged him hello; to no-one's surprise, his returning hug was fraught with awkwardness. Andromeda gave Sirius a warning look as Harry jumped up and ran across the restaurant to say hello to his professor.

"Good evening," Severus said, taking the empty seat between Andromeda and Dora. "Neville, Draco. Lupin. Black," he added, drawling the last name as disdainfully as possible.

"Don't," Dora said out of the corner of her mouth. The waitress rushed back over and Snape stopped her in her tracks with a glare.

"Penne pasta salad," he said. "Off with you."

"I see your manners are improving," Sirius remarked. Remus' leg twitched slightly and Sirius winced.

"I wish I could say -- "

"Severus, how about some wine?" Ted asked, interrupting him. "We were just saying how big the boys were getting. Doesn't Draco look well?"

"He appears not to be malnourished," Snape allowed. "I suppose it's too much to ask that any of
"you have retained an ounce of knowledge over the summer?" he asked, raking all three boys with a

"I read the books you sent me," Harry said.

"Repeatedly," Remus added with a tolerant grin. "He's become quite the Graveworthy fan."

"Really! Did you give him Wizard Bird? That was clever of you," Andromeda said. "There's a new
one coming out, you know, Harry. And you're a Slytherin, you really should read Two Kneazles."

"Ill-researched," Snape murmured.

"It's all about Salazar Slytherin!"

"That doesn't mean it's objective," Snape answered. "Graveworthy was a Slytherin too."

"Cynic," Dora said affectionately. "You'll be really horrified when you hear about Mum's Grand

Sirius glanced at Andromeda. "Finally taking over the world, are you?"

"Well, I was thinking of waiting because this is really a dinner to welcome you lads home," she
said. "But I'm bursting with the news, so if you don't mind..."

"Go on! We're all fascinated now," Remus said.

"Well, I've been thinking about what to do with the flat on the top floor since you boys are

Sirius, Harry, Snape, and Dora all instinctively looked at Remus, who had a glass of wine halfway
to his mouth. His lips were open slightly. He blinked, looked from Ted to Andromeda, and -- after
a very tense moment -- smiled.

"Very appropriate," he said, setting his wine down. His grin widened and he laughed a little,
quietly. "Very apt, Andi. Well done."

"You know the kind of attention you'll get for it," Snape said sharply. "You'll lose business."

"We're not planning to broadcast it," Ted said. "Besides, we always have a few job openings now

"How does it work?" Remus asked. "I've never even heard of this group."

"It's only about a year old, there's no reason why you should have," Ted said. "When the new

restrictions were passed, someone decided to do something about it, I suppose."

"Are you sure this is wise?" Snape persisted. "Some of these people -- "

" -- are sitting at this table," Sirius said sharply.

" -- are genuinely dangerous for more reasons than the obvious," Snape retorted.

"Sirius, be quiet," Remus said. Sirius fell quiet, sullenly. "He's right, Andromeda. I think it's great, but he does have a point. People who are down on their luck, who've been rejected by their families -- it isn't pretty. It can be dangerous."

"If nobody ever trusts them, it'll never get any better," Ted replied. "Besides, everyone knows Dora's an Auror, and I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but her mother's pretty fearsome in her own right."

"Look, food!" Neville said with mock-cheer. "Everybody dig in until you've stopped sulking!" Dora added.

"God, you are your mother's child," Ted said, but he smiled as he said it. Across the table, Draco lifted an eyebrow at Harry, who rolled his eyes.

"I'm still interested in how it works," Remus said, once Snape and Sirius' mouths were safely full of food.

"Well, it's fairly simple. Newly registered werewolves are given the Support Network's contact information by Healers at St. Mungo's -- apparently they have to get round the Ministry by privately asking Healers in the intensive wing to hand them out," Ted said. "It's all strictly confidential; any werewolf can contact a vastly underpaid woman who runs the Network. They can give a false name, or no name at all; she meets with them and evaluates what they need. There are apparently a couple of shops that regularly donate food and clothing, mostly seconds and dented cans, that kind of thing. She's in touch with a few Muggle charities too, but she doesn't like to house werewolves with Muggles."

"Industrious woman," Remus remarked.

"I think she lost a son," Andromeda said softly.

"Ah," Remus said, glancing down at his plate suddenly. "Sometimes parents do...take things very personally."

"At any rate, we're on the list now, so she sends them to us and we agree to provide safe housing. In return, our tenants agree to do their best to find work and also to change at the moon in a secure location."

"Such unnecessary charity," Remus murmured. "If it weren't for the new regulations..."

"Things will change," Ted said. "People are still living in fear from when You-Know-Who was in power. This next generation -- the boys here -- they'll change things."

Harry looked at him with such a grave, adult expression on his face that Ted bit his lip.

"Yes," he said. "Count on it."

"Harry's going to be Minister for Magic," Neville teased.
"Great way to pick up girls," Remus added, breaking the tension.

"I'm sure that's why Fudge did it," Snape remarked sarcastically.

"Can you imagine him getting any otherwise?" Remus asked. Sirius almost choked trying to keep his laughter down.

***

Neville wanted Harry and Draco to sleep over that night, and Remus and Sirius were just as happy to have some time alone, so they parted ways after dinner and made for the Leaky Cauldron while the rest of the party wandered slowly back to Tonks&Tonks, a second bottle of wine tucked securely under Severus' arm. Dora held the other one just as securely, since Severus preferred to be seen escorting her rather than childishly holding hands.

Back in Neville's room in the spacious flat above Tonks&Tonks, the boys set about unpacking bedrolls Ted provided and discussing plans for the new school year. Neville joined in Harry's valiant crusade to convince Draco to go out for Beater on the Hufflepuff team.

"You can practice on my Nimbus," Harry offered, as Draco's mother had been horrified, years ago, at the idea of buying her son a broomstick. "You can even play on it when Hufflepuff isn't playing Slytherin."

"I dunno," Draco said. "I was thinking of maybe organising a cricket side. Well, two really. There've got to be at least that many Muggleborns interested in playing, don't you think?"

"Not with Quidditch around," Harry answered. "Come on, Draco, it's like cricket in the air! I know you can fly well and you've got wicked aim with a bat."

"Mum'd never allow it."

"Don't bloody well tell her!" Neville exploded. "You needn't tell your mum everything you do, you know."

"She'd find out anyway," Draco retorted. "They cover the school games in the Prophet."

"Yeah, and your mum of course reads the sports page," Harry grinned. "Just try out, will you? I know there's an opening this year."

"If you stop harping on it," Draco said.

"Done deal!" Harry licked his palm in the style of the Betwys Beddau boys and offered it to Draco, who rolled his eyes. Grinning sheepishly, Harry wiped his hand on his trousers instead. Draco cast around for a subject to change to.

"Tell you what, let's get some snacks and barricade ourselves in for the rest of the night," he said. "The grownups are just going to have boring wine and talk about politics."

"Sounds good," Neville said. "There's ice-cream in the kitchen and a box of biscuits and some sandwich stuff. We'll have to sneak the ice-cream out," he added, turning to Harry. Or rather, where Harry had been. Now there was nothing but a pair of sneakers and about two inches of trouser leg that ended abruptly in nothing.

"Your shoes are showing," Draco sighed. "Here, take it off, you're doing up the wrong buckles."
Harry shed his invisibility cloak and handed it to Draco. Sewn across the back and at the throat were a series of leather straps, designed so that the cloak could be hitched up or lengthened depending on the height of the wearer. Harry had always buckled the lowest strap across his throat, almost doubling the cloak's material around him. Over the summer, however, he'd gained a few inches and now he was on the third buckle. Draco did the other two up across his chest to keep the cloak closed.

"You two go for the sandwich stuff," Harry said. "I'll snag the ice cream."

In the hallway, however, they stopped suddenly at the sound of the voices in the dining room where the Tonkses and Snape had gathered. They weren't the usual cheerful tones of four people enjoying an after-dinner gossip; Ted's voice was low and serious, and so was Dora's when she spoke. Severus sounded oddly defensive.

"...makes no sense not to tell him," Ted said. "He should know, if only so that he doesn't make risky mistakes. He's thirteen, Severus, and old for his age."

"I'm aware of that," Severus said, annoyed. Neville held up a finger to his lips, unnecessarily shushing the other two.

"They'll listen to you, maybe even more than they will to Remus. You've been their teacher for two years. They need to know how important it is not to go running around in the forest or Hogsmeade or wherever they go when they get bored with school," Andromeda said. "I love them but they're such..."

"They're clever, all four of them, too bloody clever by half," Snape said. "That doesn't mean they need to know this."

"He sort of has a point," Dora said. "Tell one, tell all. I don't think they have any secrets between them."

"Harry and Draco make a pretty tempting target together," Andromeda sighed.

"They will be safe at Hogwarts. Why stir up old trouble?" Snape asked. "Lucius hasn't been seen since his escape. He's probably dead."

Draco made a soft little gasp, quickly stifled by Harry's hand.

"He's not dead and we all know it," Andromeda replied. "And he'll come for the boy sooner or later."

"Draco is not your responsibility," Snape said sharply.

"No -- he's yours," she answered, just as sharply. "Doubly so because of your friendship with Lucius. You knew him better than anyone -- Draco should know about his father, what his father's capable of. You're the only one who can tell him that with authority."

There was a long silence. When Snape spoke again, it was in a surprisingly sad voice.

"The boy is ashamed enough of what his father is," he said. "He's happy at school, away from Narcissa, away from that house. I was just as glad to see him away from it this summer. She fills his head with wrong ideas and I can't even credit how he manages to avoid turning into the perfect little copy of her. Let him have one place where he isn't constantly reminded of his father's misdeeds."
"You don't want him to hate you," Dora said.

"I didn't say that."

"He knows you're not like Lucius."

"I am more like Lucius than anyone ought to be."

"All right," Andromeda said suddenly. "It's your decision, Severus, but I hope you know what
you're doing. Let's find something more cheerful to talk about."

Neville turned to look at Draco. The other boy was pale white, fists clenched at his sides. His grey
eyes were brilliant in his face.

"Take him back," Harry whispered in Neville's ear, startling him. "I'll get the food."

Neville pulled Draco away from the doorway, back into his room, and when Harry returned they
were sitting on Neville's bed, Draco with his fists pressed into his lap, hair falling across his face.

"Did you know?" Draco asked them both, in a controlled, furious voice. "Did you know he knew
my father?"

"Not me," Neville said, glancing at Harry. Harry shook his head.

"No idea. I don't see why they'd be friends," he said. "It's not like Professor Snape is...I don't think
he's even pureblood, is he? Why would your dad be friends with him?"

"I'm going to find out," Draco said determinedly. "Once we're back at school."

"Draco, listen, maybe it's better if you don't," Neville said hesitantly. "I mean. Maybe Professor
Snape is right. It's done with now -- "

"He's free, and he's going to come for me. It isn't done with at all!" Draco said, and began to cry.

Neville and Harry looked at each other, utterly lost. Boys didn't cry, especially thirteen-year-old
boys. True, he was crying in a very manful fashion, snuffling desperately and trying to hide it,
choking on his own sobs, but he was still crying.

"Give him a handkerchief, I haven't got one," Harry said to Neville, who produced a grubby
kerchief from one pocket.

"I'm not afraid," Draco said, swiping at his face with the cloth.

"Course not."

"I hate him. My father. And I hate my mum too, and it was such a nice summer..."

Harry mutely offered Draco a biscuit from the tin, and Draco nibbled on it, falling silent.

"You've got us," Neville said. "Me and Harry and Padma, I mean. And Professor Snape, and
Remus too. And Dora's out chasing him all the time. And we'll get Hogsmeade weekends, that'll be
fun, and Harry and I will make you try out for Quidditch if we have to glue you to the broomstick."

The mental image was apparently funny enough to make Draco laugh -- rather snottily, through his
tears, but laugh all the same.
"Ghaaaaa," Sirius said, flopping down on the bed in one of the nicer rooms at the Leaky Cauldron. Remus grinned at him and leaned on the bureau, tilting his head from side to side. There was an alarming crack as his bones popped.

"Nice to have an evening to ourselves," he remarked, as Sirius worked his left shoe off using the toe of his right, still lying across the bed.

"You know I love Harry," Sirius said, working at the other shoe, "and I'm in a fair way of being very fond of Draco."

"But it's nice to spend an evening without once feeling the urge to strangle one of them?" Remus asked, smiling. Sirius stretched his arms.

"It's just nice not to have any responsibilities for a bit," he said. He propped himself up on his elbows and grinned at Remus. "Which reminds me, will you open our trunk? I got you a present."

"A present?" Remus asked, sounding perplexed and delighted at the same time. "What on earth for?"

"For getting your professorship," Sirius replied. Remus lifted the lid of the trunk and studied the mess inside skeptically. "Okay, lift up the blue jumper -- no, the knit one -- there -- and then kind of wiggle it out from under my trousers."

Remus grinned at him and grasped something deep in the trunk, tugging it free finally. It was a large, oblong thing, wrapped in brown paper; he tore it off and held his gift up to the dying light coming through the window.

"Sirius, it's marvelous," he said, fingers stroking the leather exterior of the briefcase appreciatively. It was golden-brown and buttery-smooth, the perfect size for carrying student papers and lesson plans. He turned it over to admire the brass latches at the top and burst out laughing.

"Professor R.J. Lupin," he read, tilting the briefcase so that the light picked out the sheen of the gold lettering stamped on the top of the case. He flicked it open deftly, his hands exploring the more durable interior. "Thank you."

"Got to have proper supplies before you go off to school," Sirius replied, grinning. "You like it, really?"

"It's wonderful," Remus said, and Sirius flopped back again on the bed, contented. "You didn't have to, you know."

"Yes, well, I'm Sirius Black, I don't have to do anything." He sighed blissfully. "It's a nice feeling."

"Very nice," Remus agreed, but it sounded as though he'd moved; after a second, Sirius nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand clasp his leg gently. He propped himself up on his elbows and saw Remus leaning over his right knee, kneeling on the floor.

"Though it's not terribly private here," Remus continued, hooking his thumb in Sirius' sock and pulling it down and off. His hands were warm and sure, and Sirius had the sudden idea that perhaps Remus had been as frustrated all summer as he had. One sometimes couldn't tell, with Remus.

His hands moved to the other foot, holding Sirius' ankle lightly. When he was done removing the sock, he slid his fingers up slightly, just under the cuff of Sirius' trousers.
"There are silencing spells," Sirius said, as Remus' other hand came to rest just above his knee. Remus rested his head against Sirius' thigh.

"I've just cast two," he said. "And nobody's going to come knocking."

Sirius sat up further and ran a hand through Remus' hair, affectionately. "Why, Professor Lupin, what on earth are you implying?"

Remus leaned forward and slid his hands down Sirius' calves, then up over the fabric, past his thighs. His thumb brushed Sirius' groin and he smiled when Sirius moaned softly.

"I think you ought to know," he said, curling his fingers in the waistband of the jeans and tugging them down, "that I appreciate what you're going to have to put up with this year."

Sirius' breath hitched as Remus pulled his clothing down and away. His left hand slid under Sirius' shirt, hiking it up.

"I think you ought to know that living apart will be difficult," Remus continued. He rose up and leaned over Sirius, pushing his shirt further up around his chest. The soft nap of his trousers brushed tantalisingly against Sirius' erection. "I want you to know that we'll find ways around it. I'll find ways around it."

"We will," Sirius moaned, head tilting back. He lifted his arms and let Remus tug the shirt up and off.

"So glad to have your cooperation, Mr. Black," Remus murmured in his ear. Sirius shivered. Remus had very few kinks, but they always emerged at the most opportune, entertaining times. He couldn't have known, for example, that he would find lying naked under a fully-clothed Hogwarts professor so very...stimulating. But Remus had known.

"Anything for Professor Lupin," he replied, and Remus laughed and kissed a line down his chest.

"With an attitude like that you'll be head boy before long -- "

Sirius groaned and twined his hands in Remus' shaggy hair. "Awful."

Remus, in reply, hummed deep in his throat and darted his tongue out, licking a line up Sirius' cock.

Sirius decided he could get used to Professor Lupin.

***

This time he knows it's a dream.

In the dream (the dream the **dream** he can feel the hollow coldness inside. He remembers from other dreams the way this felt. In the dream he's lost everything -- not just James and Lily and Peter but Sirius too, irrevocably lost Sirius. The ache is always there, like a hollow space between his spine and his heart, for everything he's lost in the dream. His health, too; he can feel how taut the skin is on his ribs, he can see the way it stretches over his knuckles. Fingers metaphorically scrabbling, broken-nailed, for a handhold in the world.

He tries to think about where he really is, which is buried under a rat's nest of blankets and sheets in the Leaky Cauldron with Sirius curled up around him and drooling on his neck, both of them exhausted and slick with sweat from lovemaking. He tries to think about the pasta and wine they
had for dinner, still warm in his stomach. He tries to think about the moments he still has, every day, where he looks at Harry or Sirius or the books on the shelves or the nice furniture or the full pantry and feels safe.

But the truth is that in the dream he's a skinny, underfed, ragged-robed man sleeping under a patched cloak in a freezing-cold rail compartment, with a handful of kids who only sat here because it was the last place they could all fit in together. In the dream he hears Harry's voice for the first time, the voice of a stranger with James' familiar timbre nonetheless.

There's Ron Weasley, whose mother had taught Harry before they left for Betwys Beddau, asking who he is, and some girl he doesn't recognise, replying; and there Ron prompts Harry to tell him the story of something, some argument that Ron's parents had. And the girl warning Harry not to go looking for trouble.

"I don't go looking for trouble," says Harry, sounding nettled. "Trouble usually finds me."

Too right, thinks the cold, exhausted man under the cloak.

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" asks Ron, shakily, and Remus thinks he means Sirius, but that can't be, because Sirius is lying warm in bed with him, not some crazed murderer. Sirius belongs to him, Sirius would never betray him.

Except he has. Sirius abandoned him and went to kill Peter after he killed James and Lily, oh, Sirius.

***

In the bed in the Leaky Cauldron, Sirius woke suddenly and wasn't sure why, until he heard Remus moan softly. His skin was cold and clammy even under the blankets. His face was twisted up into a pained, wizened expression that made him look far older than he was.

"You killed them," Remus whispered, horrified. Sirius opened his mouth to ask who, but Remus was still asleep, and he moaned again.

"Moony," he said quietly, trying to keep his voice steady. He propped himself up for better leverage and rested a hand on the other man's chest, wondering if he should wake him. "Moony, it's just a nightmare."

But it wasn't nightmares with Moony, not always; sometimes it was presentiments, glimpses of another world that Remus was convinced existed somewhere, a world where Harry had never come to live with them, where somewhere things had gone horribly wrong.

"Moony, come on," he soothed, sliding his hand up to cup the side of Remus' throat. "I'm right here."

Remus' back arched suddenly, nearly pushing him off the bed. As Sirius scrambled for leverage he screamed "Expecto patronum!" and the room was filled with blinding white light. Sirius shut his eyes and buried his face in the blankets as Remus fell limp against the bed again; he sprawled out over the other man and tried to hold him down, but Remus was unresisting now and it wasn't even necessary.

For a few heartbeats, the world was awash in white even behind Sirius' eyes. When he was finally able to open them again, he peered past Remus' body to the diminishing source of the light.

"Bloody fuck," he said. An enormous silver-white dog, faintly transparent, was staring at them...
both over the edge of the bed.

Even as he watched it faded off into little wisps of light and then vanished entirely. He looked down at Remus, who was wide-eyed and staring at where the dog had been.

"My patronus," he said quietly.

"You cast it wandless," Sirius replied, equally subdued.

"I had a bad dream," Remus answered. He rolled towards Sirius, twisting the blanket tight around him and pressing his face into Sirius' chest. Sirius eased himself down slowly, his breathing a little less frantic now.

"Did you see anything I should know?" he asked. Remus shook his head, clinging tightly to him. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I love you," Remus replied. "And I don't believe them."

"Them?"

Remus didn't answer.

***

Remus showed no sign he remembered his dream the next morning, and Sirius didn't press him. He wasn't certain he wanted to know. And if Remus dreamed again after their midnight upset, it was either much more quietly or Sirius slept deeper.

There was no shortage of distractions, at any rate: rambling shopping outings with the boys, Remus' meetings with Dora to ascertain where she'd left off teaching and where he ought to start, dinners with the Tonkses, and preliminary preparations for the move to Hogsmeade. Remus had made Sirius swear not to buy any furniture without Remus' presence, and much private teasing about interior decorators had followed. Sirius left for Hogsmeade the night before the Hogwarts Express was scheduled to leave and while Harry sensed that something was askew between his godfather and his professor, he doubted it was very grave. Not considering how unhappy Remus had been to see Sirius leave.

Besides, Harry had more important things to concern himself with -- more important to him, at least. Thirteen is a perilous age and its politics are much more seriously played than those of any government. He wanted to see Padma again and find out how she was getting on. He had to talk to the Hufflepuff captain about Draco's prospects, not to mention re-convincing Draco to go out for the team. And he had to make sure that everyone knew the first person who talked down about the new Defence professor was going to feel the full weight of Slytherin's disapproval. Harry hadn't much authority amongst the sixth and seventh years, but if he could convince them that Remus was a friend of Professor Snape, they'd adopt him readily enough. Most of them already knew Remus from his infrequent appearances in the newspapers, usually in the background of some photograph of Sirius.

Even with all the weight of the new school year on their shoulders and a full moon not far past, they made a merry gang on their way to the train platform. Ted and Andromeda cracked jokes about the weight of Neville's trunk and Harry and Draco plotted mischief just out of Remus' earshot, strutting proudly ahead of the new Defence professor. Remus himself was tall and impressive-looking in his perfectly-pressed brown professor's robes, his new briefcase carried lightly in one hand. True, he also looked pale and a little frightened, but Harry knew he wouldn't
show it to the students. Remus had thrown himself in front of a killing curse before; he could handle Hogwarts students just fine.

He kept a lookout for Padma and her family, but even so he missed them and saw Dobby first. The house-elf, dressed in a variety of clothing apparently sewn entirely from socks, shrieked with joy and bolted straight for Draco.

"Master Malfoy!" he shrilled, dancing from foot to foot in front of Draco, who eyed him with amusement and just a hint of annoyance. "Master Malfoy! Look, it is Dobby! Dobby has returned to you, Master Malfoy!"

"I see," Draco said drily. "How was your summer, Dobby?"

"Dobby has looked after Mistress Padma!" Dobby nearly babbled, as Padma leaned around a column and waved at them, laughing.

"Hiya, Padma!" Harry called. Padma's mother Sara leaned around the column also, narrowed her eyes, and rested a hand waringly on Padma's shoulder. Padma scowled.

"Looks like she's still mad at you for getting Padma into trouble," Draco said.

"Mad at me? Like she's not mad at you?"

"Course not," Draco said loftily. "I gave her a house-elf."

"If you'd given me Dobby, I'd hold a grudge," Harry answered.

"Come on lads, you might as well load up now," Remus called, standing on the bottom step of a train doorway.

"We'll stay here until the train's away," Andromeda said. "Give us hugs -- mmmh -- and go on. Mind your manners and be nice to the first-years!" she called after them as they ran off.

Harry led the way past Remus up into the train car, searching for an empty compartment. Behind him, he heard Remus welcome the Patil twins aboard and then call out, "Find us somewhere roomy, Harry!"

Harry peered at the glazed, frosted glass of the last compartment left, which appeared to only have one person in it -- but it didn't look like a student.

"This is the last one!" he called back. Remus pushed through the crowd of children and opened the carriage door.

"Excuse me, do you mind if we -- "

He broke off suddenly. Harry peered around his elbow and saw a small, rather stout wizard in pinstripe robes occupying the window side of one of the benches.

"I'm so sorry," Remus said. "This compartment's probably reserved -- "

"Nonsense!" said Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic.

***

Remus was familiar with the concept of the Minister, and he'd seen photographs of Cornelius Fudge many times, but he'd never expected to come face to face with him. He didn't like Fudge's
politics much and had often made fun of him to Sirius over the morning newspaper. Fudge had been in office when Umbridge's werewolf laws went through, and while he hadn't backed them, he hadn't exactly fought them, either.

"Come in, come in," Fudge was continuing. "There's room for four or five, really. Professor Lupin, isn't it?"

Remus cleared his throat and let the others push their way in ahead of him.

"Lupin, Remus Lupin," he said. "We can certainly find another compartment, Minister."

"Not at all, don't be silly. This must be young Harry," Fudge said, all but pulling Harry into the small compartment. Draco and Neville had already squashed each other into the seat opposite, totally ignoring the political head of British Wizardry, and Padma seated herself next to Neville, elbowing him sharply when he and Draco didn't stop wrestling. Parvati had apparently wandered off, probably to find her Gryffindor companions.

"I'm bound for Hogsmeade, and I thought I might take the train up. So much more pleasant than floo travel, and it gives one time to get a bit of quiet work done," Fudge said. Remus gave it two seconds' thought and decided Fudge was, if nothing else, a first-rate liar in person. "You've been appointed Dark Arts professor, haven't you?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," Remus said, putting the slightest emphasis on the first two words. "It's quite exciting, really," he added, somewhat uncomfortably. "Draco, Neville, settle down or you'll be the first students ever to get a detention before the school year actually starts."

"Boys will be boys, eh?" Fudge asked. Harry perched on the bench next to Padma, which left Remus to share the other bench with Fudge.

"Only when absolutely necessary," Remus replied absently. "I hope your business in Hogsmeade isn't unpleasant."

"Not in the least, though I shall probably have a few rather tiresome meetings. I don't suppose you're staying in town?"

"No, up at the school. I do know people in town, though; Harry's godfather is living in the Three Broomsticks right now while he searches out a flat."

"Ah! I was under the impression he lived in London."

"Well, considering everything, he thought it best to be a bit closer to Harry," Remus said significantly. Fudge nodded and glanced at Draco.

"Of course, you haven't been properly introduced," Remus said. "Harry you've met; this is Draco Malfoy, of Hufflepuff -- "

"Ah! I was a Hufflepuff boy myself, you know!"

"Neville Longbottom of Gryffindor, who lives with Draco's aunt Andromeda -- "

"How d'you do," Neville said politely.

"And Padma Patil of Ravenclaw. Who'll have your job one day, I imagine," Remus said, grinning at her. She smiled back shyly.
"Quite a jolly band! Are you all looking forward to the new year?" Fudge inquired.

"Yes, Minister," Harry said. "We start new electives this year, and we get Hogsmeade visits."

"Ah yes!" Fudge said. "Lovely little town. Quite historic."

"It's the only Wizarding village left in Great Britain," Padma said.

"Sure, but that's not why I want to go," Neville said. "I want to see Honeyduke's."

Remus glanced at Harry, who looked as entranced as Neville did. Honeyduke's had been around when he was a boy, and always inspired the same reaction in children -- awe and a sort of covetous longing. In another year or two, the only thing that would inspire that kind of look would be girls -- or boys, he supposed, all things being equal. His gaze fell on Draco, who looked as though he was trying to hide some disappointment or other.

The door slid open then and Dobby appeared, arms stacked high with sweets and cauldron cakes.

"Dobby has brought snacks like Master Malfoy requested!" he announced, wobbling unsteadily into the compartment just as the train shrieked loudly and jerked into motion.

"By jove, they have relaxed the rules a bit if children are allowed to bring house-elves to school now," Fudge observed.

"What're you going to do with him, Draco?" Harry asked. "He can't live in your trunk all year again."

"Dunno. Maybe he can get a job in the kitchens? He's been socked, he's a free elf. I don't know why he insists on following me around. I only paid you through the end of summer, you know," he said to Dobby.

"He was a very good elf," Padma said. "You shouldn't let him go to just anyone, Draco."

"You know, Sirius might be able to use him," Harry suggested. "He's going to be living alone all year and he's not really that good a cook, and he never does his laundry. He'd pay his wage, too."

Dobby turned enormous, bulbous eyes on Harry. "Master Sirius...Black?" he asked, tone full of awe.

"Um, yeah," Harry said.

"Dobby would be in the employ of Master Sirius Black?"

"He's very nice, really," Harry said. Remus wondered for a moment why Dobby would want so much confirmation, and then it occurred to him that the Blacks had a certain reputation, above and beyond Sirius' fame as a handsome, wealthy bachelor.

Dobby drew himself up to his full height proudly. "Dobby would be proud to serve Master Sirius Black!" he proclaimed.

"I'll write to him when we get to school," Harry assured him.

"Er, but for now...maybe you could...find somewhere quiet and...go there," Draco said. Dobby obediently tucked himself under the bench and wrapped his arms complacently around his legs. He sat so still Remus wondered if he was breathing.
"That reminds me, Harry, I got you a birthday present," Padma said, digging in the bag at her feet. She produced a small, gaily-wrapped package and offered it to him.

"Hey, ta Padma, you didn't have to," Harry said, accepting it with pleasure.

"Well, it was a bit of a production. Mum and dad are not best pleased with any of my friends. Except Draco," she added, and Draco shot Harry a smug look. Remus' internal amusement leapt up a few notches. "Eventually I talked Dobby into getting it for me without telling on me to mum and dad."

"A sneakoscope!" Harry said, taking a small, top-shaped object out of the paper-wrapped box. "Cool!"

"Very useful things, when they work," Remus said. Harry stood it up on his palm and spun it experimentally. It kept turning in slow, lazy circles, whistling softly. "It all depends on how sensitive they are."

"How d'you mean?" Neville asked.

"Well, the spinning-top is powered by a certain form of energy put out by a charm that detects ill intentions -- it's the same basic principle as a foeglass, except that in this case the magic is much more active, not quite so passive and dependent upon the person carrying it. D'you know what a foeglass is?" Remus asked, and Neville shook his head.

He launched into an explanation of the theories behind the foeglass charm, more than happy to have an audience to share his information with. It was a good forty minutes before he realised that all four children were listening raptly and a few more had paused in the doorway to listen as well. Fudge was calmly reading some kind of legal brief near the window, and Dobby had crept out to sit on Remus' shoes.

"Er. So that's why a sneakoscope's charm is the most important part," he finished lamely. "And why the really professional ones are highly calibrated by experts."

"Have you ever used one?" Padma asked.

"Well, no," Remus admitted. "Most of the time when I traveled, I traveled light. I mean, you could use a sneakoscope, or you could just always assume that you're in danger, and keep a sharp eye out. An old friend of mine says constant vigilance is the key. And an alert mind, you know, is much easier to carry than a dozen amulets and sneak-detectors and that kind of thing."

"You're a born lecturer," Fudge said, looking at him over the edge of his paperwork. "I can see why Dumbledore hired you."

"Thank you, Minister," Remus replied. "Really, though, it's mostly the students -- they're a very agreeable audience."

At that point Harry and Neville broke out a pack of tarot cards (newly bought for Divinations class) and began some kind of furious card-game that Remus recognised as a distant variant on Egyptian Ratscrew. Padma placidly found a book and buried herself in it while Draco cheered Harry and Neville indiscriminately, depending on who was winning at any given moment. Remus decided Padma's example was probably a good one, and took a book about Macedonian hexwork out of his briefcase.

The time passed quickly enough that he'd nearly forgotten the presence of the Minister for Magic at his elbow until a quiet snore told him that the Minister had drifted off to sleep. He didn't blame
him; it was getting quite dark out.

Draco, who was gazing out the window, glanced over his shoulder at Remus.

"We must be nearly there, don't you think?" he asked. "Hard to tell in the fog."

"The fog's probably a sign," Remus replied. "Yes, I think -- "

He broke off as the train started to slow down.

"Grand! Time to put our robes on," Draco announced. "I'm starving, I can't wait for the feast -- "

"We can't actually be there yet," Remus said, putting out a hand to stop him. Padma and Neville looked at him, confused. Harry was asleep as well, head crooked in the corner of the compartment.

"Then why are we stopping?" Padma asked hesitantly.

Remus shook his head, listening intently. The pistons on the engine began to fall away, but the wind was howling against the glass and rain had begun to pelt down. Something felt wrong, quite wrong, and quite horribly right, as well. As though he'd done this before.

Neville opened the door a crack, stepping carefully around Harry, and put his head out.

"Nothing in the -- ow!" he said, as the train stopped entirely with a jerk, throwing him on top of Harry. Harry promptly woke and shoved Neville off him, and Remus caught the boy's wrist in his hand.

"Sit down," he ordered. Neville obeyed, looking startled. Even as he sat, the lights flickered and went out.

"Ow, Neville," Padma said. "Mind your feet."

"Sorry," Neville muttered.

"Have we broken down?" Harry asked sleepily.

"No," Remus said, never more sure of anything in his life.

"Remus, something's moving," Draco said worriedly, pointing to shifting shapes in the fog beyond the train. "Someone's coming aboard."

"Stay where you are," Remus ordered. "Don't move. Stay away from the window," he added. Ice was beginning to form in the corners of the glass. "I'm going to make sure everyone's all right."

He held out his hand and called up a small ball of green flame in his palm, one of his favourite tricks from school and a handy tool at any time. The flickering light illuminated four worried young faces and the still-sleeping form of Cornelius Fudge.

He opened the door with his other hand, wand tucked between two fingers, and stepped catlike into the corridor, nearly tripping over another student.

"Sorry," she gasped. "I was going to ask the driver what was going on -- "

"Get inside a compartment," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," she answered, brushing frizzy hair away from her face. A young man stumbled into
them and Remus, with a growing sense of horror, recognised Ron Weasley.

"Both of you. Right now," he said, opening the door of the compartment next to his own and pushing them into it. "Stay there."

That was apparently enough for the rest of the train car; the few heads that had been poking out to see where the light was promptly pulled back. Several doors slammed shut.

He walked warily down the corridor to the front of the car, pushing the door open and stepping out into the fog. Little tendrils swirled and dipped around him, but he couldn't see any more from here than Draco had seen through the window -- just dark shapes moving in the distance. Maybe they were nothing more than birds.

But that was a lie, and Remus knew it. And when he turned around in the doorway there was his proof, because a cloaked figure was standing at the other end of the train car, one grey, slimy hand resting on the door to a compartment.

The door to his compartment.

Time stretched out and seemed to fracture into fragments as Remus hurtled headlong back through the carriage, towards the impossibly tall, ghostly figure that was now opening the door and now reaching inside and now making the most horrible sucking noise as it inhaled --

"Expecto Patronum," he shouted, skidding to a stop in front of it. A silver dog leapt out of his wand ahead of him, and its huge jaws clamped ethereally around the Dementor's arm, throwing it sideways even as the shiny white teeth passed straight through it. The dog circled again, driving it towards the door, and Remus had the presence of mind to look around for any others that might have crept onto the train. A shadowy figure rushed at him from the direction he'd come, and he very nearly sent a patronus straight through the train's driver.

"What in bloody blue Asgard is going on?" the man asked.

"Dementors. Check the other compartments," Remus ordered, propping the door open with his hip. The man ran onwards and Remus was confronted with a scene out of his worst nightmares.

He dimly registered that the Minister was huddled in a corner, terrified; Padma and Neville were clinging to each other on one of the benches. Draco knelt on the floor and looked up at him with a ghostly-white face framed by pale hair that glowed green in the dwindling light.

Harry lay on the floor, arms and legs sprawled limp, head cradled in Draco's lap, glasses gone.

Remus dropped to his knees next to Draco and took Harry's face in his hands. He was breathing, thank Merlin, and even as Remus checked his eyes they were fluttering open.

Remus helped him sit up and lit the tip of his wand so that he could hold both of Harry's shoulders.

"What happened?" Harry asked. Remus fought the urge to pull the boy against him and cry; Harry was thirteen, too old to be cried over -- and Remus was supposed to be a teacher. Teachers didn't cry in front of their students. He fumbled in his pocket for a bar of chocolate.

"Eat this," he said, tearing it open and offering it to Harry with only slightly shaking hands. He broke off a piece for Draco, and gave the rest of the bar to Padma, who bewilderedly shared it with Neville and the Minister. "It'll help. Do you feel cold?"

Harry nodded, nibbling on the chocolate with wide eyes.
"What was that thing?" Draco asked.

"A Dementor," Remus said grimly. "One of the Dementors of Azkaban."

Surprisingly, the squeak of fear that followed the announcement came not from the children or Dobby -- still trembling under the bench -- but from Fudge.

"I was told they'd be guarding Hogwarts, but nobody mentioned they might search the train," Remus continued, still holding tightly to Harry's shoulder. "Is everyone all right?"

"The chocolate helps," Padma said in a small voice.

"Good. Minister..." Remus turned to him. "Do you know the patronus spell?"

Fudge shook his head, chocolate clenched in one hand.

"Bloody hell..." Remus rubbed his face. "All right. Eat the chocolate. If another one comes, everyone scream as loud as you can, right? I've got to make sure none of them got up to any more mischief in the other cars."

"Remus -- " Harry grabbed his wrist as he rose. He stopped, ready to stay at a word from Harry. The boy looked up at him, pleadingly, and then let go of his hand.

"You have to see if everyone is okay," he muttered.

"I can stay -- "

"We're all right," Neville said. "If another one comes, we'll scream."

"Right," Remus said. He gave Harry one last, measured look, and then went out. He had hundreds of children to look after now, after all.

"I'm not paid enough for this," he muttered, passing out into the fog and hurrying quickly into the next car down, where someone somewhere was crying.

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When Remus was gone, Draco got his hands under Harry's arms and helped him up onto the bench. Padma wrapped her arms unabashedly around Harry's neck; on the other side, Neville studied him with solemn eyes.

"What happened?" Neville asked. Draco seated himself next to Fudge, on the very edge of the bench and ready to leap up at any second.

"It just felt -- cold," Harry said. "So cold. And -- miserable."

"Like you'd never be happy again," Draco put in. Harry nodded. "We all felt that, didn't we?"

"I heard screaming," Neville said.

"Me too," Harry whispered. "And then I couldn't move, and everything went sort of...white around the edges..."

"You fell over," Draco said. "On me, mostly."

"Sorry."
"S'okay," Draco said. "And then...this big white thing came out of nowhere and knocked the Dementor over, and Remus came back." He glanced at Fudge, who was still holding the chocolate, watching them. "It isn't poisoned, you know," he said. "You should eat it."

This seemed to snap the man out of his stupor, and he looked down at the chocolate, then out at the window.

"Ah -- yes, this is a rather unexpected turn of events," he announced distractedly. "I'm afraid I can't be delayed -- very important business meeting in Hogsmeade -- you'll forgive me if I Apparate..."

They didn't have time to complain even if they'd been capable of it; with a loud bang and a puff of sulfur-scented air, the Minister for Magic disappeared.

"Coward," Padma said contemptuously.

"Too true," Draco agreed feelingly. "I was working up to ask him something important, too."

Padma slowly released Harry and sat back, finishing the slightly melted chocolate and licking her fingers.

"What were you going to ask him?" Neville asked. Padma shook her head at him. "It'll take our minds off -- that thing."

Draco looked morose. "Mum wouldn't sign my Hogsmeade form. I thought -- " he raised his voice over their stunned objections. "I thought the Minister might. I mean, he's the Minister for Magic, that's as good as a parent, isn't it?"

"Why won't your mum sign it?" Neville demanded.

"Says she thinks Hogsmeade'll distract me from my studies."

"She's bonkers!"

"Yeah, but she's probably right, this time," Draco sighed. "It is distracting and I can always use more time to study, you know how I am."

"Then we won't go either, will we?" Neville said, appealing to the other two. Harry and Padma exchanged a hesitant look. "Oi! TRAITORS!"

"No, it's just -- "

"It's okay," Draco said. "Really. Anyway, someone's got to go and bring back sweets and all. Really, it'll be fine."

They all jumped as the compartment door slid back again, but it was only Remus. He hesitated on the threshold.

"Where's the Minister gone?" he asked.

"He Apparated," Neville volunteered.

"Apparated? To the school? Good of him to -- "

"No," Harry said. "He Apparated to Hogsmeade."

"Whatever for?"
"Didn't want to be late to his meeting, he said," Padma put in.

Remus frowned, sitting down just as the train jerked to life and the lights flickered back on. He closed his hand, dousing the green flames.

"He left you here in the dark? Well, it's only what he's been doing to the country," Remus mused.
"All right, everyone feeling better now?"

"Yes," they chorused.

"Good. We're only ten minutes from Hogwarts at top speed, and I've sent an owl ahead. You," he said to Harry, "are going straight up to the infirmary."

"Aw, Remus, I'm fine -- "

"Be told, Harry," Remus said, in a severe voice that none of them but Harry had ever heard before. Remus didn't often step into Sirius' shoes, but when he did, he meant business.

"We'll come too," Neville said, glancing at Draco, who was still a little pale.

"That's just as well," Remus said. "You'd best get your robes out. I'm going to have to leave you -- I'll be wanted in the Great Hall."

"We'll miss the sorting," Harry said, but the protest had gone out of his voice.

"Boring, anyway," Padma said, studiously yawning. The train began to grind slowly to a halt, just as the sign for Hogsmeade Station passed their window.

They clattered out into the crowd of nervous students, all of whom were much quieter and more well-behaved than usual. The younger ones were huddled in a group around Hagrid, the groundskeeper, who looked even larger when surrounded by eleven-year-olds. The older children were filing into large carriages that waited on the road which wound from the train station up the hill to Hogwarts.

Padma stopped so suddenly that Harry nearly plowed into her.

"What's up?" Neville inquired, brushing past. "I'll save us a carriage!"

"All right, Padma?" Harry asked. He watched Remus climb into the frontmost carriage, and saw a brief flash of silver hair -- Dumbledore was sitting inside. Dobby, on orders from Draco, tottered after Remus officiously.

"I've never seen a Thestral before," Padma said, pointing to one of the spiked, horselike creatures that drew the carriages.

"How come she gets to see one and I don't?" Draco demanded. "I'm the only one now! AND the only one who's actually seen a real live dead person lying in a coffin."

"Come on, Draco," Neville said, rolling his eyes. He hauled open the door to one of the carriages and all but thrust Draco inside.

"It isn't fair!" Draco protested.

"It's not like we picked it, you know," Harry said.

The bickering over the Thestrals continued until they reached the school. Harry almost made it into
the Great Hall, but he couldn't quite duck away from Madam Pomfrey fast enough. She led them through the echoing hallways to the hospital wing, clucking over Harry like a hen with only one chick.

"Mr. Lupin wrote that you had a bad fall, is that so?" she asked, as she opened the door.

"He fell on me," Draco said, still aggrieved, then blanched when she turned and began fussing about him, too. Neville and Padma sat on a nearby bed and shared a chocolate frog as amused spectators.

"Dementors in the trains, I'm sure I don't know what the Ministry is thinking," she said, investigating Harry's eyes thoroughly and then pressing some strange metal device to Draco's chest, over his robes. "Well, you both look all right and there's no concussion. Let's just get you a nice restorative potion and send you down to the feast, shall we?"

"I don't need one, really," Harry protested, but she'd already vanished into the other room.

"Hey, before she comes back," Padma said. "I didn't get to show you until now. Look what I've got!"

She tugged at a thin gold chain around her neck, pulling it out from under her shirt. Dangling from the end was a tiny glass-and-gold hourglass, held in place by two or three rings of flat gold with odd inscriptions on them.

"It's...pretty?" Neville said.

"Is that what I think it is?" Draco demanded, scooting forward for a closer look. His face ended up about half a foot from her shirt, which was gaping open to allow the necklace out, and she gave him a gentle shove to bring his chin level with hers.

"Better," she said, and he blushed. "And yes. It's a time-turner."

"Really?" Neville asked. "I've never seen one."

"What's a time-turner?" Harry said.

"I got it from the Ministry so I could take more classes, catch up a bit on what I missed last year, that kind of thing," Padma said. "It's very top-secret. They only gave out two this year, I guess a Gryffindor got the other one. That's what I heard when I was getting mine, anyway. I had to sign all sorts of papers not to tell anyone about it."

All three boys looked at her.

"Well, none of them were hexed, and anyway you lot won't tell," Padma said. "Plus I had to promise not to misuse it."

"what's it do?" Harry asked, but Padma quickly shoved the necklace back under her shirt and sat up straight. A second later Madam Pomfrey came bustling back into the room.

"Drink up," she said, pouring out four helpings of an awful-looking green potion. "Then you may go down to the feast."

Harry and Draco immediately leapt into a competition to see who could finish theirs first, while Neville held his nose and tried to down it in a single gulp. Padma glanced around, made sure Pomfrey wasn't watching, and then poured hers out the window. From below came the stuttery
complaint of a bird nesting in the shrubbery.

"Now, off you go," Pomfrey said, herding them out the door. "And enjoy the feast!" she called after them, as they raced each other to the Great Hall.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

At two points in this chapter I have used dialogue verbatim from *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. In this instance, the text of Dumbledore's speech is taken with minor alterations from canon, and Hagrid's brief lecture on the Hippogriff is taken directly from canon.

"Balls, we have missed the Sorting and all the seats are taken," Harry said, when they arrived in the Great Hall. The last of the first-years was just making his way to the Slytherin table.

"Bad luck," Draco sighed, sitting down at the end of the Hufflepuff table next to the first-years. Padma found a couple of Ravenclaw girls who had saved her a seat, and Neville squeezed himself in on the other side of the first-years, next to Seamus Finnegan.

Harry, undeterred and unashamed, walked down to where Marcus Flint and most of the other Quidditch players were sitting with the sixth-years, elbowing his way in.

"Oi!" said an annoyed sixth. "Find your own seat!"


"Ta," Harry said. "What're you doing back here?"

Flint sneered. "Fumbled my NEWTs. Got to take the year again. Anyone going to say anything about it? Thought not."

"Shh," said Towler, a fifth-year who played Beater for the team. "Dumbly's talking."

"...nother year at Hogwarts!" Dumbledore was saying, standing at the lectern in front of the high table. "I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast."

The Slytherin Quidditch team, en masse, groaned. Dumbledore frowned slightly; behind him, Snape smiled.

"As many of you are aware -- particularly after their search of the Hogwarts Express -- our school is presently playing host to some of the Dementors of Azkaban Prison, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

Harry turned to glance at Draco and saw a Ravenclaw lean across the space between tables to give him a shove. A few other Hufflepuffs closed ranks around the blond boy.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," Dumbledore continued, "and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises -- or even Invisibility Cloaks," he added blandly. Harry grinned at him. "It is not in the nature of a Dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. Dementors are capable of seriously injuring even the innocent when their tempers are aroused. Fortunately, they have been banned
from entering school property, but I cannot speak to your safety from them -- or other dangers -- outside of the grounds."

Behind Dumbledore, Remus sat next to Snape with his hands folded on the table, looking pale and grave. Dumbledore turned to look at him. Harry wondered how much Remus' owl had said about what the Dementors had done on the train.

"On a happier note," Dumbledore continued, "I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year. First, Professor Remus Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

Remus stood and gave a hasty bow to a scattering of applause, mainly from the Weasleys and Harry's band of friends. Several Gryffindor girls were giggling with their heads together, Ginny at their centre. Most of the Slytherins in the immediate area were murmuring discontentedly: "Snape missed it again!" "He'll never get the job." "Dumbledore doesn't like him."

"In addition," Dumbledore said, spreading his hands to quiet the crowd a little, "Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, has chosen to retire in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. I am delighted to say that, after some discussion with the Board of Governors, his place will be filled by our own Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Hagrid, the enormous gamekeeper, stood with an abrupt jerk and gave a clumsy imitation of Remus' bow. Remus clapped him on the shoulder when he sat down again, then winced and shook out his hand to banish the sting.

"Now, with introductions out of the way, let me wish you a bright new year of studies," Dumbledore said. "And let the feast begin!"

Immediately the tables filled with food -- giant tureens of mashed potatoes, sides of beef and roasted chickens, overflowing bowls of bread, pitchers of pumpkin juice and cool iced water. Harry heaped his plate high, being in competition with boys and girls whose arms were much longer than his, and settled down to enjoy the meal, keeping one eye on Remus at the high table. He seemed to be doing all right, making conversation with Hagrid, and Harry felt a surge of pride for his adoptive father.

"So," Flint said, talking around a mouthful of turkey, "We're down seriously this year. We've got me for Keeper, Pipsqueak's bound to be out of practice in Seeking so you'd better find some time to make it up -- "

"I'll be fine," Harry replied, annoyed.

"Sure you will, tiny," Towler put in.

"Pucey's our only Chaser left, and Towler's a hell of a Beater but not good enough for two."

"Care to wager on that?" Towler asked, buttering his bread.

"Not the cup I'm not, but we'll have a contest sometime," Flint answered. "Tryouts are next Sunday."

"It's already Tuesday. That hardly gives people a week and a half to sign up!" Harry said, thinking of Draco.

"Long enough. No slackers on this team, right?" said Flint, which made Harry stifle a grin. Marcus
Flint was the laziest Quidditch player he'd ever met. "We'll be looking for two new Chasers and a Beater. Anyone got recommendations?"

"Blaise Zabini flies all right, but I've no clue how he plays," Harry said. "I imagine Colin Creevey'll try for something or other."

"Cricket? He's smaller than you are! If he tried to bat a Bludger he'd fall off his broomstick," Towler said with a laugh.

"Sharp though," Harry answered. "And he's a quick little bug. Are all the teams doing tryouts?"

Flint nodded. "Sure, we're doing a big mass thing, I arranged it with the other captains. Way more embarrassing that way," he added with a chuckle. "Oliver Wood likes Neville Longbottom for Beater, you know."

"Good, 'cause he's pants at it and that'll make it easier on us," Harry replied. "Speaking of flying, have you seen the Firebolt yet?"

The conversation rapidly changed to the merits of the Firebolt, the history of the company, the personal preferences of the players, and several jokes about who liked what kind of wood. Harry listened, actually getting many of the jokes for the first time, and even joined in on the chorus when the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs both broke into a rude song about the Holyhead Harpies and their lovely soft bristles.

Betwys Beddau had been fun, and London had been interesting, but Hogwarts really was the best.

***

It took Remus until after dinner was over to corner Snape. McGonagall had passed word down the High Table that there was to be a gathering for punch and light dessert in the professors' common room after dinner; Remus finally found Snape folded into a chair by the empty fireplace with a cup of punch in his hands.

"May I sit with you?" he asked politely, indicating the other chair. Snape gestured to it dismissively. "I was wondering if I might have a word before classes begin tomorrow."

"Oh?" Snape asked, disinterestedly.

"Listen, I know we haven't always been on the best of terms and you and Sirius are -- well, I won't try to come up with a word for that -- but I think we've managed to reach a sort of detente in the last few years, don't you?" Remus asked.

"A detente?" Snape said scornfully, raising an eyebrow.

"A truce? I don't approve of the way Sirius treated you at school, I never did..."

"Nor, if I recall correctly, did you -- "

"-- do much to stop it, I know," Remus interrupted. "And I'm sorry for that. Honestly, though, we're both adults; we're going to see a fair bit of each other what with the -- potion and both of us living in the castle and all. I'd like to put that behind us, if you will," he continued. "I think we have a lot in common, Severus. I want to make a clean start with you."

He offered his hand. Snape looked down at it, then back up at him. "Nymphadora didn't put you up to this, by any chance, did she?"
Remus looked perplexed. "Do you think I'm not capable of wanting to make amends myself?"

"It has more to do with her annoying habit of wanting me to get on with everyone," Snape said, then sighed and shook his hand lifelessly. "A fresh start, as you say -- but don't expect we shall be great friends or that I'm going to help you with your lesson plans or any of that."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Remus said drily. "That's very decent of you, Severus."

"Yes, well, don't let word get out," Snape replied.

"That you're a decent human being? My lips are sealed. If you'll excuse me..."

"Ah yes. Mingling," Snape said, his lip curling in distaste. Remus picked up his cup and wandered back over to the cauldron of punch, where Madam Hooch and the Headmaster were discussing the events on the Hogwarts Express.

"Our hero of the hour!" Hooch said, smiling at him. "We were just saying how wonderfully pithy your owl was."

"Mr. Lupin has rarely been at a loss for words in his life," Dumbledore added.

"Dementors aboard train; students endangered. All well, proceeding to Hogwarts. Medical attn. for Potter. Signed RJL," Hooch repeated dramatically.

"Yes, well. Therein lies a mystery, you know," Remus said. "Has the Headmaster informed you that Cornelius Fudge was on the train?"

"Was he?" McGonagall asked. "Why would the Minister for Magic want to take the Hogwarts Express?"

"I've no idea," Remus said. "He said it was because he found the train less stressful than flooing straight to Hogsmeade, which is obviously a line, but I can't think of any other explanation. After the Dementors came on board he Apparated away pretty quickly."

"Perhaps he was coming up early for the Azkaban inspection," Flitwick said, picking up a discarded Daily Prophet and folding it so that the headline on the back was visible. "He's supposed to be having a look at the new safety features on the prison."

"Can't imagine that'll be much fun, if he's so skittish around Dementors," Remus said.

"I'm skittish around Dementors. Horrible creatures," said Madam Pince.

"Well, good thing we have a big strapping Defence professor to keep them at bay, eh?" Professor Sinistra said, winking at Remus. "I'm off, children; Mercury's leaving retrograde tonight and I always like to watch that. See you all at lunch."

"I think I will slip away too, actually." Remus said, finishing his punch. "Bit of a long day for me. Besides, I'd better go make sure Dobby hasn't utterly destroyed my belongings -- I left him unpacking my rooms, but he can get a bit overenthusiastic."

"Sleep well, Professor," McGonagall said, putting a slight emphasis on his title.

"Thank you, Deputy Headmistress, I plan to," he answered with a grin, leaving the common room and pausing in the hallway to get his bearings briefly. Then, with the confidence born of seven years' sneaking around the castle, he made his way to the rooms he'd been assigned, near the
entrance to Gryffindor's dormitory tower.

He found Dobby in the hallway outside his room, unloading an enormous chair from the old dumbwaiter.

"Evening, Mr. Howson," he said, nodding to the ghost of the old porter, who was directing Dobby bossily. "How are you?"

"Little Lupin!" Howson crowed, tipping his hat. "Fine, sir, and yourself?"

"Getting along. Good to see you're still about the place. Dobby, what are you doing?"

"He's bringing you some proper furniture," boomed a voice from the doorway to his quarters, and Sirius' head poked around the doorway. "Come on then, I didn't sneak all the way here from the Shrieking Shack just to get caught and tugged around by my earlobe by McGonagall."

Remus grinned and took the chair from Dobby, carrying it effortlessly into his rooms.

"Right, elf," Sirius said, "Get ye to the kitchens for a day or two. I'll call when I need you."

Dobby bowed so low his nose banged on the hallway's stone floor before he vanished. Remus shut the door after him and allowed Sirius to kiss him hello before inspecting his rooms.

"Bit poky," Sirius said professionally, looking around. "But then you did always like poky."

"I don't expect to spend much time here -- did you have Dobby refurnish it? My books aren't even unpacked!"

"I just had him take the broken stuff away. And the ugly stuff," Sirius added.

"Sirius, your definition of ugly..."

"Well, I was tired of looking for flats in Hogsmeade. I still haven't found a proper one. There's a nice house out near the fens, though. It's rather big, actually, but -- "

"How big is big?" Remus inquired, amused.

"Three bedrooms, plus a library and a study plus all the usual rooms. But it's a good investment! I can fix it up and then rent it out when or if we move back to London. And it's got a lovely big gardens..."

"One wonders how anyone ever mistook you for straight," Remus said, reaching for a box of books on the floor. "First you redecorate my rooms, now you're going on about lovely gardens. Oof!"

His muscles protested and he nearly dropped the box; Sirius caught one edge and helped him move it onto the table.

"Raw animal magnetism," Sirius answered.

"And your horrible taste in art. Listen, I need to talk to you about Harry."

"No you don't," Sirius said, wrapping one arm around his waist. "We can talk about Harry tomorrow."

"Sirius..." Remus pushed him off, gently. "You know Dumbledore said there were Dementors guarding the grounds?"
"Sure, that's why I went underground when I came in. Did you know the east tunnel collapsed? Looks like it's been years -- "

"They searched the train. One of them attacked Harry."

Sirius froze. "What?"

"He's all right, just a little bruised up. But he passed out, and I thought -- "

"Is he in the hospital wing?"

"No -- Sirius -- " Remus grabbed his arm as he made for the door. "He's fine. Well, probably not completely fine, but he'll be much less fine if you go bursting into his common room..."

"Has the nurse seen to him?"

"Yes, all right? I made sure she checked him out. When I left the Great Hall he was having a grand time and eating ice cream."

"You didn't tell me sooner?" Sirius demanded.

"He's all right, Sirius! I only thought you ought to know, and I didn't want you to panic, which you're clearly going to do anyway..." he tugged Sirius back from the door and gave him a gentle push onto a sofa near the big windows.

"You're sure he's all right?"

Remus crossed his arms. "Do you think I'd have left him alone if I thought otherwise? The boy has to preserve some kind of respect with his friends, though. I promise, Sirius."

"Okay," Sirius said, looking calmer. "Thank you for telling me."

"You're welcome," Remus said, properly interpreting Thank you for telling me as I'm sorry I am insane. "Listen, why don't you Padfoot up tomorrow morning and you can come to breakfast with me and see for yourself."

"Do you have him for class tomorrow?"

"N...o," Remus said, checking his schedule. "No third-year classes at all tomorrow, I won't have Harry in a class until Monday. But if you want to come along, we can have dinner in Hogsmeade after my last class. And this weekend you can show me this house you like so well."

Sirius looked placated, though still a little worried.

"And you can stay here tonight if you like," Remus added, tempting him. "Bet you always wanted to have a passionate affair with a Hogwarts Professor."

Sirius smiled at that and jerked his head at the box of books on the table. "Want help unpacking?"

***

"All right, gentlemen," Padma said, sitting at the Hufflepuff table the next morning. Harry, a very sleepy-looking Neville, and Draco were all eagerly eating breakfast while Denbigh, head of the kitchen elves, waited on the early-rising foursome. "You know what time it is."

Draco put his fork down and groaned. "Index cards?"
"Index cards!" Padma said with relish, taking a handful of white cards out of her book bag. "Who's got what when and with whom?"

"Who wants to know?" Harry asked, but he took a card anyway and began writing down his schedule. "You lot all have Arithmancy tomorrow afternoon, don't you?"

"No, I've got Runes," Padma said. "Well, both. You know, it's sort of silly really, I'm not even going to be using the time-turner all that much."

"Not for classes," Harry agreed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Padma, you have a device which allows you to travel in time. Do you have any conception of how much mischief we can get up to this year with a time traveling accomplice? It boggles the mind!"

"It boggles your little mind, I'm sure," she replied with a sniff and a teasing grin. "Honestly, I can't use it much, I think they monitor it or something."

"Padmaaaaaa..."

"Maybe a little," she allowed. "But not much!"

"All right, all right."

"How'd they even let you have one?" Draco asked, writing industriously and with many ink-blottings. "I mean -- after last year..."

Harry saw Neville kick him under the table. Draco winced. Padma's lips were pressed into a thin line.

"I have to catch up," she said determinedly.

"Yeah, but I mean, not about classes, but -- ow! Neville! Ow! Harry!"

"Don't mind him," Neville said. "You're fine, aren't you?"

"Sure," Padma agreed. "Done with your schedule?"

"It's a thing of beauty," Neville said, propping it next to his plate. "We have Dark Arts together, don't we Harry?"

"I think so," Harry said. "Yep. Dark Arts and Divination. You should have taken Divs, Draco."

"No thanks. Besides, it means I have Friday afternoon off," Draco answered. "Listen, people are showing up; you guys had better go before the Prefects get stroppy."

"Sure thing," Harry said, sliding off the bench and crossing the aisle to the Slytherin table. Neville climbed up over the table with simian agility and settled into a seat at Gryffindor just as Percy Weasley, the most officious Prefect in the school, appeared in the doorway. This year, in addition to his Prefect's insignia, he had a Head Boy badge pinned to his collar.

The hall filled up quickly as Harry finished his breakfast and double-checked his schedule. Cricket Creevey brought up his brother Dennis to be introduced; Dennis had gone into Gryffindor and was a little anxious about fraternising with Slytherins. Harry privately decided Creeveys were genetically disposed to making things difficult for themselves.
A shriek of glee near the doorway made him look up, then stand up to try and see over everyone else, who were also standing up. He could see Remus' head bobbing towards the High Table, but surely Remus wasn't causing the commotion --

All became clear as Remus mounted the steps to the High Table's dais, followed by an enormous black dog who came easily up to his hip. Padfoot, tongue lolling, tail-wagging, saw him to his chair and then leapt down, avoiding the many hands outstretched to pat him and making a beeline for the Slytherin table.

"Hello, dog," Harry said with a laugh, allowing Padfoot to lap his cheek affectionately.

"He isn't yours, is he Harry?" someone asked.

"Nah, he belongs to R -- Professor Lupin," Harry answered, as Padfoot leaned past him to steal a helping of bacon from the table. He rubbed Padfoot's jowls affectionately. The enormous dog finished the bacon in record time, then sniffed Harry all over, wagged his tail, and trotted away again, pausing briefly to nudge Draco with his nose. Draco grinned at Harry, but Harry noticed that Dumbledore and Snape were both looking distinctly unamused.

***

Harry's first class was History of Magic, which was boring on several levels; Binns was of the old school (the very old school; he was a ghost) and didn't believe in making learning interesting. Perhaps he really believed history was interesting on its own merits, but his lectures, if possible, made it drier than it had been to start with. There was also the fact that Harry had read several wizarding history books, so some of it wasn't even new information. He spent most of the class doodling an intricate design in the corner of his desk and wondering what Remus was up to.

Remus was not having quite as placid a morning as Harry; after leaving the Great Hall slightly ahead of the crowd, in order to have a few minutes with his classroom before the students began to arrive, he had bid Sirius goodbye, calmly walked to the faculty washroom next to the Defence classroom, and been violently ill from nerves. Twice.

By the time he washed his face and drank enough water from his cupped hands to kill the acid in his throat, he was nearly late. He arrived to find a half dozen seventh-year students already unpacking their quills and books in the expectation of a full morning of teaching. God, seventh years. Too young to have stopped testing boundaries, too old to punish easily, and far too cocky to reason with. He remembered seventh year all too well.

There were two mixed-house classes for seventh years; not enough of any given House wanted to take Dark Arts for him to make a full classroom from them. He had one this morning, for the whole morning, which was clearly some kind of sadism.

Well, at least he had a place to begin.

"Good morning," he said. "My name is Professor Lupin, as you know, and I will be in charge of your education this year. I understand your course of study may have been a little...irregular."

There was a smattering of laughter from the back of the room. Remus smiled.

"So I'm going to make sure that you get those gaps filled in, as well as preparing you for your NEWTs. You are all planning on taking a NEWTs in Defence? How many of you plan to go out for Magical Law Enforcement?"

Most of the hands went up. Remus nodded.
"Very well then. Quills away and books closed, please; pack up your bags, as we will not be returning to the classroom today."

The students all looked at each other, startled.

"Well, come on then, you haven't got all day," Remus continued.

"We normally have a test on the first day," a shy-looking Ravenclaw said, blushing immediately when he made eye-contact.

"What makes you think you won't?" he said, and walked out of the classroom. Behind him there were hurried rustling noises as they tried to strap up their bags and catch up. When the first few appeared at his elbow, he began asking questions.

"What are three ways of disposing of an Ashwinder egg?" he asked. "Come on, it's all right. I'm not talking to myself, you know."

"Uh, freezing, burying in sand, and, uh..." a tall Hufflepuff fumbled on the third.

"A containment charm," another supplied.

"Very good. Who can name the four categories of Dark potions?"

"Acquisitive, Manipulative --"

"-- Unforgivable, and Invasive."

"Hey, I was going to say those!" complained the boy who'd started the list.

"No interrupting, you're all big kids, you know better," Remus said, pushing open the side-door that let out onto the Hogwarts grounds. A group of startled-looking first years were learning to fly broomsticks off to the right. He led the Sevenths down and across the steep slope, towards a clearing near the lake. As long as he kept them off their footing, they couldn't kick back...

"Where are we going?" someone asked.

"I like the fresh air," Remus replied. "Here we are. All right," he said, stopping on level ground and turning to face the breathless Sevenths. "I know Professor Tonks drilled you in duelling last year -- how many of you were in the Duelling Club?"

Every hand went up.

Remus grinned. This might be fun after all...

***

Following his Charms class, Harry had a free afternoon and he knew everyone else did too; he laid in wait outside McGonagall's classroom for Draco to come out. When the rest of the Hufflepuffs passed by, Harry poked his head in and found Draco still sitting at his desk, working. McGonagall was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey!" Harry called. "C'mon!"

"Can't," Draco replied, half-turning.

"Sure you can, it's our first day," Harry said, walking down the centre aisle. "You can't have that
much homework already. We're all going to go to the Defence classroom and play pranks on Remus' students so they learn proper respect for their professor. It'll be fun!"

"Nah," Draco said. "You go on. I've got remedials."

"What?" Harry asked. "Remedials on your first day back? McGonagall isn't merciful, is she?"

"Well, I sort of signed up for it," Draco said reluctantly. "I mean, I was middle of the class last year because of Transfiguration, I want to be top of class this year. It's important now, you know."

"So I'll help you, why do you want to spend more time in a classroom?"

"McGonagall says she thinks she knows how to help. It's fine, Harry, go on. See you at dinner, okay?"

"You're welcome to stay, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall's voice behind him. Harry stiffened. It was instinctive -- he swore he'd seen Sirius do it once or twice. "You could use a few extra hours on your diction."

"Ah -- no thanks -- Professor," Harry said, turning around and backing away slowly. "I'll just -- go -- to -- my...common room."

He fled with a backwards glance at Draco, who didn't look as miserable as Harry would have been in his shoes.

Padma and Neville should have been coming out of the free-study class in the library, but when Harry arrived only Neville was there.

"Where's Draco?" Neville asked.

"Where's Padma?" Harry asked.

"Is it just us? Padma's doing extra tutoring to get up to speed on what she missed. She says it'll only be a month."

"Draco's doing remedials in Transfigs."

"Again? It must be some kind of disorder."

"I dunno what it is, but he seems to like it. Come on. We can still spy."

Harry and Neville crept towards the Dark Arts classroom by slinking along the walls and, once, taking refuge in an empty room on the first floor.

"You stand guard," Harry whispered. "Then I'll stand guard and you can have a turn."

"Should've brought your invisibility cloak," Neville sighed.

"Takes all the fun out of it," Harry said. "It's fine in a -- you know, a greater cause, but when it's sneaking for the sake of sneaking, invisibility's boring."

The classroom door was open just slightly, and Harry knelt down and pushed it a little until he could see inside, his head just past the doorjamb. Remus was pacing back and forth at the front of the class.

"So, the theory behind this is -- yes --"
"Brocklehurst, sir. The theory of equative properties states that the force of magic in a given object is reduced in efficiency by the same amount as a Muggle object in high magical fields."

Remus had moved out of sight now, though it sounded like he was walking past the windows. Harry narrowed his eyes at Elaine Brocklehurst. He had yet to forgive her for helping to dye Neville green in their first year. Perhaps a croak-throat hex...

"And what are the implications of this, Mr. Diggory?"

"Magic meant to interact on a normal basis with Muggles must be slightly stronger than magical items meant to remain in a magical environment, Professor."

"Yes, we all know that," Remus said, sounding much closer now. Harry had just about fixed his wand on Brocklehurst's neck. "What I mean to ask is, with an eye to theoretical experimentation, what can we learn from bringing Muggle objects into a magical field?"

There was a sudden thump. Harry had a brief vision of Remus' newly-shined shoes before all he saw was stars. He tumbled backwards into Neville, who also fell over. The door had slammed shut, directly on his nose.

He sat up slowly, rubbing the tip of his nose where the wood had knocked him backwards. Behind him, Neville pushed himself upright.

"He slammed the door on me!" Harry said, outraged. "My nose is bleeding!"

"He's not half mean as a professor," Neville observed, laughing. "He's got your number right enough, Harry. Serves us right for spying."

Harry, pride and nose both still smarting, stood up and gave Neville a hand up too. "Come on, let's go steal some snacks from the kitchen and plot our revenge."

"He is a professor, Harry," Neville said, slightly apprehensive. "And you did deserve it, you know."

"Maybe," Harry allowed. "But he shouldn't get away with it."

Neville rolled his eyes and tickled the pear at the entrance to the Hogwarts kitchens. "Yes, how dare a professor escape punishment for putting you in your place, Harry Potter."

***

Thursdays, Harry supposed, were going to be outdoors sort of days.

He had Herbology in the morning, a double-class with Ravenclaw, and then in the afternoon he and Draco both had Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid. He knew the gigantic gamekeeper well enough to know that Care of Magical Creatures was bound to be...interesting. No one, so far, had been able to get their Monster Book of Monsters open, and most of them had been forced to lock it in a box or tie it shut with various shoelaces and belts. Draco had tied his up with string; it had gnawed itself free and gone on to eat two pairs of socks before he'd been able to get it under control again. All through breakfast that morning he kept glancing apprehensively at his bag, which was moving as the Monster Book inside rattled around restlessly. Neville was gloating just a little that he'd decided not to take the class.

"I'd kill anything I was supposed to care for, anyway," he said. "Dunno how Trevor's survived this long. He's a very hardy toad."
Herbology wasn't really an outdoors class, but it felt like it; all that time in the humid, stuffy greenhouses meant that Harry and Padma showed up to the Great Hall damp and tired -- and not all that interested in lunch after a morning of squeezing various pods and studying diverse saps.

"Ready to go, then?" Draco said, shouldering his bag as lunch ended. "Maybe Hagrid'll let us leave our books with him."

"Doubt it," Harry replied. "See you in Ancient Runes, Padma!"

It was nice to get out of the castle after lunch and stroll down through the grounds to Hagrid's hut near the forest. It was a clear day, slightly windy, and the grass was still wet underfoot, dampening their shoes and the edges of their robes. Hagrid was outside, a cluster of students already gathered around him. Harry heard Theo's voice drift back on the wind.

"...open them!" the Slytherin was saying, sounding injured.

"Yeh haf ta stroke their spines!" Hagrid replied. "Din' anyone get theirs open?"

Harry reached into his bag and stroked the spine on his Monster Book of Monsters, unbuckling the binding around it as he did so.

"I did," he said with a smirk, taking the book out of his bag. It fell open in his hand, making little purring noises.

"Me too," Draco chimed in, fumbling a little with his. Theo looked murderous.

"See? Gen'le as can be," Hagrid said, taking Harry's book in his huge hands and showing it to Theo. It growled a little and made a half-hearted snap at the boy's face. "All right, yehs, put 'em away for now an' follow me!"

"Show-off," Theo muttered as he passed Harry, who smiled serenely and fell into step behind the other Slytherins, just ahead of the Hufflepuffs. To his surprise, Padma appeared at his elbow.

"Did I miss anything?" she asked breathlessly.

"I thought you had Charms!" Draco said, surprised. "Don't Ravenclaws and Gryffindors get Magical Creatures on Fridays?"

"Sure, but Friday I'm in Divs with you," Padma said. She hooked her thumb under the little golden chain around her neck, and Draco's eyes widened. "I'd rather have a busy Thursday and be able to sleep a bit on Friday, so I got permission to take class on Thursdays."

"We have to talk about that -- "

"Don't say it!" Padma said, clapping her hand over Harry's mouth. Then she blushed and pulled back. "We're not supposed to talk about it, remember?"

Harry didn't reply; they'd reached a small paddock at the very edge of the forest, beyond which a clearing cut a swath through the trees. Grazing in the clearing was a herd of what looked like horses, but horses with massively misshapen heads and shoulders. One of them had been cut out of the herd and was serenely strolling around the paddock itself, stopping occasionally to inspect a post or a bit of interesting wildlife.

Up close, Harry could see that it wasn't a horse at all; what he'd taken for deformed shoulders were furled wings. Instead of a normal horse's neck and head, the creature had an elongated neck
covered in soft downy feathers, and the head of some kind of bird of prey -- a hawk, maybe an eagle. Its beak looked razor-sharp, and followed the colouration of the rest of the animal: deep steel grey with white dapples. As they approached, it turned its head sharply to reveal a large, brilliant orange eye.

"Look at its hooves," Draco whispered. Harry looked down. Each hoof was cloven, with a talon above it, and looked dangerous enough to kill.

There was also a thick leather collar around its neck, attached to a chain which was hooked on a simple locking ring screwed into one of the posts. Hagrid unhooked the chain and held it in his massive hands, standing on the other side of the fence from the students, who were all leaning on the wooden crossbeams, looking at the animal curiously. It looked back.

"This," Hagrid said proudly, "Is Buckbeak. He's a Hippogriff."

"Oh, wow!" Padma whispered, looking entranced. Harry glanced at her, then turned to Draco; he was watching her too.

"Now, firs' thing yeh gotta know abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud," Hagrid continued. "Yeh always wait fer the hippogriff ter make the firs' move. Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt."

In demonstration, Hagrid reached into his pocket and took out a sizable dead rat. Amid cries of "oh, gross!" he threw it into the air and the hippogriff leapt upwards with a flutter of its wings, neatly catching the rat between talon and hoof. It ripped it in half with its other talon and commenced eating it happily.

"So," Hagrid said, turning back to them and rubbing his hands. "Who's first then?"

Everyone looked apprehensive. Harry saw Theo smirking back at him out of the corner of his eye, and was about to volunteer when Padma stepped up onto the lowest bar of the paddock fence.

"I'll go," she said. Draco tugged on her sleeve, but Padma gently shook him off and climbed over the fence.

"Padmer! Good on yeh," Hagrid said proudly, as the rest of the class muttered about what a Ravenclaw was doing in a Slytherin-Hufflepuff class. "Now. Stand there, and remember not to blink too much. Hippogriffs don't trust yeh if yeh blink too much..."

Harry saw Padma immediately blink, then wince. Buckbeak stood very still, studying her with his keen orange eyes.

"I can't look," Draco said, both hands covering his face. "She's going to die."

"She's not going to die, nobody dies at Hogwarts anymore," Harry said, but he knew how unconvincing he sounded.

"There yeh are. Now bow," Hagrid said, one hand on Padma's back. She bowed deeply, her braid falling over one shoulder, and stopped herself from flicking it back when she stood up. Buckbeak sidled back a step.

"Easy now, easy..."

Padma took a step forward, boldly, and bowed again. This time, Buckbeak screeched a little, but
after a moment, when Padma didn't move, he bowed back.

"Righ', now yeh can touch 'im," Hagrid gave Padma a slight push forward, and she slowly stretched out her hand to touch his beak.

"It's warm," she said, startled. Buckbeak closed his eyes as she stroked the fluffy feathers just below where his beak ended.

"Yeh like a ride?" Hagrid said. Padma nodded, entranced. "Righ' then..."

He gestured to Buckbeak and the hippogriff knelt on his front legs, extending both wings. Hagrid gave her a slight boost as she put her foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted herself lightly onto his back.

"Where do I hold on?" she asked, and Hagrid grinned.

"Anywhere yeh can!" he said, giving Buckbeak a slap on the rump. Most of the students shrieked as his wings suddenly beat the air and the hippogriff leapt into a running start. Padma looked like she was smiling, but it was hard to tell; her hands were both gripping the long, durable-looking feathers on the back of Buckbeak's neck. Just before reaching the end of the paddock, Buckbeak gave a second mighty leap and pumped his wings furiously, while Padma whooped and clung tight. Harry watched in awe as the hippogriff got fully airborne and pulled into a hairpin curve around the paddock. The other hippogriffs in the clearing looked up and screamed encouragement.

It didn't look like a comfortable ride; Harry watched Padma's braid bounce up and down as she was rocked by the beating of the wings just behind her hips. He couldn't see her face, but her shouts didn't sound like they were in fear.

Buckbeak circled the paddock and dove suddenly, pulling his legs up as he skimmed the clearing ground. Just before he would have collided with the fence, he swung upwards slightly, then crashed down into the paddock with all four feet going.

When he finally stopped, Padma half-slid from his back and staggered towards Hagrid. Her usually tidy hair was windblown and wispy, but she looked ecstatic.

"She didn't die!" Draco said, in a tone of utter disbelief. Harry laughed.

"That was brilliant!" she called, running back to the fence. "I nearly fell off like a dozen times!"

"Awrigh', everyone around to the clearing," Hagrid said, gesturing them towards the other hippogriffs. The rest of the class, reassured by Padma's success, began slowly approaching the animals, bowing so often that Harry, who could see the whole clearing, nearly laughed. He grabbed Draco and pointed to an enormous black hippogriff that nobody else had approached yet.

"Let's take that one," he said. "Hey Pansy!"

Pansy Parkinson looked around.

"You partner with Padma!"

Pansy looked put out -- she'd been gesturing at Millicent Bulstrode to be her partner -- but still obeyed, walking over to where Padma was once more bowing to Buckbeak.

Harry approached the enormous black hippogriff, trying not to blink, and bowed slowly. Next to him, Draco followed suit. Its bright green eyes flicked back and forth between them, and then it
bowed low. Harry put out a hesitant hand and stroked its beak. Draco touched the feathers below its eye.

"They're not so scary up close," Harry said calmly.

"Speak for yourself," Draco replied. As if to prove his point, the hippogriff jerked backwards with a start.

"That one's a bit testy," Hagrid said. "Come over an' try Buckbeak, Padmer's gentled him a treat."

Harry and Draco joined Padma and Pansy, who were looking uneasily at each other over Buckbeak's shoulders as they scratched his wing joints. Harry hung back while Draco bowed, received his bow in turn, and was allowed to come closer.

"That was some good flying," he said. Buckbeak's eyes rolled and he pulled away, nearly knocking Pansy over. Draco froze, startled. Padma stepped backwards while Pansy ran for the comfort of the paddock fence.

"Bow again," Hagrid said, looking worried. Draco bowed. Buckbeak whistled, then bowed.

"There's a good -- hoo!" Draco leapt deftly backwards as Buckbeak turned and snapped.

"One more try," Hagrid said encouragingly. Draco put out his hand and Buckbeak allowed him to smooth over some ruffled feathers on his neck. For a few seconds, all was well.

"That's better," Draco said. At the sound of his voice, Buckbeak lashed out again with his hooves, and this time Draco couldn't pull away in time. He went over backwards, knocked down by a blow from a wing, and cried out when Buckbeak's talon ripped into his arm. The other hippogriffs crowed, and most of the students ran for the relative shelter of the paddock.

Hagrid darted forward with surprising speed for a man his size and pulled Draco away from the flailing Buckbeak, who looked like he'd enjoy trampling Draco underfoot. Draco himself was curled into a ball around his arm and had to be dragged a little before Hagrid could pick him up. Hagrid turned, Draco held upright in one arm, and smacked Buckbeak in the beak. Surprisingly, the hippogriff merely snorted and trotted off.

"Class dismissed," Hagrid roared. Everyone fled except Harry and Padma, who waited for Hagrid to get clear of all the hippogriffs before running forward.

"Ow ow ow ow ow," Draco was whimpering, trying to walk as he was half-carried, half-dragged to the fence. Hagrid leaned him up against a post. Both teacher and student were white-faced, Hagrid with worry, Draco with pain.

"We got ter get yeh to the hospital wing," Hagrid said. "Can yeh walk?"

"No -- if we go they'll tell mum," Draco gasped.

"Draco! Now is not the time to worry about your bloody mother!" Padma shouted. A couple of the hippogriffs screamed agreement.

"No no no..." Draco gulped a deep breath. Padma rolled her eyes, took out her wand, and tapped it against his forehead with a muttered "Ibuprofi!"

He sagged backwards.
"Thanks," he said, breathing a little easier.

"No problem."

"If they tell mum, she's on the Board of Governors," he continued, still breathless. "She'll get Hagrid in trouble. Plus she'll have Mr. Macnair come after Buckbeak. My fault, my fault..."

"It wasn't, I saw," Harry said. "He attacked you for no reason."

"Nah, I scared him," Draco answered. "Just, okay -- you know any healing charms?"

"We're taking you to the hospital wing," Padma insisted. "We'll -- we'll say you fell down some stairs."

"And gashed his arm open?" Harry asked.


"She's a sharp 'un," Hagrid said to Harry, as Draco protested that he could walk. All four of them made their way slowly back to Hogwarts, where Madam Pomfrey was standing on the steps, shading her eyes.

"What happened here?" she said. The rest of the class was gathered around her. "Merlin, did one of those hippogriffs maul the boy?"

"I saw it!" Pansy said shrilly. "It knocked me over too!"

"It did not, Parkinson," Harry said. "Draco fell," he added to Madam Pomfrey. "And -- and cut his arm on a sharp root."

"All right, everyone run along," the mediwitch said, shooing the rest of the class off. "Potter, Patil, you'd better come with me..."


Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out, landing squarely in Padma's arms.

"Wow, where's Creevey and his camera when you want him?" Harry asked, as Padma staggered under his weight.

***

"Well," said Pomona Sprout lightly, "never let it be said that Hufflepuffs aren't determined, at any rate."

Draco, sitting on a bed in the hospital wing, set his jaw and rubbed his arm, which had been wrapped in white bandage. "I fell," he repeated.

"Of course you did, dear," she replied. "After the hippogriff cut your arm open almost to the bone. I would too."


"It was," Harry and Padma chorused in support. Madam Pomfrey looked disapproving.
"Ah, Headmaster," Professor Sprout said, as Dumbledore appeared in the doorway. "We were hoping you could have a talk with young Malfoy here."

"Of course," Dumbledore replied, smiling at Draco. "Humbug?"

Draco took the small peppermint sweet, putting it in the pocket of his ripped school robe.

"Now then. We're having lovely weather for this time of year, don't you think?" Dumbledore continued. Draco blinked. "I hear Puddlemere United played last Sunday; aren't they your team?"

Draco stared at him. "Um, yes...sir..."

"Mine too. I hear their Seeker rides a Nimbus two thousand one; a very good broomstick -- "

"Headmaster," Professor Sprout said, sternly.

"Hmm?" Dumbledore turned to look at her.

"A talk about his injury," she prompted. He gave her a small smile.

"Of course. How silly of me. How did you hurt your arm? I hope it isn't serious."

"Nosir," Draco said. "I fell, sir. Tripped and cut it open on a sharp root."

Dumbledore glanced at Pomfrey. "Seems rather open and shut, to me."

"There are several students who claim he was attacked by a hippogriff," she said.

"Ah. These students here?" Dumbledore said, pointing to Harry and Padma. "You disagree with Mr. Malfoy's tale of these events?"

"No, sir," Harry said. "We saw him fall."

"Very sharp root," Padma added.

"Well, it would seem to be the word of he who was injured against the word of several...invisible students?"

Pomfrey threw up her hands and rubbed her forehead. Professor Sprout sighed.

"Hm, yes, mass invisibility, that will have to be seen to," Dumbledore said, winking at Harry and Padma. "For now, however, I suggest Mr. Malfoy be sent to his dormitory for some well-earned rest, and Harry and Padma continue on to class. Ancient Runes, isn't it? Very stimulating for the mind."

"But Headmaster..."

"Well, I have enjoyed our chat," Dumbledore interrupted, "but I'm afraid I must be going. Do come say hello any time," he added to Draco, who was smiling. "Good day, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Sprout."

As he left he presented each of them with a humbug. The two women sighed, and Madam Pomfrey shrugged.

"The Headmaster knows best; off you go, then, Draco. Harry, Padma, I'll give you slips for class."
"That was the best thing ever!" Draco whispered to Padma and Harry, as they left the hospital wing.

"I don't know," Padma said dubiously.

"It was your idea!"

"No, that was just keeping stuff from your mum, I think it's good practice for you. I mean, Dumbledore covering for Hagrid that way. What if he really is dangerous, as a teacher?"

"Well, then he's learned his lesson," Draco said. "Bet you we're stuck with really boring animals all year."

"Hey, where're you going?" Harry said, as Padma turned off towards the staircase. "Ancient Runes is this way!"

"I know! I'll see you there," she said, disappearing up the staircase. "Draco, I'll take notes for you!"

When Harry arrived at class, after walking Draco to the Hufflepuff common room, he found Padma already seated with an empty desk next to her and a pile of Arithmancy homework at her elbow.

"Got here early, saved you a seat," she said with a grin.

***

Harry met Draco in the corridor outside the Great Hall the next morning, falling easily back into the habit of early breakfasts. Padma and Neville showed up before long, Neville with his tie askew and hair still a mess from sleep.

"Don't look at me," Harry said, as Neville tried to flatten it down. "My hair's always a mess."

"Yeah, but it's a nice mess," Padma said. "I mean, it looks sort of good that way."

"Oh, sod it," Neville sighed, taking out his wand and pointing it at his head.

"Don't -- " Draco and Harry chorused, but Neville had already spoken the charm.

To be fair, his hair did now lie in a flat and orderly manner. The fact that it was also bright purple was lost on Neville, who couldn't see it. Padma rolled her eyes.

"Capellum fuco," she said. Neville's hair changed mostly back to brown. He mumbled a thank-you around the hot pastry the house-elves had delivered to the end of the Hufflepuff table where they sat. Hedwig, Remus and Sirius' snowy white owl, fluttered in through one window and looked around in perplexity when she found the high table empty.

"Poor Hedwig. It'll be good when Sirius has a real address again," Harry said as she spotted him and soared across the Great Hall, dropping off a Daily Prophet. "She isn't sure whether to bring things here or to Remus' rooms or to the Three Broomsticks."

Hedwig stole a sausage and flapped away while Harry unrolled the paper.

"Looks like Fudge finally made it to Azkaban," he said, studying the photograph of the Minister on the front page. Fudge looked pale even in monochrome, and didn't move except to shake his head from side to side at the camera.

"Says he's staying in Hogsmeade for another few days until the Aurors set up an office there. What
do they want to do that for?” Draco asked.

"High time if you ask me. Hogsmeade hasn't got any security at all, and someone's got to keep an
eye on the Dementors besides," Padma said. "Maybe Professor Tonks'll get reassigned here!"

"Doubt it," Neville said, looking glum. "She's a hero. She got reassigned to diplomatic last week.
She's off running round the continent."

"Bet Professor Snape hates that," Harry said with a grin. Neville grinned back.

"Well, she does get whole weeks off at a time, 'cause they never know how long she'll be on."

"Guess you'll know when she's home," Padma snickered. "Professor Snape'll actually give nine of
ten on a paper."

"Not mine!" Draco laughed.

"Uh oh -- Prefects on the way," Neville said, shoving his toast in his mouth and preparing to dash
for Gryffindor. It was a standing joke that Percy Weasley hadn't yet removed whatever was stuck
up his arse, and hated to see Neville fraternising in other houses.

"Nah, it's just Eddie Carmichael," Padma said, craning her neck. "He's in the year above me. He's a
twit," she added. "And his girlfriend Marietta. Ugh, don't make eye contact."

Eddie Carmichael was a plain, studious-looking boy who was followed by a handful of girls in
Ravenclaw blue. Harry guessed that the curly-haired girl at his elbow was probably Marietta.

"Hey," he called, spoiling Padma's plans to studiously avoid him. "Hey, Malfoy!"

Draco, looking resigned, raised his head.

"Yes, Carmichael?" he asked.

"I hear you passed out in class yesterday," Carmichael said. Marietta giggled. "Swooning over
hippogriffs, eh? About your calibre, I suppose."

"What's that?" came a new voice from the other side of the room. A couple of sixth-years with
Gryffindor ties had filed in. "Who passed out?" one asked mockingly.

"Draco Malfoy!" Carmichael called.

"Oh, that's it," Neville said, standing up. All the Ravenclaws made fearful, sarcastic noises, but the
Gryffindors hesitated. Two years before, a couple of students had paid dearly for turning Neville
green. "Don't think I can't knock you down, Carmichael!"

"Getting your boyfriend to defend you, Malfoy? I hear your dad does the same thing," Carmichael
taunted. Neville would have vaulted the table and gone for him, but Padma caught him by the
shirttails and gestured to the doorway. Professor Snape had just swept through.

"But they're getting away with it!" Neville fumed.

"No they're not," Harry said calmly. "Come on, we'd better go."

Neville pointedly sat as far from the others as possible at the Gryffindor table, though he glared
daggers at them all throughout breakfast. Padma did likewise at her own table, muttering audibly under her breath about Marietta. Harry dawdled at Slytherin until Towler and Pucey arrived.

"Hey Towler," he said, pretending to eat a muffin in front of him.

"Yah, pipsqueak?" Towler asked, spinning a sickle idly on the table.

"You know Edgecomb and Carmichael?"

"Not well. Why?"

"You know anything about Edgecomb she doesn't want public?"

"She'd hardly confide in him," Pucey said. "What gives, Potter? Got a crush?"

"Just playing a little game," Harry said.

"I hear she's a gossip," Pucey volunteered. "And she talks down other girls in her House."

All three boys shook their head, tsking. There was often no love lost amongst Slytherins and they'd stab other houses in the back soon enough, but you stabbed your family, at least, in the front.

"Well, that ought to do it. Who are the fourths in Ravenclaw?"

"Oh well, there's Edgecomb of course, Cho Chang -- god, you know Chang?" Towler asked Pucey. "Ravenclaw Seeker, nice hair?"

"Nicer legs," Pucey observed with a leer.

"Edgecomb, Chang, Gill..." Towler scrunched up his face in concentration. "Dunno the rest."

"That's enough, I think. Hey, you played cricket before Hogwarts, didn't you?"

"Sure. I'd play it here if they had it."

"Will you have a word with Malfoy? He wants to go out for beater and he's a keen batsman."

"Right-o," Towler said agreeably. "Only don't tell Flint, he'd call it traitorism."

"Sure," Harry said. "Now, watch this."

The hall was crowded now, and nobody else noticed as he made his way to where Carmichael and Edgecomb were sitting with the rest of the Ravenclaw fourths. Carmichael was doing an exaggerated imitation of someone having a fainting spell, which drew a lot of laughs. Harry stopped, facing them across the table, and leaned forward between two other students.

"Can I have a word before class, Edgecombe?" he asked. Carmichael howled with laughter.

"Are you going to beat us up too, Potter?" he asked.

"I don't think this is any of your business," Harry replied.

"Ooooh. Wee Potter's got his knickers in a knot."

"What do you want?" Marietta asked suspiciously.

"In private," Harry said gravely.
"Pull the other one," she said. She smiled, but it was an uncertain smile.

"I really think you should," Harry insisted.

"Go on, Potter," Carmichael said, making a shooing motion. Harry ignored it, staring at Marietta.

"Yes," she agreed. "Go on, Potter."

Harry straightened and shrugged. "All right. It's your funeral, not mine."

Then, very deliberately, he grinned at Cho Chang. "See you on the practice field, huh, Chang?"

She smiled back, looking confused but pleased. Marietta's eyes darted from her to Harry. Satisfied, Harry turned, winked at his teammates, and left the Great Hall. Even if she didn't come running after him, the uncertainty on her face was enough for now --

"Harry! Harry Potter!"

Harry stopped on the threshold of the front entrance, smiled to himself, and turned around. Marietta had come after him, just as he'd hoped. He wondered if Towler and Pucey were as amused by the bluff as he was.

"Go on, Edgecombe," he said, imitating Carmichael's shooing motion. She stopped, looking stricken.

"All right, what is it you wanted to say?" she demanded. He waited as she drew closer.


She froze. Harry wondered if he'd hit more pay dirt than he knew.

"What -- what about her?" she stammered.

"We both know that, Marietta," he said, leering a little.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, that depends on you, doesn't it?" he asked, giving her his best Snape smile. "It's not really any of my business, I'm just a third-year Slytherin. But, after all, I don't gossip about my own House."

"Harry, come on now, we were only teasing Malfoy a little."

"And if you tease him a little again, I'll talk a little to Cho Chang. She'll get the words right from my mouth. Just like I got them from Towler," he added, in a moment of inspiration.

"Towler knows?" she practically howled.

"Oh, he'll keep quiet if I ask him," Harry said. "Cho never has to know, really. But if you tease Malfoy again -- or if any other Ravenclaw teases Malfoy again -- "

"I can't police the whole House!"

"Find a way," Harry said ruthlessly. "Because otherwise Cho and I could get to be really good friends, y'know?"
He left her in the hallway and had almost made it all the way to his morning Potions class before he burst out laughing.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue or description verbatim from The Prisoner of Azkaban. In this instance, Trelawney's speech and portions of Lupin's lesson are taken directly from canon.

Harry didn't get a chance to tell Draco about his brilliant politics until lunch; he had double-potions with Padma while Neville and Draco had double-Defence. He was eager, and a little scared, to hear their reactions to being taught by Remus. He'd heard nothing but cheerful gossip about Defence class so far, but he didn't care if the school liked Remus as much as he cared that his friends did. And that they wouldn't give him the cold shoulder if Remus was hard on them in class.

It turned out he needn't have worried. On their way to lunch, Padma and Draco gleefully dissected the morning's lesson on hinkypunks. Harry could hardly distract them long enough to tell the story of Marietta's blackmail.

"But you've no idea what she said about Cho Chang," Padma pointed out.

"Who cares? She doesn't know that," Harry replied.

"You didn't have to, you know," Draco said, slightly sullen. "I mean, I can take a bit of teasing."

"It wasn't just teasing," Padma retorted. "It was cruel and unnecessary. You can't help who you're related to."

"No," said Draco quietly. "S'pose not."

"But it is brilliant, isn't it?" Harry bragged, swaggering into the Great Hall. Snake, sensing food nearby, poked his head out from under Harry's collar.

"Do you really think it'll keep all the Ravenclaws in line?" Neville asked.

"Enough of them," Harry said, heading for Slytherin's table. "See you in Divination!"

"Not me, I've got the afternoon free," Draco grinned at Harry. "Have fun studying your balls!"

Draco's jest, weak as it was, was still the funniest thing about Divination class, as Harry soon found out. For one thing, it was in one of the highest levels of the castle: an entryway on the seventh floor led to a spiral staircase that seemed to go up forever, getting closer and tighter as it went. At the top landing there was nothing more than a trapdoor in the ceiling with a brass plaque on it reading "Sibyll Trelawney, Divination Teacher".

"Bugger this," Harry said to Padma. "How do we get up there? Levitation?"

As if in answer to his question, the trapdoor opened and a silvery ladder descended through it, sparkling in the dim light on the landing.

"Great," Padma said. "Remind me not to wear a skirt on Fridays."
Climbing up the ladder was like portkeying to an entirely different world, one made up mainly of chintz and china. There were a few narrow windows, but most of the light came from a handful of red-swathed wall lamps, giving the entire room a dark crimson hue. It was packed with small tables, surrounded by armchairs and footstools, some of them rather greasy and well-used. It wasn't even cold outside, but a fire was burning at one end of the room next to a larger table that Harry could only assume was the professor's desk. The copper kettle over the fire gave off a smell of stale tea. The walls were lined with shelves, covered with dusty curios and teacups. It reminded Harry a little of one of the Betwys Beddau cafes, the one all the older people frequented, and a little of an engraving of Hell he'd seen in one of Remus' books.

He flinched back suddenly; what he'd taken for another heap of curios had begun to move, and turned out to be his professor. She was a thin, bespectacled woman in a gauzy shawl with tiny bells and bangles hanging from it; more hung from thick ropes of beads around her neck and bracelets on her wrists.

"Good afternoon," she said in a soft, misty sort of voice. "I am Professor Trelawney. Do be seated, won't you?"

Harry picked out a table near the back of the classroom, and Neville and Padma followed him there.

"Ah, my dears," the Professor said, gliding towards them. "I am afraid it is an ill omen to have three at a table -- you will sit here, my dear," she said to Neville, gently guiding him to where Ron Weasley was seated, "and you here," she said, returning for Padma, who sullenly followed her to where another Ravenclaw was seated. Harry sulkily kicked out a chair for Theo. Crabbe and Goyle took the table next to them and immediately began scratching swearwords into its surface.

"You may not have seen me before," Trelawney said, taking up a position at the head of the classroom. Harry noticed resentfully that at least two other tables had three occupants. "I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye. So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you."

She paused as she passed Neville and Ron's table. "You, my boy," she said to Neville. "Is your grandmother well?"

"My grandmother's dead," Neville replied with a remarkably straight face.

"I knew as much. My condolences," she said, passing onwards. Some of the other Gryffindors looked impressed. Harry wondered if "courageous" was the Sorting Hat's euphemism for "slightly dim".

"We will begin with tea-leaves, then progress to the Tarot. If we finish fire omens, we shall move on in second term to the most sublime of all divinatory devices, the crystal ball. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever. By the way," she said to Parvati Patil, "beware a red-haired man."

Parvati and Padma both glanced at Ron, the only ginger in the room. Ron looked terrified.

"Now, collect a tea-cup from the shelf, come fill it with tea, and then return to your tables and drink until only dregs remain," she said. She touched Neville's shoulder. "After you've broken the first cup, do choose one of the blue-coloured ones? I'm rather partial to pink. Now," she added, moving on, "Swill the dregs of the tea around the cup three times with your left hand and turn it
upside down on its saucer. After the last of the tea has drained away, give your cup to your partner to read, using pages five and six of *Unfogging the Future*.

"Break a cup!" Neville said hotly to Harry as they stood in line to collect their teacups. "I've managed to feed myself for many years without breaking any cutlery at all, thanks!"

"She's just picking on you," Harry replied as Neville reached up to defiantly take one of the pink-patterned cups. "She -- watch out!"

The cup, which was coated with dust, slipped through Neville's fingers and crashed to the floor. Neville looked horrified.

"Blue-pattern, dear, please," Trelawney called. About half the class laughed, but everyone looked vaguely sympathetic. Neville gathered the shattered pink teacup onto a spare saucer and sheepishly collected his blue-patterned one.

Harry and Theo poured their tea and returned to their table; as one, they opened the window behind them and dumped out most of their tea. Around the room, the rest of the class was drinking and grimacing. Harry stealthily pulled the window shut and sipped the last of the liquid. Theo was a little too enthusiastic, and choked momentarily.

"Swirl!" Harry whispered to him. "Swirl for your life, she's coming!"

Theo hit himself in the chest with his right hand while he swirled with his left and upended the teacup onto the saucer. Harry followed suit and waited for Trelawney to arrive.

"Have you examined your dregs already?" she asked, beaming on them. "You must be very fond of the tea!"

"Absolutely," Theo croaked. Harry turned over his teacup and traded it with Theo, opening his copy of Unfogging the Future (half-price used in Mardjinn Alley, with interesting but mostly irrelevant margin notes and some very naughty annotations to the chapter on Crystal Ball Gazing).

"Um, it looks kind of like a..." Harry studied the list of images in Unfogging the Future madly. It looked like a lump of tea-leaves to him. "A volcano!" he said triumphantly. "Which is an...impending disaster. Well, that sort of makes sense," he said to Theo. Trelawney bent over his shoulder and studied it.

"Excellent, Mr. Potter," she said approvingly. "And yours?" she said to Theo, who was still clearing his throat.

"Right! Right. Uh, it looks like a flower and...a...tree," Theo said. "Sort of like a park...park's not listed...uh..."

Trelawney gave a little shriek and snatched it out of his hands.

"Can you not see it!" she cried, holding it under Theo's nose.

"A spider?" Theo said hopefully.

"My dear boy, I am so sorry to tell you this -- it is a Grim!" Trelawney declared. Harry stared at her, baffled.

"A Grim?" he asked.
"An omen of impending disaster!"

"Sort of like a volcano?" Harry ventured.

"Much worse, my boy! See the horns of a bull, here, and the shape of the Grim's head, the head of a black, red-eyed dog -- to see the Grim is to know that death is upon you!" she announced loudly. "And the horns of the bull, a troubled friendship -- someone close to you is near death!"

"Been there," Padma sighed, looking bored.

"Nah," Harry said, tipping the cup so that he could look into it. "That's not a dog, is it? Looks more like a kangaroo to me."

"What, like this?" Neville said, holding up his teacup. Trelawney shrieked louder.

"The Grim!" she declared. "But not meant for you! Tell me, are any of your friends ill, my dears?" she asked, looking back and forth between them. Harry looked at Padma, who smiled wickedly.

"Professor," she called, holding out her cup. Another very doglike figure had taken shape in her tea-leaves. "What do you think of this?"

Trelawney gave Padma an infinitely sad look. "One you love is near death," she said.

"Must be Draco," Neville said cheerfully.

"Who?" Trelawney asked, delicately.

"Draco Malfoy," Harry said. "He's our mate. A Hufflepuff --"

"But you probably don't know him. I expect newspapers cloud the inner eye," Padma said.

"My dear, I am not certain you are taking this matter with the gravity it requires!" Trelawney said, scandalised.

"Oh, no, Professor!" Padma gave her a wide-eyed look. "I swear I'm giving it all the respect it deserves!"

Neville tried not to giggle. It came out sounding like someone was choking a frog.

"Clearly," Trelawney said with a significant frown, "Mr. Malfoy should heed the portents!"

"Meaning he should sign up for class," Harry whispered to Theo.

"Alas, we can but hope he will come to his senses in time," she continued, shaking her head. "In the meantime, we must press on..."

Most of the class actually seemed pretty awed by Trelawney's predictions and vague histrionics about Draco, but Neville and Padma were less than impressed.

"Honestly. It's all power of suggestion," Padma said as they walked back down the narrow spiral staircase. "And anyone who really isn't naturally gifted isn't going to get very far anyway."

"Dunno," Harry said. "It did sort of look like you both had dogs in your cups. She seemed awfully convinced..."

"Of course it looked like we had dogs in our cups," Neville scoffed.
"Why would you say that?" Harry asked curiously.

"You didn't see?" Padma asked, putting on her best innocent face. "We rearranged our tea-leaves when she wasn't looking."

***

Saturday morning dawned bright and beautiful. Remus knew, because he was awakened at dawn by a large black dog slobbering all over his face.

"Ugh! Sirius!" he groaned, shoving Padfoot's muzzle away. Sirius transformed on the bed and pinned him down, grinning. Remus saw he was fully dressed.

"Up up up!" Sirius said.

"Merlin, what time is it?" Remus asked.

"Six ay-emme. I want you to see the house. Come on, come on," Sirius said, wrestling him out of bed. Remus staggered towards his closet and began dressing sleepily.

"It still exists after ten in the morning, right?" he asked, pulling his trousers on.

"Yes, cranky," Sirius answered.

"Then why six -- "

"Because you can't really appreciate it unless you see it in the mornings. Come on, I've found a floo point near the house..."

Sirius' floo point turned out to be a little cafe on the edge of Hogsmeade, and Remus sipped tea as they walked, the end of his sleeve wrapped around the paper cup.

"Now, it's a bit far from the village centre but it's got a great big garden for moons," Sirius said excitedly. "And it's big enough for you and me on week-ends -- "

"When I don't have class duties -- "

"Right, right. And big enough for Harry too during the holiday. It's got washing charms in place on the sink and a chill-charmed cupboard, bootscrubbing spells in the front hall -- I checked the heating hexes myself, they're in good order."

"Rent or purchase?" Remus asked, blowing on his tea.

"Well...purchase," Sirius said. "But I can rent it out in summers and Harry's going to need a house of his own one day after Hogwarts, you know."

"Can you afford it?"

"We, Moony, we. That's why I want you to look at it, it'll be yours too, you know," Sirius said. "And yes. We definitely can."

"There must be something wrong with it," Remus said with a grin. Sirius led him around a high hedge and down a small path.

"Erm," he said. "Well, it...does need a new coat of paint and some work here and there..."
He opened a gate and guided Remus through it, almost dancing with eagerness. Remus grinned at him and turned to regard the house.

"Oh god," he said, startled out of any tactful reaction.

The house rose before them on the crest of a little hill, and he would have to admit that the view out the windows on the west side would be stunning -- sunlight touched the grass and stones of Creadonagh valley below the Forbidden Forest, turning it bright gold. But the house itself...

"It's so...orange," he said.

"Yeah, but paint is cheap enough," Sirius said, resting his hands on Remus' shoulders.

"But -- so -- orange, Sirius," Remus repeated. The house, a two-story affair with a handful of odd gables and turrets, might have looked normal enough in other circumstances, but the sheer orangeness of it -- two toned orange, orange with brighter orange trim -- overwhelmed. It was like a giant orange wart in the middle of a lovely green field. "I mean..."

"Come look inside," Sirius urged. "And don't mind the wallpaper, I'm going to pull that down too."

"Is it orange?" Remus asked, still stunned witless.

"It's blue!" Sirius said cheerfully.

"What did you do this morning, Professor Lupin?" Remus asked himself, while Sirius opened the door and led him inside. "Oh, not much, Headmaster. Got some tea in Hogsmeade. Went blind and insane. Bought an orange house. An orange house, Professor Lupin? Yes, Headmaster, with lovely blue wallpaper..."

***

Very few things could kill Harry's appetite. Quidditch matches, of course. Nerves in general. Rarely had excitement done it, but on Monday morning he found himself totally uninterested by the delicacies Denbigh tried to tempt him with. Today he was going to have his first Defence class with Remus, and he was looking forward to it with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. He'd studied with Remus before, of course, since Remus had tutored him in "extracurriculars" when he was a student at the little village school in Betwys Beddau. He'd come to Hogwarts with a reasonable comprehension of Arithmancy and Latin because of Remus, and he'd spent many hours practicing wandwork with sticks in the back garden of the River House. He'd never really considered that to be "class", though. That was just Remus, showing him how to do things.

Neville and Harry left breakfast early and were almost the first to arrive -- Hermione Granger was already seated at her desk with her books out, doodling idly with her quill on a scrap of parchment.

"Morning, Hermione," Neville said, taking a seat next to her. Harry sat on Neville's other side, unpacking his own book. No way was Hermione Granger going to show him up in Remus' class.

"Hi, Neville -- hi Harry," she added, blushing a little.

"Hermione," Harry said, setting out his inkpot. "Looking forward to class?"

"Oh yes. I've heard Professor Lupin knows all kinds of interesting things about the Dark Arts," she said, as other students began to arrive. There was still no sign of Remus, however. "He's going to take over the Dueling Club, too."
"Brilliant," Neville said. "Professor Lupin's great."

"Do you know him?"

"Yeah..." Neville faltered and glanced at Harry. "He's friends with my parents."

Other students began to pour into the classroom and Parvati Patil sat down on Hermione's other side at that moment to engage in what was apparently a hot bit of gossip. Hermione's attention swerved away from them as Parvati whispered in her ear. Harry glanced at the doorway just in time to see Remus enter, carrying the briefcase Sirius had bought for him and wearing his freshly-ironed teaching robes.

"Good morning," he said, putting his briefcase down on the desk. "Please put your books and inkpots away. Today's lesson will be a practical."

There were a few muffled groans as people re-packed their bags. Harry hurriedly shoved his book back and tossed his quill into the bag's pocket.

"I'm Professor Lupin, and I think..." he looked narrowly out at the double class, "I know quite a few of you already. You're Mr. Crabbe, aren't you?" he said to Crabbe, who nodded sullenly. "Yes, you're very like your father. And that must be Parvati -- almost called you Padma -- and there's Neville of course...hallo Ron! I had your sister in class on Thursday...and you must be Hermione Granger," he said to Hermione, smiling. "I've been warned about you."

Hermione turned so pale that Remus hastened to add, "Only good things! Professor McGonagall has nothing but good to say of you, Miss Granger."

Hermione heaved a sigh of relief as Remus continued to name off the third-years, stopping occasionally to be introduced when he couldn't place a student. Finally he came back around to Harry.

"And you're Harry Potter," he said, winking at Harry. "I think we've met once or twice, haven't we?"

"Yes, sir. I believe you know my godfather," Harry replied.

"Just so. Well, I've managed most of your names, and those I've only just learned I'm sure I'll remember with a little occasional assistance. I've rather a treat for you today. I had intended to show you a working demonstration of how Hinkeypunks trap their victims, but over the weekend a much more interesting creature was brought to my attention. Follow me, please. Leave your bags; bring your wands."

He led them out of the classroom and along the empty corridor in the opposite direction from the Great Hall. Harry wasn't sure where they were going, and he nearly ran into Neville when the whole class had to stop suddenly.

Craning his neck, he could see Remus standing at the front of the crowd. Peeves the poltergeist was in front of him, busily stuffing a keyhole with chewing gum.

"Peeves," Remus said in a reserved tone of voice. The poltergeist looked up, then flipped over midair to float upside-down, facing Remus.

"Oooho! It's the new professorling!" Peeves squealed.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you," Remus said, his tone still conversational. "Mr.
Filch won't be able to get to his brooms."

Peeves stuck his tongue out and burst into song. "Loony, loopy Lupin! Looney, loopy Lupin!"

A few of the Slytherins giggled. Harry glared at Theo until he smacked Millicent and Goyle in the backs of their heads to stop them. Remus didn't seem affected in the least; he merely raised his wand and said "Waddiwasi!" in a commanding tone. The gum shot out of the keyhole as if it had been fired from a gun, ricocheted off the ceiling, and landed right in Peeves' left nostril. The poltergeist shrieked a startled curse and zoomed off down the hallway.

"Cool!" Dean Thomas exclaimed.

"Effective," Remus answered absently, leading them onwards. He stopped at a door marked "Faculty Common Room" and opened it, gesturing them inside.

The faculty common room, which Harry had never been in before, was a long room paneled in wood and furnished with old, mismatched chairs. A wall of windows looked out onto the grounds, and the fireplace at one end was empty, awaiting autumn's more bitter chill.

At the opposite end of the room from the fireplace, near to the door, was an old upright wardrobe which Harry guessed was meant to hold spare robes and cloaks for the professors. Remus crossed to it and the rest of the class followed, fanning out in a circle -- a circle that got a lot wider as the wardrobe gave an alarming wobble, banging against the wall and tilting forward on two legs for a moment.

"Nothing to worry about," Remus said calmly. "It's only a boggart."

Harry, as well as most of the rest of the class, felt that this was definitely something to worry about. Grimmauld Place used to have boggarts infesting the spare rooms, and he remembered hearing horror stories from Ted about getting rid of them.

"Who knows what a Boggart is?" Remus asked. Harry raised his hand quickly, barely beating Hermione's, but Remus eventually called on Seamus Finnegan.

"I -- it's a shape-shifter, isn't it?" he said uncertainly. "It takes the shape of whatever's most frightening."

"Very good, Mr. Finnegan. Boggarts nest in dark, enclosed spaces -- under beds, in unreachable cupboards, under the sheets on furniture in unused rooms. I once encountered one that had hidden itself inside a grandfather clock," he added. "This one is relatively new; I suppose it moved in over the summer. I managed to save it from the tender ministrations of Professors Snape and McGonagall -- " here everyone laughed, " -- by offering to use it as a lesson for my third years. Now, this Boggart, sitting in the darkness next to the Headmaster's second-favourite cloak, doesn't have a form. He doesn't know what frightens us -- yet. When we let him out, then he'll immediately try to become whatever each of us fears most. This means that we have an advantage over the boggart, doesn't it? Anyone care to guess what it is?"

Hermione's hand beat Harry's into the air this time, but Remus smiled at him. "Potter?"

"Uh," Harry said, thrown off by hearing Remus use his last name. "There are a lot of us, so it won't know what shape it should be?"

"Exactly. It's best to tackle Boggarts with company, and not just because you should always try to deal with the Dark Arts with a companion who can watch your back. Now, when Boggarts are faced with a pair of people, they have a decision to make -- what should they become? Headless
corpse? Flesh-eating slug?"

The class made appropriately mock-terrified noises.

"I once saw a boggart make that very mistake -- tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening, of course," Remus said. "Now, how do we defeat a Boggart? All right, Hermione, your turn," he said.

"Laughter," she said promptly.

"That's right. You need to force it to assume a shape you find amusing. And the spell we use to accomplish this is, repeat after me, *Riddikulus.*"

"*Riddikulus,*" the class repeated.

"*Riddikulus.*"

"*Riddikulus,*" Harry chorused, along with everyone else.

"So, who wants to volunteer? Neville, a bit of Gryffindor courage?"

Neville grinned and stepped forward.

"Now, what do you find most frightening?" Remus asked.

"Professor Snape," he said, and the entire class laughed. Remus grinned.

"Come on, Longbottom! There must be something worse."

Neville appeared to give it some thought.

"I don't reckon I like Dementors very well," he said, and the class was instantly quiet. Remus nodded.

"That's uncommonly wise of you," he said. "Very well then, let's see. Ted Tonks is quite the cook; you know that red apron he owns?"

Neville nodded, perplexed.

"And do you remember the time Andromeda played a trick on him and he came running out of the kitchen chasing her with a saucepan full of onions?"

Neville laughed. "Sure!"

"Right. Now, when the Dementor comes out of that wardrobe, I want you to picture it in a red apron, with a saucepan of onions in one hand, all right?"

Neville nodded and took his wand out of his pocket. "I'm ready," he said.

"Very well. On three -- one, two, three!"

Remus aimed his wand at the wardrobe and it burst open. Black smoke spiralled out, resolving itself into a Dementor with frightening speed. Neville turned pale and Harry felt sick, but just when he thought he might bolt, Remus shouted.

"Now, Neville!"
Neville lifted his wand automatically and shouted "Riddikulus!"

The Dementor jerked backwards as if a string had pulled it, and a red apron materialised over its cloak. One slimy hand suddenly grasped a large saucepan, and the other held a spatula. It looked down at the spatula in confusion. The apron read "REAL MEN SAUTEE". Neville and Harry both burst into immediate laughter, followed closely by the rest of the class.

"Excellent! Form up, let's give everyone a try -- you next, Crabbe!"

The Dementor swooped down on Crabbe, turning into a giant spiked ball as the rest of the students fell into line behind him.

"Riddikulus!" Crabbe shouted, and little streamers burst out of the tips of the spikes to the sound of kazooos going off.

Parvati was next, her mummy unraveling and tripping on his own bandages, and after her came Ron. The Boggart burst out into a gigantic spider, but Ron was prepared and almost before it was fully formed, it had rollerskates strapped to its feet.

Harry, at the end of the line, watched as each student took their turn, marveling a little at the variety of fears, both concrete and absurd, that were passing before his eyes. Finally, he was next; he lifted his wand, but before he could, Remus stepped forward so quickly he almost collided with the giant jack-in-the-box that was about to have its lid slammed down on top of it by Goyle. It stretched and compressed and shifted into what Harry knew to be a moon, though from where he stood it looked more like a pale yellow balloon.

"Riddikulus!" Remus said almost lazily, and the moon deflated, buzzing all over the room before zipping back into the wardrobe. Remus locked the door and stepped back quickly as the wardrobe nearly toppled on top of him.

"Well!" he said, slightly breathlessly. "I think that's enough for one day. I'll have my fourths finish it off. Let's see; five points to everyone who tackled the boggart; ten to Hermione, Harry, and Seamus for answering my questions, and fifteen for Neville for going first."

Harry stared at Remus as the rest of the class filed out, heading back to the Defence classroom for their bags. Remus checked that the lock was secure, slipped his wand up his sleeve, and turned.

"Did you need something, Harry?" he asked mildly.

Harry was furious, suddenly; he'd known he wouldn't get special treatment from Remus, but he didn't think Remus would coddle him. He never had before.

"No," he snapped. He turned on his heel, almost running out of the room.

***

If Harry was struggling with unfairness in Defence class, Draco wasn't doing much better in his morning Potions class with Padma.

"These are," Snape said, looming over him, "without a doubt the most pathetically ill-shredded daisy roots I have ever had the misfortune of witnessing, Malfoy."

Draco's cheeks burned and he pulled the roots towards him, trying to imitate Padma's delicately-diced roots on the cutting mat next to him. Snape continued to stand there, intimidating him.
"I find it difficult to believe that even you can fail to adequately brew a Shrinking Solution, but you may yet prove it possible," Snape said as Draco wretchedly continued to cut up his roots. "Patil!"

"Yes, sir?" Padma asked.

"At the end of the lesson, you will sample Malfoy's Shrinking Solution."

"Me, sir?" Padma asked, looking horrified at Draco, who seemed equally horrified right back.

"Yes, you! Are all Ravenclaws deaf?" Snape demanded, stalking back to the front of the classroom. On his way, he swept the pulpy remains of a shrivelfig from Morag MacDougal's table into his hand.

"This," he said acidly, "is not a skinned shrivelfig. It is a former shrivelfig, now made useless by Ms. MacDougal's clumsiness."

"At least it's not just you," Padma whispered to Draco.

"No, just mostly," Draco whispered back. "Help me! I don't want to poison you!"

"I don't want to be poisoned! Here, swap me roots," Padma said, trading with him and quickly helping him to dump her perfectly sliced roots into his cauldron. She efficiently re-cut his roots and threw them into her own cauldron, then turned to skinning her shrivelfig. Draco had already added his and was stirring it, a worried expression on his face.

"Is it supposed to be pink?" he asked.

"I don't know! I need a rat spleen," Padma said. She leaned forward and tapped Justin Finch-Fletchely on the shoulder. "Justin, got a spare spleen?"

"Take two, they're small!" he said, offering her two small, pinkish objects on the tip of his knife. She plucked one off, grimacing, and added it to her potion. It glowed neon green and she breathed a sigh of relief.

By the end of class, however, Draco's potion was still bright pink, no matter how much work he put into making it turn green, up to and including adding an enormous helping of parsley. The pink absorbed it all.

"Shall we, then?" Snape asked, ladling out a cupful of the horrible liquid. He offered it to Padma, who took it with a grimace. "If even Patil cannot teach you how to make a proper potion, Malfoy..."

But he stopped then, because Padma had already tipped her head back and downed the whole cupful in two long gulps. She set the cup down on the table and glared up at Snape defiantly.

Then, miraculously, she began to shrink. When she nearly slipped off the stool, Snape relented and offered her a small flask from his pocket. A sip restored her to normal size, and she held it out to return it to him, smirking.

"The next time," Snape growled, "it had better be the proper colour, Malfoy."

"Yes, sir," Draco said gratefully, bolting from the room. And, as it turned out, right into Neville.

"Wotcha!" Neville said. "Come on, let's get lunch and bugger off. Harry wants to sit outside."

"Fine by me," Padma said, sticking her tongue out. "That tasted foul, Draco."
"What did?" Neville inquired, leading them towards the Great Hall.

"Snape made me drink Draco's Shrinking Solution to make Draco feel bad about bollocksing it up," Padma said.

"LEECH JUICE!" Draco shouted, stopping suddenly. "That's what I forgot!"

Neville slapped his forehead. Padma shook her head despairingly.

They shoved sandwiches and a few pieces of fruit into their pockets and went in search of Harry, who was sitting on the steps of a side entrance that looked out over the Quidditch pitch.

"He's in a foul mood," Neville said as they approached. "We got to hex a boggart today -- "

"Really?" Padma asked excitedly.

"Yeah, and Remus didn't let him have a go. Harry thinks Remus was coddling him."

"He was," Harry said resentfully, as the rest of them joined him on the steps. "It isn't fair, him treating me like I'm not big enough to face a Boggart on my own."

"You didn't do very well with that Dementor on the train," Neville pointed out. The other three glared at him. "Well, it's true. And you know Remus, he's practically your dad, Harry. Ted'd be really uncomfortable seeing me mucking about with boggarts."

"It still isn't fair," Harry sulked.

"Well, don't dwell on it," Padma advised. "What've you got this afternoon, Charms?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Hey, Draco, are you going to have extra Transfiguration again? Or can you break away long enough to bat some Bludgers around?"

"Today?" Draco asked, alarmed.

"When better? Tryouts are on Sunday," Harry said. "Towler said he'd give you some tips, too."

"It'll have to be after dinner," Draco replied.

"That's fine, Towler has class all afternoon anyway. I'll get the key to the ball trunk from Flint," Harry said, looking marginally happier now that they were talking about Quidditch. "We can play until it gets dark. It's dead easy, you'll get the hang of it in no time."

"Need to borrow a broomstick," Draco said.

"There's plenty in the shed, you can use one of the spares. If you get on the team you can give Sirius some money and he'll buy you one," Harry said. Draco gave him an uncertain look, but he didn't really object. He was good at hitting a ball with a stick, after all, and that ought to be useful somehow. Draco had the uneasy sense that he was not always as useful as he might be -- oh, not with Harry and his friends, but in a general way. He had the dim idea that as a pureblood he was supposed to be safeguarding the heritage and defending the culture and all that. He just hadn't the faintest clue how.

***

"Moony? Moony, are you there?"
Sirius emerged from the floo in Remus' rooms, dusting ash from his sleeves and waving a rolled up parchment scroll importantly. Remus ought to be in his rooms by now; dinner was long since over and he didn't have tutoring on Mondays. At first he didn't see him and wondered if some faculty business had distracted him, but then he saw the tall, slouching figure leaning against the frame of one of the wide windows that looked out on the Quidditch pitch.

"Come here," Remus said quietly, and Sirius obeyed, giving him a curious look. Remus pointed at a couple of kids throwing around Quidditch balls on the pitch and offered Sirius a pair of omnioculars. He took them and twisted the little brass rings until the kids came into sharper focus - not just any kids, but Harry and another Slytherin boy, Padma, Neville, Draco and one or two others in Hufflepuff yellow. All of them but Neville and one of the Hufflepuffs were on broomsticks, dodging and darting around the pitch. For a moment, Sirius felt a desperate squeeze of nostalgia on his heart. James had flown like that.

"How long have they been at it?" he asked, forgetting the scroll he'd hastily shoved in his pocket.

"About half an hour. As far as I can tell, Harry's giving a lesson."

"Really?" Sirius asked, focusing on Harry. It didn't look like he was snitch-chasing, that much was true. "Well, I expect nothing less."

Remus laughed. "I suppose so. See, he's got Neville and that other boy, Eric something, fielding Bludgers on the ground. Padma's throwing the Quaffle around with the other Hufflepuff and Harry and the Slytherin -- Towler, he's a Slytherin Beater, I'm told -- are showing Draco how to bat Bludgers."

"What does Harry know about batting Bludgers?"

"Not much, but he's practically an encyclopedia of flight dodges," Remus said. "Look at them go. Absolutely unafraid of death or dismemberment. When was the last time you saw professional Quidditch players play like that?"

"Never have done," Sirius replied, handing the omnioculars back to Remus. "They're a bit raw for the big leagues, Moony."

"Yes -- but they're fearless. Reminds me of you and James," Remus said, peering through the omnioculars.

"Well, come on then, let's go say hullo," Sirius said. "Oh! Wait a second."

He dug the scroll out of his pocket and unrolled it. "Sign here," he said, pointing to a blank at the bottom. "It's the deed to the house."

Remus skimmed the document. "I suppose you had Llewellyn Payne draw up the contract?" he asked.

"Old bird made it as airtight as possible," Sirius said, summoning a quill. Remus took it and signed neatly, adding the date. "Splendid. I've moved in already. I'm going to paint it tomorrow."

"No idle hands for you, hm?" Remus asked. Sirius put the scroll on the mantel above the fireplace. "Where are we going, again?"

"Down to the pitch! Come on, I'll go as Padfoot, there'll be no harm done," Sirius said, shoving Remus towards the door.
It didn't take long to reach the field, a big black dog chasing low-flying broomsticks and a brown-haired professor who hung back from the crowd, watching with detached interest -- except when Harry cut things a little too fine. Then his fingers tightened into worried fists before forcibly relaxing again.

By the time Harry landed, Padma and Neville were lounging on the grass with Padfoot and the sun was well low on the horizon.

"Good flying," Remus offered as Harry trudged past him towards the storage shed.

"I'm still mad at you," Harry said over his shoulder, stomping off. Remus blinked and glanced at Padfoot, who blinked back and jerked his head in Harry's direction. Remus took the hint and followed Harry into the little shed they kept their broomsticks and equipment in.

"Care to explain why?" he asked, leaning against the doorway. The others brushed past him and went to put their broomsticks away; Harry dawdled and double-checked the lock on the game-ball trunk until they'd gone again.

"Man to man?" Harry asked. Remus fought down a smile.

"Sure. No Professor Lupin here, just Remus and Harry," he replied. "What'd I do?"

"You're a rotten Professor," Harry accused.

"You didn't enjoy the lesson today? Harry -- "

"You didn't let me, did you? Cut me off before I could even get a crack at the Boggart," Harry exploded. "I didn't expect to be treated specially, but you're not my dad in class, you know. How am I supposed to learn anything if you don't let me try stuff?"

"Is that what this is about? You think I...spoiled you?" Remus asked, perplexed.

"Yeah! I wanted to try that spell!"

"Harry -- " Remus rubbed his eyes. "Does that sound like me?"

"No! And that's why I think you're a rotten -- "

"A rotten professor, right. Come on, Harry, it was one class and that's not why I did it."

"Then why?" Harry demanded. "Everyone'll say you're treating me special."

"Okay, okay." Remus made a calming gesture with his hands, palms down. "Right. Harry, I have no doubt that you can handle a Boggart and I'd be happy to have you give Riddikulus a try in private, okay? But you -- have a lot in your past. I was concerned that your boggart would cause a panic."

At least Harry was quiet now, listening intently. Remus took a breath and continued.

"I don't pretend I know your mind as well as you do, you're growing up. I know that," he said. "But I've raised you with Sirius for the last five years. I know a little bit about what you think and feel. I assumed -- maybe I'm wrong -- that your boggart would be Peter Pettigrew. Or, god forbid, Voldemort. I couldn't risk the rest of the class panicking because of it, Harry. I should have warned you sooner, but it didn't occur to me until class had begun." He saw Harry staring at him and crossed his arms, almost defensively. "I wasn't trying to spoil you, Harry. I was worried about how
little you're spoiled, really."

"That's still a rotten reason," Harry said sullenly.

"Am I wrong?" Remus asked mildly.

"No -- yes -- well, I'll never know, will I?" Harry asked. "Nobody ran away when Neville had the Dementor."

"That's true, but most of them still don't recognise Dementors." Remus sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. Do you want a private conference with a boggart?"

"That's the principle of the thing," Harry muttered. Remus waited, uncertain what to do next. Finally, Harry scowled and licked his hand, offering it to Remus. "Truce."

"Truce," Remus replied, gravely licking his palm and shaking Harry's hand. "Promise not to do it again."

"Better not," Harry said.

"We are a spitfire, aren't we? Are you always this catty with your professors?" Remus asked, wiping his hand on his sleeve as they left the shed.

"Only the ones that underestimate me."

"Low blow! I thought we called truce!"

Padfoot bounded across the grass and knocked Harry over before he could reply, but Harry's smile came pretty easily, so he resolved not to worry overmuch.

Something told him this was just the precursor to Harry's teenage years; from here out it would only get harder.

***

The day of Quidditch tryouts dawned early for Harry's foursome, with Draco up at dawn from nerves. It didn't go smoothly, either.

Sunday breakfast was a generally informal affair, carried out more or less all morning as late-sleepers wandered in and a few seventh-years had a snack before going to bed. Fewer people bothered about table rules, so as long as Percy and the Slytherin prefects weren't around -- or weren't paying attention -- Harry and Neville went mainly unmolested while breakfasting at the Hufflepuff table.

"Listen, can't we just -- go do one last practice or something?" Draco said, fidgeting on the bench.

"Eat your toast," Padma commanded.

"The captains are probably already out there," Harry said. "It's a bit hopeless to practice now."

"But my forehand --"

"It's fine," Neville said. "Um. When you hit the ball, anyway."

"Thanks," Draco muttered. "But I can still back out, right? I mean, I don't put my name on any list until I get there, so if I wanted to..."
"Don't you want to play Quidditch?" Harry asked.

"Well..." Draco frowned. "I should, right?"

"Should?" Padma asked.

"Team glory and all that. And it'd be nice...Harry has friends in all the other classes because he plays. And I like hitting Bludgers, it's just...everyone'll be watching," he said, squirming in preemptive embarrassment.

"Short memories," Harry replied. "Do you remember all the stupid moves I made last year?"

"No," Draco said sullenly.

"But you remember that one brilliant dive, don't you?"

"Sure, I suppose..."

"There you are then. It'll be good for you. Show the school you're just as good as anyone. Because you are, really."

Draco was about to reply when one of the other Hufflepuffs at the table (most Hufflepuffs ate breakfast in a timely manner, regardless of the day) leaned across and offered him the Daily Prophet.

"Better read it," he said gruffly, without a hint of the malice that a Slytherin might have used. Draco picked it up even as Padma said, "See? Everyone's watching you anyway..."

Draco's fingers tightened on the newspaper. He laid it flat on the table so that the others could see.

**MUGGLE REPORTS LUCIUS MALFOY NEAR HOGSMEADE**

WP - A Muggle woman has reported seeing Lucius Malfoy yesterday evening near the magically shrouded village of Hogsmeade in Scotland. Unaware that the Azkaban fugitive is a wizard, she contacted a Muggle "hot line" which has been set up on the chance Muggles might encounter Malfoy.

The Muggle claims to have seen a 'filthy blond man in a bathrobe hiding in the trees' outside Iobair, a Muggle village located on the far side of the Forbidden Forest from Hogsmeade.

The Ministry of Magic was notified and has responded, although there is currently no evidence of Malfoy's supposed presence in or near the Forbidden Forest. Aurors say it is likely the woman heard a news report about the dangerous Dark wizard and imagined seeing him.

"The Forest is patrolled not only by Dementors by several creatures potentially even more dangerous to wizards," reports Kingsley Shacklebolt, who is spearheading the effort to locate Malfoy. "There is no need for alarm."
The Forbidden Forest encompasses much of the land south of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, dividing it from Hogsmeade. It also serves to protect Hogsmeade from Muggle settlements such as Iobair, which have cropped up to the east in the last three hundred years.

"I know Mr. Shacklebolt!" Padma exclaimed. "He gave the examination for my...well, you know," she said, making a little time-turning gesture. "And he's really good, Draco, I'm sure if he says it, it must be true."

"Or he's trying not to cause a parental panic," Harry whispered to Neville.

Draco looked doubtful, but he hadn't heard the whisper -- and, in the grand thirteen-year-old scheme of things, the immediate trauma of Quidditch tryouts far overshadowed the vague, distant trauma of his father being mentioned in the newspaper.

"What time are tryouts again?" he asked, glancing at Harry.

"Nine o'clock. Come on, we might as well go," Harry said with a sigh.

Down on the field, the Captains were just setting out the practice pads and broomsticks for the hopeful applicants. Towler and Pucey were sitting in the stands, yawning and looking annoyed at having to be out of bed before noon.

Harry left Draco and the others sitting on a sideline bench and went to say hello to Marcus Flint, who was having a heated debate with the other Captains.

"Listen, we have the most players to recruit for, we should go first," Flint was saying as Harry approached.

"That's crap, you should go last so we can get ours out of the way," Oliver Wood replied. "Wotcha, Pipsqueak."

"Hi Oliver," Harry said.

"Good you're here, Potter, go keep Towler and Pucey awake," Marcus said. "Listen, I didn't come down here at eight oh-bloody-early-clock to wait around all day while you poufs piffle with your broomsticks."

"There's no need for that kind of language," said the Ravenclaw Captain, Ellen Dawlish.

"We could draw lots," suggested Cedric Diggory. "Luck of the draw."

"Why don't you double up?" Harry asked. All four of them turned to him, surprised.

"It speaks!" Ellen said, grinning. "What d'you mean, double-up, Pipsqueak?"

"Well, we've got to get the most players," Harry said. "You're only looking for a Chaser, and Hufflepuff needs new Beaters, right? And Oliver only wants a Seeker."

"One new Beater, one Chaser," Cedric corrected. "What's your point?"

"We'll form up teams and do a few mock matches. Slytherin versus all comers. That way we get a chance to go through all our prospectives, and -- "

"-- and show off," Oliver said.
"It's tryouts, who cares?" Harry asked. "And you lot get as much time as you need to pit your people against the current Cup champions."

He glanced at Marcus, hoping he wasn't overstepping his bounds, but the older boy seemed to at least be considering the idea.

"Well, it seems sensible enough to me," Dawlish said. Oliver nodded agreement. "Ced?"

"Fine by me," Cedric said. "Let's make the roll lists."

Harry caught Cedric's sleeve as the others wandered away. "Diggory, I need to talk with you."

Cedric smiled easily at him. "About your pal Malfoy, right? I'm not going to make him my new Beater just because he's your friend, Pipsqueak."

Harry had the sinking sensation he was never going to outlive the nickname they'd given him in first year. "I don't want you to pick him if he's not best. I just thought you should know if I were you, I'd take him. He's a good flyer. Watch his dodges."

"Okay, Potter. But I want you up in the stands, no helping him from the pitch."

"Sure," Harry said, retiring in triumph. He jogged over to the equipment shed and unlocked his broomstick from its stand, carrying it out to the pitch.

"Here," he said to Draco. "It's faster than the practice brooms. Couple of other students have their own broomsticks, you might as well use mine."

Draco looked at it as if it might bite him. "What if I crash it?"

Harry shrugged. "Then I'll get Sirius to buy me a Firebolt. TAKE IT, Malfoy, and stop cringing."

Fire flashed in Draco's eyes for just a second, but a second was all Harry was asking for. He grasped the Nimbus and reached for the pile of greaves nearby. Harry nodded curtly and gestured for Neville and Padma to come with him to the stands.

"Harry!" Towler waved him over, rolling his eyes at Pucey when Neville and Padma came too. "Come help us make fun of the losers."

"Little Cricket's going out for Chaser, isn't ee a snookum?" Pucey said, pointing to where Colin Creevey was putting on a pair of gloves much too huge for him.

"He'll never make it," Harry said. "He's too small, even for a Seeker. Nother few years, maybe."

"Malfoy ready to knock them around?"

"I hope," Harry said truthfully.

"No more training with him once we start practice, mind," Towler said. "Can't go giving away all our secrets. Flint hasn't even mentioned a new playbook yet."

"There's still time," Harry said. "Ah, looks like it's starting..."

Other students were arriving in the stands as the prospective players kicked off from the ground, some with a bit more difficulty than others. Draco seemed startled at the speed with which the Nimbus rose, but he covered it well, tossing the bat from hand to hand while he waited for the signal to start.
"Oh god, he's going to drop the bat," Neville said.

"He's a sure hand," said a new voice, and they all twisted around to see Remus and Sirius standing in the row behind them, hands in their pockets, looking for all the world like well-grown seventh years.

"Sirius!" Harry said, startled. Sirius winked at him. "What're you doing here?"

"Came through the floo. Seems a shame to spend the year in Hogsmeade and not see any Quidditch, and I thought Malfoy might like a friendly face," he said, sitting down. He offered his hand to the other Slytherin players, which probably took all the tact he had. "Sirius Black," he said.

"Adrian Pucey," Pucey replied, shaking his hand and looking faintly awed. "That's Towler."

"Martin Towler, sir," Towler said, equally wide-eyed. "I play your position."

"So I hear," Sirius said. Remus had wandered over to a knot of Gryffindors across the aisle and was pointing out one of the Gryffindor hopefuls. "Didn't think anyone would even remember I played at school."

"You nearly killed Hammerhead Gens in the seventy-five House Cup!" Towler exclaimed. Sirius looked rueful. "Knocked the snitch right out of his fingers, they had to have Kennilworthy Whisp himself mediate the call!"

"Who won?" Harry asked.

"Don't you even know?" Towler asked, surprised.

"I live with him," Harry said with a grin. "He's the guy who leaves his laundry on the sofa, not the Quidditch idol."

"Gryffindor won, but nobody was really satisfied," Sirius said. "I mean, we felt like it wasn't a fair win if people disagreed, and Ravenclaw felt like it wasn't a fair win at all anyway."

"So what'd you do?" Padma asked.

"Snuck out of dormitory after hours with pretty nearly the whole student body and had a second game," Sirius said, savouring the memory. "Dumbledore had to punish us -- everyone involved, Detention was so big they had to hold it in the Great Hall -- but he let us finish the match first. Gryffindor won fair the second time and we shook hands over it with Ravenclaw."

"Hey, there he goes!" Neville said, pointing to the pitch. Draco was dodging in and out of a complicated play, riding wing on a Ravenclaw would-be Chaser who was being dogged by a Bludger. He leaned forward, took both hands off the broomstick, swung forehand and smacked it straight into a knot of Seekers following the Snitch. Harry and Sirius cheered loudly.

"How's he doing?" Remus asked, strolling back over to sit with Sirius behind the others.

"Brilliantly, really," Sirius said. "What were you up to?"

"Making illegal bets with students over who's going to be Gryffindor Seeker," Remus replied easily. "My money's on Ginevra Weasley, personally."

"Little Ginny? The girl who used to pour paint in Harry's hair?" Sirius asked. "Is that her out there?"
"Yep. She's only a second-year, but she's clever and she hasn't any bad habits yet. Weasleys are practically born on broomsticks anyway, you remember Charlie Weasley. Wood's a fool if he doesn't pick her."

"Betting with students," Harry tsked. "Bad form."

"Well, if I win they have to write me a paper each on magical ethics, and if they win I've got to deliver a lecture on sex magic for any interested fourth-years and above," Remus said complacently. "Either way, they learn something."

"Sex magic?" asked Towler and Pucey in unison. Sirius sniggered. "Will that be allowed?" Pucey continued.

"Oh, I imagine I'll have to get parental permit slips from anyone who wants to attend, but I don't see why it shouldn't be. If you're allowed to dissect birds in Divination and rats in Potions, I don't think sex ought to be off limits. Besides, I'm sure Ginny will get the spot."

"Oof, there goes Cedric," Harry said, pointing to where the Hufflepuff Captain had grabbed his own broom and taken off to break up a nasty scrum between a couple of Chasers.

"He's rather good looking, isn't he?" Padma asked, leaning on the railing.

"Too old for you," Harry replied. "And too tall to be a really great Seeker anyway."

"There's more to people than Quidditch positions, Harry," Padma said.

"News to me," Sirius teased.

Just then, Draco darted between two other Hufflepuffs, who were both angling for a Bludger that was coming in a high, easy arc towards one goal. He cut close past Cedric and looked like he was going to collide with Ginny for a split second.

They heard him shout "Keep going!" at Ginny, who leaned forward on her broomstick and stretched out her left hand. Draco passed just above and to her left, pulled the Nimbus into a flat 180 spin, and brought his bat up just as the Bludger the others had already hit would have collided with her.

The impact of the spin, combined with the speed of the ball, knocked him backwards and he flailed, hooking his knee and one hand around the end of the Nimbus. Cedric blew a whistle loud and everyone stopped; even the Bludgers dropped flat to the ground.

In the silence, Ginny shouted "I got it!", holding up the Snitch triumphantly. Draco was still grappling with his broomstick. Cedric rose fast, grasping the collar of the other boy's robes and pulling him up onto the hovering Nimbus again. He patted Draco on the back, said something the spectators in the stands couldn't hear, and descended slowly to speak with Oliver Wood. When he'd touched down, he blew the whistle again and the Bludgers immediately rose, play resuming as before.

"Damn," Harry said, as Draco drifted out of play and slowly over to the stands. "He must have kicked him off."

"Stupid," Sirius said. "That was a bloody good play. He knew where the Bludger was going to be before it was even there."

Draco was almost level with the stands now, his face blank, hands white-knuckle gripping his
broomstick.

"What'd he say?" Harry asked hesitantly. Draco gave him an empty look.

"He said I'm in," he told them, as if he himself didn't believe it. "He said, good play. You're in."

Sure enough, the rest of the Hufflepuff Beater hopefuls were dropping to the grass as Cedric called them down one by one. Harry and Padma helped Draco off his broomstick and over the edge of the stands, Harry pulling the Nimbus after him. Sirius slapped him on the back in congratulations.

"Now you get to do that," Harry said, pointing at the still-scrimmaging players, "Every week!"

"Well, hopefully not the falling-off-your-broomstick part," Neville added.

"Brilliant, Draco!" Padma said. Even Towler nodded professionally to Draco as one Beater to another.

It took Draco five or six minutes to come down from the adrenaline rush, but when he did, a huge grin split his face.

"I'm in!" he said triumphantly.
Chapter 5

At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue or description verbatim from canon.
In this instance, a portion of the Dark Arts class is lifted with minor alterations from
canon.

After the excitement of the Quidditch tryouts ended, school seemed to pick up in earnest, though it was an unseasonably hot September and most of the students would rather have been outside. They dreamed of cramming in a few last hours of freedom before the autumn rains began to set in, but the professors kept a tight grip.

Remus' classes continued to be the highlight of the week, and not just for the third-years; everyone seemed to be enjoying them, almost looking forward to them. They didn't face down the Boggart again (he'd been permanently destroyed by some of Remus' fifth-years) but they quickly moved on to Red Caps and Kappas, nasty creatures both and only dispatched through defensive spells. Remus promised he'd stop infringing on Care of Magical Creatures soon enough, but nobody minded; after the hippogriff attacked Draco, Hagrid had reduced the third-years to flobberworms, immensely boring creatures he was growing for Professor Snape's potions storeroom.

Severus found himself nearly as restless as his students, though much better at hiding it, of course. He would not have admitted for the world that he actually missed Dora, but he did confess confusedly to McGonagall that -- for the first time -- he was finding the silence of his rooms oppressive in the evenings.

"Perhaps you're feeling pent up down in the Dungeons," she replied knowingly. "It is a rather monastic life for a young man like yourself. Where is Nymphadora these days, anyway?"

He was so aggrieved by her absence it didn't occur to him until later to question the propriety of the inquiry. "On the continent. She sends postcards," he added, annoyed.

"Oh yes! Dumbledore got one of her postcards to you by mistake, didn't he? The one with the -- "

"I'm surprised she isn't cited for sending obscenity through the mail!" Severus interrupted.

"I didn't think she'd written anything so terribly naughty on it -- "

"It was the front to which I was referring," Snape said sullenly.

"Dumbledore seemed very amused by it. I shouldn't worry if I were you. She's bound to be home soon," McGonagall said, patting his arm. "You can shout at her then."

They had been discussing it over tea after a Friday-evening staff meeting, and perhaps McGonagall had a little of the Sight herself -- or perhaps she was merely well-informed. The next morning, Severus woke up to a thump and a curse in his rooms. Instinct overriding common sense, he had thrown off the sheets and taken his wand from the nightstand before he even saw who it was.

"Is that a wand in your hand or are you just happy to see me?" Dora Tonks asked. She was covered in ash from head to foot and rubbing her elbow, which was turning red and starting to swell.
"What on earth?" he asked, not sure even what to demand first.

"You never changed the passcode on your floo," she said, gently pushing his wand-hand away and planting a sooty kiss on his nose. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I didn't expect early morning visits from the filthiest Auror of my acquaintance," he said, running a thumb down her forehead and showing her the black dust on it. "Have you been playing in the chimney?"

"I got lost," she complained. "I tripped getting in and my elbow bumped something and I ended up in some pub in Cockerham."

"Cockerham? Where in Hades is that?"

"Well you might ask!" she said. "It's a good thing I still had my robes on!"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Is there a reason, Auror Tonks, that you would not have your robes on while flooing into the private rooms of a Professor at Hogwarts School?"

She grinned and shrugged. One shoulder of her uniform robes slid down her arm, revealing what was definitely not standard-Auror-issue underwear.

"You did miss me, didn't you?" she asked, kissing him. He brought one hand up to grasp the back of her neck, and touched the other -- still holding his wand -- to her bare arm.

"Scourgify," he said against her mouth, and she shrieked as the cleaning spell cascaded over her, raising goosebumps on her skin.

"You," she said damply, through a burst of soap suds, "know how to kill a mood, Severus Snape!"

"I'll ring for breakfast," he said calmly, kneeling on the hearth. "Denbigh! Large breakfast for two, heating charms!"

"I don't want breakfast!"

"You will," he said, and then added over his shoulder, "Especially as I doubt we'll be leaving the room all day."

She stopped halfway through rubbing her hair dry on her now-clean Auror's robe. "Oh?" she asked delicately. He accepted the breakfast tray from the fireplace, set it on the table near the hearth, and crossed to stand in front of her.

"Well," he said, kissing her, "once I'm finished properly saying hello, there's the matter of the postcards to clear up."

***

The same Saturday morning that Dora Tonks was thoroughly enjoying her homecoming, Remus Lupin was still ranting about the events of the night before.

"Moony, you're going to give yourself some kind of condition," Sirius said, really and truly worried. He wasn't sure he had ever seen Remus sustain any kind of anger for any length of time, let alone nearly twelve hours.

"Well, then they'd have to call in my substitute even earlier!" Remus said, pacing furiously back and forth. He'd come home (such as it was at the moment) and paced all evening; he'd gone to bed
and slept restlessly. Then he'd gotten up, made a terrible breakfast, and begun pacing again.

"I mean, how could he?" he exploded, stopping and turning to Sirius, spreading his arms wide. "Dumbledore, of all people. I told him I was handling it, I told him I'd leave notes..."

"Dumbledore does things his own way, always has," Sirius replied. He was still sore from all the fiddly little painting he'd had to do on the house where charms wouldn't work, and tired from the interior cleaning, pulling down the blue wallpaper and preparing the walls for painting. Plus there was unpacking to do and their bed still lacked a frame. He wondered if he could channel some of Remus' anger into helping him assemble some of the new furniture that had been delivered. "What did he say, exactly?"

"I said to him, Headmaster, I'm preparing my notes for the first full moon, I expect I'll be out Monday the fourth and back on Tuesday," Remus recited. "All I wanted to know was who was going to cover for me or if I needed to ask around and find someone myself."

"And he said?"

"He said there's no need, he was arranging a guest lecturer to handle my classes on Monday and Tuesday if necessary, and he'd have others throughout the year."

"Which is thoughtful of him," Sirius pointed out.

"Thoughtful! Sirius, he called the most viciously bigoted, small-minded -- "

"Did he actually call the Ministry and ask for someone? I thought you said -- "

"Will you please be on my side for a minute!" Remus shouted. Dobby, who had been trying to quietly and unobtrusively clear up the breakfast dishes, squeaked and disappeared under the sink. Sirius stared at Remus for a second, stunned, and then grinned. Remus let his shoulders slump and leaned on the kitchen counter.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be! This is all very healthy for you. I've been telling you all these years not to repress!" Sirius said, still grinning. "My fault, Moony. Yes, it's very wrong that your students are going to be placed at the mercy of a Ministry stooge, but I'm sure it's some kind of political move to get the Ministry off his back so that he can call interesting people the rest of the year."

"I think it's a conspiracy to make me come in and teach class. I mean -- I could, you know. I've been up and around the day after a good change before. I could teach class."

"Moony," Sirius said, standing up and walking to where he was leaning against the counter. He wrapped his arms around Remus' waist and kissed the back of his neck. "Go talk to Dumbledore. Shouting at me is fun, but isn't going to get you anywhere. Go shout at him for a bit. He'll be delighted, I promise."

"I can't shout at him, he's the Headmaster."

"And you're not a fifth-year anymore. Tell him you want to choose the guest lecturers for the rest of the year. I'll come and lecture if you like."

"On what?" Remus asked, distracted.

"I'm a Black, we practically invented the Dark Arts. Get Andi to come talk, she can tell about
cleaning out Grimmauld Place."

Remus sighed. "I should just let him do it. He probably won't pick an entire year's worth of idiots."

"Remus."

"What?" Remus groaned. "Fine, fine. I'll talk to him on Monday."

"Why not now? He's probably at breakfast."

"Sirius --"

"No better time to make anyone agree to anything than at a meal. Catch him with his mouth full, then he can't say no."

Remus looked at him suspiciously. "Is that why Harry always asks my permission for something while I'm eating?"

Sirius looked entirely too innocent to actually be innocent. Remus rubbed his forehead, then went to the front door and pulled on his shoes.

"Do I look all right?" he asked.

"You look fine for a Saturday morning. Go," Sirius replied. "And if Severus Snape is there, tread on his toes for me."

"You have to stop being mean to him, he's making this new potion for me and we're very grateful," Remus said, taking down a pinch of floo powder and lighting the pile of dry kindling in the fireplace with a flick of his wand.

"Good luck," Sirius said. Remus threw the powder into the floo, climbed in, and announced "My rooms!"

Sirius, grateful for a few minutes' silence, fished Dobby out from under the sink and sent him to Hogsmeade for some decent sausages, then settled down with tea and a book in the only fully assembled chair in the bare, box-filled living room.

When Dobby returned after ten minutes, he was still engrossed in his book and ate while reading. After twenty minutes he was mildly concerned; at thirty minutes downright alarmed. He was about to floo into Hogwarts himself and demand to know what they'd done with Moony when Remus reappeared in a cloud of ash.

"How did it go?" Sirius asked, trying to sound calm.

"He made me have a bowl of oatmeal with those little sugar dinosaur eggs in it," Remus said, throwing himself down into a chair. He looked a little more relaxed, at any rate. "He said if I wrote up a proposal for the rest of the year he'd have the board of governors sign off on it, as long as the speakers had reasonable merit. He did say you weren't allowed to lecture on pranks."

"He knows me too well," Sirius said gravely. "But that's good news, right?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I mean, yes it is. But, you know..." Remus leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. "Basically, he made me eat a proper breakfast and gave me homework. I'm never actually going to be a grownup, apparently."

Sirius laughed and set his book down, resting his arms on the table.
"So," he said, "let's plot who you want to ask to lecture."

***

Remus' suspicions were confirmed the day he started the Wolfsbane Potion.

"Is all this really necessary?" he asked, shivering shirtlessly in the Hogwarts hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was making a detailed examination of his scars while he listed off everything he'd eaten in the past two days.

"That depends," Snape remarked, a charmed quill hovering over a piece of parchment floating in midair. "Do you wish to receive the Wolfsbane potion or not?"

Dora's presence in Scotland -- he'd seen her around Hogsmeade -- seemed to have done little for Snape's disposition, though apparently he was grading his students slightly easier.

"Yes," Remus answered.

"Then you will please inform me what you had for dinner this evening."

"A rare steak and some of those marinated carrots. A couple of dinner rolls, a small bowl of sherbert, and two glasses of wine," Remus recited, vaguely annoyed.

"Does that constitute an increase in appetite from your usual?" Snape inquired.

"Yes."

"Is this habitual?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Yes. About a week before the moon I tend to start eating more, particularly rare meat."

"Your weight is listed as...eighty-one point six kilograms. Is that normal?"

"Within reason, yes."

"Mmh." The quill scratched on the parchment. "There are dietary restrictions accompanying the potion."

"Permanent?" Remus asked, looking vaguely worried.

"No. After your evening meal you are not to consume refined sugar, acidic fruit juice, or more than two glasses of water. Once you have consumed the potion, you may sip water; do not consume any food for at least thirty minutes."

Remus saluted. Snape looked at him sourly.

"The measurement is precise, so please drink it all," he said, walking around the bed to where a set of brass scales, a goblet, and a small cauldron stood. He placed the cauldron on the scales, adjusted the weights in the other cup, and began to ladle a smoking liquid into it. The scales clanked slightly; he picked up the goblet and offered it to Remus.

"Severus, I know this is troublesome and I just wanted to say again that I'm -- oh God," Remus said, nearly spitting his first sip back into the cup. "Is it supposed to taste like second-hand bile?"

Snape looked at him impassively. "Bile is one of the ingredients," he said, deadpan.
"Wonderful," Remus said, throwing his head back and downing it in two large gulps. He covered his mouth, winced, and set the goblet down carefully. It was still smoking.

"Sugar makes it useless," Snape continued, picking it up.

"I do appreciate it, you know," Remus said, turning around as Snape crossed back to the cauldron again. "Bile-flavour and everything. If it works, it'll be..." he trailed off haplessly. It was difficult to explain, especially to someone as controlled as Severus Snape, how horrifying the loss of control, the loss of memory always was.

"I shall expect a full report on its effect as soon as possible after sunrise on the third of October," Snape said.

"I'm generally asleep after a full moon sunrise, but I'll do my best," Remus replied. "Thank you, Severus."

Snape did not say "You're welcome," but he didn't scowl as Remus dressed and departed, which he supposed was a step in the right direction.

***

The morning of October fourth dawned remarkably rainy, and Harry wondered whether Remus and Sirius had even been able to venture outside for the full moon. They did all right indoors so long as Padfoot was around, that much he knew, but the new potion Professor Snape was brewing for Remus was an unknown quantity. He hoped they were both okay, and tried to reassure himself that he'd have heard if they weren't.

Remus hadn't told the class he was going to be gone that day, probably because he thought there was an even chance he might still make it in. Harry didn't see him at breakfast, however, and knew with a sinking heart that they were going to have a substitute.

He'd asked Remus what they were going to be doing in class if Remus wasn't there, but Remus had smiled frustratingly and replied, "If you really don't want to be treated any differently, Harry, I can't tell you. I wish I could, believe me -- I wish I could warn you. But if nothing else...it'll be a good test of your critical thinking skills."

And with that enigmatic remark, he'd gone off to Hogsmeade for the weekend.

"Who do you think it'll be?" Neville asked, as they made their way down the corridor towards Defence class. "You never know, it might be Dora!"

"I don't think Remus would be as upset about it as he was if it were Dora," Harry answered. "Whoever it is, he doesn't like them much."

"Cornelius Fudge!" Neville laughed.

"If he's teaching our Defence class I'll laugh in his face," Harry replied. Parvati Patil and Hermione Granger caught up with them at that point.

"Did you hear?" Hermione said to Neville.

"Hear what?" Neville asked.

"Someone from the Ministry's teaching Professor Lupin's class today! He's sick," she added.
"Never," Harry drawled.

"I hope it isn't serious," Parvati said.

"Parvati thinks Professor Lupin is dreamy," Neville told Harry. Parvati hit him in the shoulder. "Ow!"

"All the Gryffindor girls do," she said. "Even Hermione."

"I do not!" Hermione said, but she blushed.

They slowed as they approached the Defence classroom, Harry putting a finger to his lips and poking his head around the doorway cautiously. At first he didn't see anyone; then some of the shadows in one corner resolved themselves into a stout, wobbly sort of shape.

A soft, fluttery, high-pitched voice spoke. "Come in, young man, do come in."

Harry glanced at the others, shrugged, and strode into the classroom, sitting in the back -- far from his usual spot -- and slinging his bag over the back of his chair. Hermione and Parvati, curiosity overcoming them, sat down in front. Neville sat across the aisle from Harry, close enough to pass notes without being close enough that the teacher would immediately separate them.

His eyes adjusting to the unusually dim light, Harry was finally able to make out a figure and a face for their new substitute. After a moment's consideration he decided that "toad" was probably a good description, though that might be an insult to nice toads everywhere.

She was a short, stout woman with a broad and flabby face, no neck to speak of and a wide, almost slack-jawed mouth. Her large, close-set eyes bulged slightly under hair that was pulled tightly back into curls on the top of her head, tied with a black velvet bow. She wore a fluffy pink cardigan as well, and a ruffled pink skirt that would have looked more appropriate on someone around nine years old.

Other students began to arrive, and she greeted the more hesitant ones in the same oddly girlish tone. Surprisingly, the last person to arrive, in a knot of Gryffindors, was Albus Dumbledore.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he said, striding up to the front. His clear, confident voice was a relief after ten minutes of the woman's cooing. "Unfortunately, Professor Lupin is ill and cannot be with us today. However, in his place I have arranged for a very...unique substitute. Ms. Dolores Umbridge -- "

"Hem, hem," said the woman behind him. He turned to her, curiously.

"I am Dolores Jane Umbridge," she said, stepping forward, "Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge."

"Just so," Dumbledore said drily. "And she has come here today to speak to you about the dangers of magical beasts, which I understand Professor Lupin is currently reviewing with you. I hope you will all give her the respect and attention she deserves, and show her the true spirit of inquiry for which Hogwarts School is so well-known."

With that cryptic statement and a very slight smile on his face, he turned and glided serenely away. The entire class of Slytherin and Gryffindor third-years stared with unabashed amazement at the only human being they'd ever seen interrupt Albus Dumbledore on a technicality.

"Well," she said. "This is nice. Good morning!"
A few people mumbled some form of greeting in reply; most were too amazed to speak.

"Tut! That won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply 'Good morning, Miss Umbridge'. One more time. Good morning!"

"Good morning, Miss Umbridge," the class echoed back at her.

"There, now, that wasn't too difficult, was it? Wands away please," she added, and Harry rolled his eyes at Neville, tucking his wand up his sleeve and taking out his inkpot.

"Now, I understand from an examination of Professor Lupin's notes that he has been educating you on the dangers of magical creatures, although his curriculum is, I may say, not in keeping with current Ministry policies on the subject..."

Harry bridled at the silent criticism of Remus. Hermione Granger's hand shot up.

"Questions at the end," Umbridge said dismissively.

"It's about Ministry policy," Hermione said.

"Stand when you address me, if you please."

Hermione obediently stood up. "With all due respect, Madam Umbridge --"

"Miss Umbridge. And you are...?"

Harry grinned. Score one for Granger and Gryffindor.

"Hermione Granger, Miss Umbridge. The Ministry doesn't set Hogwarts policy, Headmaster Dumbledore does."

"For now," Umbridge said coolly. "Be seated, Miss Granger."

"Ms. Granger," Hermione corrected, seating herself primly. Umbridge decided to ignore it, taking out her wand and pointing it at a piece of chalk, which leapt into the air.

"I am sure Professor Lupin's approach to 'education' is thoroughly unique," she continued disapprovingly. "But I am here to present the Ministry's views on the topics of..."

The chalk began to write on the board, outlining a short list:

1. Classification of dangerous creatures
2. Identification of dangerous creatures
3. Various situations in which defensive magic may safely be used
4. Proper authorities to notify

It was an extremely tedious lecture, complete with fuzzy black-and-white slides whose occupants themselves looked bored, barely moving in their frames. A couple of Slytherins tried to even the score by raising their hands at various points, but Umbridge pointedly ignored them. First they learned about the X-classification system, which Remus had gone over on the first day of class just to make sure they were aware of it: how various animals were rated as threats, from a single X for nearly-harmless creatures to five for the most dangerous creatures like dragons and acromantulae. Then they were shown lots of pictures of low-risk animals and the various people who had discovered, and sometimes been killed, by them.

Harry didn't really pay much attention until she reached the end of her second point. Then he sat up
so suddenly that he woke Neville, who was dozing across from him.

"The werewolf is considered a five-X rated beast," she was saying, indicating a slide of a man in mid-transformation. Harry recognised it; he'd seen it in a book years before. "There are two methods of detecting a werewolf, one for when it is in what is known as Mortal form, and one for when it is in wolf form. The five methods of detecting it in wolf form are...?"

Harry's hand shot up.

"Yes, Mr...?"

"Potter, ma'am," Harry said, standing. He fought down a laugh; he was tempted to ask her to call him Miss Potter. "The five methods of differentiating a werewolf from an ordinary wolf are in the shape of the snout, elongated in a werewolf, the colour of the pupils, deep yellow, a significant tuft on the tip of the tail, the enlarged size of the paws, and the length of the incisors."

She gave a pleased sort of whistling sigh.

"Very good, Mr. Potter! What a star pupil you are. And can you tell me the methods of differentiating a werewolf in mortal form?"

"You mean human form?" Harry asked.

"When they appear to be human," she replied.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said. "Werewolves aren't dangerous as humans."

Umbridge shook her head, giggling. "Mr. Potter, such naiveté! Why -- "

"I suppose you could count not being able to get a job as a way of differentiation," Harry added. She froze. The entire class seemed to grow tense. "And having to undergo painful physical examinations on Ministry orders. But then you know that, Madam Umbridge. You wrote the law."

"Miss Umbridge," she said sharply. Most of the Slytherins snickered. "Sit down, Mr. Potter."

"I have a question, Miss Umbridge," Harry said.

"Questions at the end," she replied. A sickly-sweet tone had invaded her voice; she was going to win, because she was the teacher, and she knew it.

Well, not if Harry could help it.

"It is impossible to differentiate a werewolf from an ordinary human being in Mortal form," Harry said loudly.

"That is untrue, Mr. Potter," she cried triumphantly. "Werewolves in mortal form can be differentiated by the shape of the pupil, the positioning of the eyebrows -- "

"Madam Umbridge, may I ask what source you're using?" Parvati said, standing up. Harry, who was still standing, grinned at her.

"Questions at the end," Umbridge repeated, turning to the blackboard. "The Ministry's approved source on werewolf physiology is Hoff's treatise of 1637 -- "

"Not Sanzecki?" Harry asked, honestly startled this time. "He's much more recent and his book has actual statistics in it, I've seen them."
"Anyone not in their seats when I turn around will be given an immediate detention," Umbridge said. Parvati gave Harry a "what can I do?" shrug and dropped back into her seat. Harry sat down on the very edge of his, thrusting his legs out into the aisle. When she turned around, she smiled sweetly at Harry, who had crossed his arms defiantly over his chest. The score was still technically two to one for Gryffindor.

Theo Nott raised his hand and spoke without standing. "Who's this Sanzecki bloke anyway?"

Umbridge deliberately turned away from Theo and began speaking again. Theo shrugged and put his hand down. "Is he trustworthy?" he asked over Umbridge's pre-prepared speech. She kept talking.

Pansy Parkinson looked positively wicked as she stood up. "Madam Umbridge, I'd like to hear more about why the Ministry's approved source is Hoff's Treatise of whenever..."

"Madam Umbridge said sixteen thirty seven," Hermione replied, also standing. Both girls sat down, grinning. Umbridge was still speaking, but nobody was paying the slightest bit of attention now. Every few sentences, someone would call out a question and a short contest would ensue to see who could keep the questions going until they ran out. By the time class ended, they'd managed to drown her out for nearly forty minutes. Harry was in pain from keeping the laughter inside, because everyone in that classroom knew that as soon as someone laughed, the fun would actually end.

Once in the corridor, however, with the Defence classroom's door shut with a slam behind them, Harry doubled over in the hallway and laughed until he wept.

"Harry Potter, valiant leader of the student insurrection of '93," Neville said, slapping him on the back. "That was brilliant, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry gasped. "Oh god, let's go eat lunch. Remus is going to be absolutely furious if he hears, but it was worth it."

***

October 4, 1993
Hogsmeade

Dear Andromeda,

Well, here I am, writing to you -- partly because I want to hear from you, partly for lack of better occupation, I'm afraid. I'm on bed-rest today after the moon, though I don't mind it so much. Teaching is terrifically exhausting and it's almost nice to have an excuse to skive off a day, especially a Monday.

I'm writing from the bedroom overlooking Creadonagh Valley in the house Sirius has purchased on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. We haven't named it yet. At the start of the school year I thought the Oh Merlin It's So Bloody Orange house would be a good name; Sirius has since repainted it a nice shade of green with white trim and it's almost painfully domestic. Painfully Domestic House, however, doesn't precisely have the right ring to it either.

I was glad to hear that the Werewolf Support Network hasn't caused you any problems so far. It sounds as though you have good, hardworking people staying with you and I'm sure they're grateful for the assistance. I wouldn't worry too much about the younger girl -- pride is hard to overcome, and so is natural shyness. She'll warm up to you if you give her time, I've no doubt.
Perhaps Nymphadora might take her to lunch, it's hard to make friends in a strange new city. The important thing is that she's working and earning some money and self-respect. It's a good thing you're doing, despite Severus' reservations.

In fact, speaking of Severus, I've just finished up my first account ever of a full moon spent as a wolf, for his research. It took quite a while to get it all down, though Sirius helped a bit and I wanted to record it anyway. I've spent so many years wondering what it was like, so many years having to go on faith and assurances by Sirius and the others that I hadn't hurt anyone -- hadn't hurt one of them, which was always my biggest fear. Now...

Well, I've never done hard drugs, but I imagine the experience is similar, and similarly hard to describe. I've always remembered the pain; this time I remembered so much more -- the aftershock of pain, you know -- like how a scratch can hurt more an hour afterwards than it did at the time. Even so, it's a background echo in the end. Everything becomes so much more vivid, so much more sensory. Every nerve seems to stand up and scream its presence. You take for granted that cats and dogs and wolves have whiskers, but you never really think about what it must feel like, until you feel it. It's absolutely amazing, Andromeda. All these years I've thought I'd trade in my lycanthropy in a flash for a chance at a normal life, and I still would -- trade it, that is -- but...

I'd hesitate now. I'd pause just for a moment and ask myself if it was worth it. It would be worth it, to live like normal people do, but I'm glad to have at least experienced the wolf on my terms, not on his.

Which leads me to the other thing I thought I ought to tell you. Scent is ridiculously vivid, in the wolf, and the smell of humans and magic are both very distinct. Once we'd decided I was more or less safe, we got out of the house and I must admit I lost myself in the Forbidden Forest for a while, on the Hogsmeade side where the Dementors aren't permitted to go. It was just so amazing, the richness of -- of existence, Andi.

But while we were out there I picked up a scent that I didn't recognise, or rather I recognised it and couldn't place it. I spent all morning wrestling with what it might be, but I think I've finally figured it out. It smells like Peter Pettigrew. Like he was in the Forest, all over it in fact.

I can't be certain, really, it could be my mind playing tricks on me and the Aurors in the paper have said over and over again that Lucius Malfoy can't be anywhere near Hogsmeade. I don't even know that Lucius and Peter are together, though I strongly suspect it. All the same I've written to Nymphadora about it. I can't come out and say it publicly, people will ask how I knew and that's something I have to protect as much for Harry and Sirius as for myself, but Nymphadora can tip off others on the sly, and I thought you ought to know. Draco's your nephew and Narcissa your sister, which makes you a target -- and I'm certain that where Peter goes, Lucius follows. By now it might even be the other way around. Sirius and I are protecting Draco, and so is Severus in his own way, but you and Ted need to be careful too. Please look after yourself down there in London.

Remus.

***

Remus did return to class on Tuesday, against the combined advice of Madam Pomfrey and Sirius. He walked steadily enough and his voice was clear, but his robes hung somewhat loosely on his shoulders and there were dark shadows under his eyes. The Change took more of a toll on a thirty-something than it had on a teenager, but the potion and Padfoot's presence together had ensured that he came through unscathed, for once. Besides, he'd had two days of bed rest on Snape's orders, plus another embarrassingly thorough examination.
He arrived early to put his classroom in order and look over his notes; apparently that Umbridge woman hadn't left any record of what she'd gone over with Monday's classes, which was shabby of her but pretty in-character. His classes went mainly without a hitch until the last hour of the school day, which he had free on Tuesdays. As the students were filing out, Dumbledore looked in -- and some of the students smirked when they saw him, never a good sign.

"Remus, I was wondering if I might discuss a small...disciplinary measure with you," Dumbledore remarked, serenely seating himself in one of the front row desks. Remus took the desk across from him, relieved to be able to sit down.

"Of course -- why me, though?"

"It concerns yesterday's Defence classes," Dumbledore replied, taking a roll of parchment out of an inner pocket of his voluminous robes. "Apparently your afternoon classes were quite docile and pleasant, according to the account I received from Miss Umbridge. Your morning double-class, on the other hand..."

Remus put a hand to his forehead. "My third years," he said. "Harry did something horrifying, didn't he."

"It would certainly seem so, according to this letter of complaint. To judge by Miss Umbridge's vitriol, he only barely stopped short at physical assault. I shall spare you her details, but it appears that Mr. Potter insulted her, encouraged a mass insubordination, argued with her, called her a liar, and demonstrated a complete lack of respect for the institution of Hogwarts, the Ministry and, so it would seem, all of Wizarding Britain. She recommends his expulsion from school. She recommends mass punishment for the rest of the class as well, for disrespectful and insubordinate behaviour hardly befitting children half their age."

Remus stared at him, stunned. "What on earth did they do, tie her up and play may-pole with her?"

"I imagine she's too short," Dumbledore said calmly. Remus tried not to smile. "As I understand it, the debate began over a portion of her lecture regarding werewolves."

Remus was instantly sober. "Werewolves, sir?"

"Mr. Potter has strong views on the treatment of werewolves. So does Dolores Umbridge, as you know."

"I see. What are we to do?"

Dumbledore studied him. "As their teacher, it is primarily up to you. Of course we cannot allow disrespect for a guest at the school go unpunished, but I've found corporal punishment very ineffective on disobedient children, on the whole, as I'm sure you'll recall."

"But we have to show we did something," Remus replied.

"Just so."

***

Harry knew that he was in deep trouble when Dumbledore stood up for evening announcements at Tuesday dinner and requested all Gryffindor and Slytherin third-years to report for a special meeting in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom following the meal.

A chorus of knowing "ooooh"s rippled through the hall and Harry looked up to find Remus gazing
directly at him; Umbridge must have called a conference or left a note or something. Harry was pretty confident he wouldn't be expelled, but he had no expectations after that -- and while he was fine being angry with Remus, he didn't like Remus being angry with him.

"It'll probably just be detention for a month or something," Neville said bracingly as they walked towards class, extra food wrapped in napkins in their pockets in case it was a long detention.

"That's your idea of whistling in the dark? Detention for a month? I have Quidditch, you know. Merlin, what if I'm thrown off the team?"

"Remus wouldn't do that, he knows you love Quidditch."

"That's exactly why he would do it if he had to punish me badly enough," Harry said.

"When was the last time Remus punished you?"

Harry had to really think about that one. Punishments in the Black-Lupin-Potter house were rare occasions and usually resulted more from getting caught than from whatever he'd done in the first place.

He hadn't actually formulated an answer before they reached the classroom and sat down. Dumbledore was seated off to one side; Remus was leaning against his desk, arms braced on the edge, head bowed in what was probably exhaustion. Harry felt a twinge of guilt over his behaviour for the first time. He hadn't intended it to put any kind of stress on Remus.

"I'm sure you all know why you're here," Remus said, when everyone had arrived. "You're not stupid enough to think that Umbridge wouldn't inform me of what you did during yesterday's class."

Hermione's hand immediately went up. Remus looked at her, and she slowly put it down again.

"I have been given a detailed account of yesterday's class by Ms. Umbridge," Remus continued. "Ms. Umbridge was a guest of the school, and reports to the Minister for Magic himself," he said. "You don't have to like her, but you were required to listen to her and wisdom should have dictated that you give someone in her position a good account of Hogwarts school. A good account of me, if it comes to that, as your teacher and the person responsible for your discipline."

"But she was lying," Harry blurted before he could help himself. The rest of the class nodded in assent. "And worse, she was boring."

"Do you think Hogwarts School's primary goal is to entertain you?" Remus inquired.

"Well, you always manage it when you teach, so I should think it would be in the bylaws somewhere," Harry retorted. Others began to speak until Remus held up his hands; everyone fell silent immediately.

"I will grant that Ms. Umbridge's account is likely biased, as I have had some experience with the woman myself," he said. Harry glanced at Dumbledore, who wore a faint smile on his face that told him nothing of the Headmaster's thoughts. "I would like to hear your side, but not from everyone at once."

He consulted a scroll on the desk behind him.
"She mentions Harry Potter, Parvati Patil, and Hermione Granger by name," he said. "You three, stand if you please. Can you tell me why you are mentioned above and beyond?"

"We're the only ones whose names she learned," Parvati said.

"Oh, I reckon it was because I called her a liar and refuted her evidence," Harry said.

"On the subject of...werewolves, I see," Remus said, consulting the scroll again. "What did you say to her, Mr. Potter?"

Harry swallowed. "I volunteered to give the five ways a werewolf is differentiated from an ordinary wolf. Then she asked me how you tell a werewolf from a human being and I told her you couldn't, and that it didn't matter because werewolves aren't dangerous except at the full moon."

Remus nodded. Harry hesitated, then continued. "She said I was wrong."

"Harry felt he had a moral imperative," Hermione put in.

"A moral imperative?" Remus asked, with a trace of amusement.

"Werewolves are people too, sir," Hermione said. "Nobody else goes around teaching us racism. Why should she get away with it?"

"The Ministry-approved source on werewolves is some musty old book from sixteen something that's not even accurate," Harry added. "I asked her why the Ministry didn't use Sanzecki's work, it's barely fifty years old and it involved actual research. I really did want to know, too. Then Theo -- " Harry gestured to him, and Theo glared as if he'd spilled some big secret, " -- wanted to know who Sanzecki was, but she ignored him. So we started asking questions, but she kept ignoring them. So we had to work out the answers, too. That's all. It's not like anyone threw spitwads or anything."

Remus hesitated. "That's all you did? Ask questions?"

"Well, we had to talk over her 'cause she wouldn't stop talking, but yeah, basically."

Remus turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, I really can't countenance much punishment for students asking questions. They were only doing what I've taught them to do."

"Indeed, what I advised them to do on introducing Miss Umbridge," Dumbledore said. "Tonight's detention, and a short essay on some subject of your choosing, perhaps?"

"My thoughts precisely," Remus replied. "You can sit down, Harry, Parvati, Hermione. Now, let's talk a little bit about common sense in Defence, as long as I have you all captive as an audience for the next few hours. Defence isn't simply a matter of spells, it's a matter of how to think, and how to look at things. You treated Ms. Umbridge as an enemy, but what did you learn from her first? What does this tell you about the Ministry? About its policies? How does this apply to other dangerous situations you may one day find yourself in?"

At some point, while Remus was writing ideas down on the chalkboard and the students were calling out observations and remarks -- in a respectful if chaotic fashion -- Dumbledore disappeared from class. By the time they ran out of ideas it was nearly time for lights-out. Harry, Theo, and Pansy strolled back to the Dungeons proud of their accomplishment and just a little excited about having gotten away with it so handily.

"See, when they're good teachers, it's not about us versus them," Theo declared to Harry.
"Professor Lupin never makes you think he's the enemy."

Harry, privately, thought this was a good thing. If nothing else, the evening's detention had shown just how good thirteen-year-olds were at finding their enemy's weaknesses and preying on them mercilessly.

 Himself included.

***

Between classes and Quidditch practice, October seemed to rush past. Harry spent his free afternoons practicing Quidditch plays, usually with Neville's help since Padma and Draco were still occupied with studying on those days. Neville wasn't very athletic, but he and Harry designed a small machine that would shoot golf balls into the air at varying degrees of altitude for Harry to chase down. Sirius gave his approval and helped with the charms when they got stuck, suggesting that they patent it and sell it to Madam Schaeffer's Educational Toy Shop or Quality Quidditch Supplies once they worked the kinks out.

Draco was practicing too, in his spare time and with his team in the evenings, though he took a fair amount of continual ribbing for nearly falling off Harry's broom in tryouts. He hadn't yet bought his own broomstick -- his allowance from Narcissa was generous, but it would take a while to save up for it. Any of his friends would have loaned him some money, and Sirius would happily have bought it for him as a gift, but Draco seemed to want to train on a substandard broom. He said it would make him a better flyer when he finally did get his Nimbus.

Harry barely had time to be concerned about Draco's progress anyway, since he and the rest of the returning team had two new Chasers and a new Beater to train. Harry supposed he ought to be happy for Crabbe that he got the Beater position, since Crabbe was in his year, but Crabbe was also exceptionally dim and didn't catch on very quickly to the flexible nature of the Slytherin playbook. Harry, Towler, and Pucey could make mid-air alterations in plays when necessary, but Crabbe sometimes still ended up in positions that made it clear he was working off laboriously-memorised plays and not real-time observation. Colin, as expected, had not even come close to qualifying for Chaser, but the two fifth-year girls that were tapped as Chasers were decent enough. Besides, this year Harry could occasionally suggest new plays without having to go through Snape; he'd been on the team two years and was at the very least senior to the new players.

The weather grew cold and wet as Hallowe'en approached, which wasn't great for Quidditch practice but did help ease the heat a little bit in the stifling Divination class. Harry had started to dread Divs as much as he suspected Remus had when he was at Hogwarts. Sirius was right; it was easy, and Trelawney wasn't exactly great at discerning fake star charts from the real thing. But it was also hot and boring, and Harry began to wish he'd taken Arithmancy like Remus said, or even only taken two new classes like Draco and had a free afternoon a few times a week. He was rather fond of his tarot cards, but only because they were useful for playing poker with when Trelawney wasn't looking.

Before he knew it, Hallowe'en was almost on them and notices had been posted on all the common-room boards that the first Hogsmeade weekend would be the last weekend in October.

"Nice of them," Neville said. "We can buy lots of sweets for Hallowe'en and such, and I bet the whole town will be done up for the holiday."

Draco picked at his breakfast, looking morose. Padma sighed unhappily.

"I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," she said. "Can't you ask Dumbledore or someone to sign
"Did already," Draco muttered. "A professor can't sign for you because then Hogwarts is still responsible if you get hurt or die or whatever. It's fine, I reckon it's not as good as Diagon Alley anyway and I've been there often enough."

"Sure," Harry said. He'd been to Hogsmeade a handful of times and knew that he was lying through his teeth, but it would make Draco feel better, anyway. "I mean, the sweet shop's pretty good and Zonko's has some great pranks, but other than that it's mostly just the Shrieking Shack, and that's not exactly scary most of the time."

Padma rolled her eyes at Harry and he frowned, perplexed, before dismissing it.

The first Hogsmeade Saturday dawned clear but cold, with a sharp cutting wind that promised snow before too much longer. It was also the full moon, and Harry wondered who they'd have as substitute on Monday as he and the others walked to the entrance hall.

"We'll bring you a load of sweets back from Honeyduke's," Neville promised Draco, who seemed to have made his peace with not going and was walking along with a blank look on his face, hands in his pockets.

"And Sirius is taking us to lunch, so we can see how Dobby is," Harry added.

"I hope you have a good time," Draco said, sounding mildly unconvincing. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

Filch, the caretaker, was standing at the front doors, checking names against a long list clenched in one grubby hand. Draco left them there and retreated before either Filch or one of the other students could make a remark; there had already been a few about ickle wee Malfoy, whose mad mummy wouldn't let him go to Hogsmeade.

***

Draco watched the others walk away, down the path to Hogsmeade, from behind a pillar just inside the grand oak doors of the Hogwarts front facade. When he couldn't see them any longer, he turned to go -- back to the Hufflepuff dormitory, he guessed, or maybe up to the library.

He started back with a shriek when he saw someone else in the hallway, watching silently, but Remus grabbed him before he could stumble and knock his head into the column behind him.

"Hallo," Remus said, grinning at him. "It's only me, don't worry."

Draco smiled, relieved. "Hi, Professor Lupin."

"Like you, I'm good at lurking in corridors," Remus said, but there was no accusation in his voice. "Everyone gone down to Hogsmeade?"

"Yeah," Draco said. "Thought I might go to the library for a bit. Aren't you going too?"

Remus frowned. "Well, I'm supposed to, but Severus said no strenuous labour, and chaperoning several hundred students in Hogsmeade doesn't exactly qualify as restful. The new potion trial, you know," he added, gently guiding Draco away from the front door and down the hallway. "I don't suppose you'd keep me company? It's very boring, being stuck in the castle."

"Tell me about it," Draco answered glumly. "Reckon you're going to lunch though, aren't you?"
Harry said Sirius is taking everyone..."

"Not even lunch," Remus replied, sounding more cheerful than Draco would have in a similar situation. "Until we know the effects of the potion in full, I've got to do as the good Professor orders -- even grownups are prisoners of one thing or another," he added, his hand still on Draco's shoulder. "You're welcome to come have a cup of tea with me, if you like. It's not Hogsmeade, but..."

"Sure," Draco said eagerly. It beat hanging about with the second and first years in Hufflepuff, at any rate, or sitting alone in the library.

"I missed out on a number of Hogsmeade weekends when I was at school, for one reason or another," Remus continued as they walked. "My parents, you know, were quite as bad as yours. I had to fight with them for weeks to get my permit form signed."

"I don't think fighting with mum -- "

"Oh, I agree. And it wasn't really fighting -- Lupins don't fight -- but it was quite a chilly summer in our household. At any rate, bed rest is no kind of fun when all your friends are down at Honeyduke's nicking chocolates. Nor, I imagine, is tea with your professor," he said thoughtfully. "You know, there's no injunction against a calm stroll. Would you rather explore Hogwarts a bit? I could show you some new places, I reckon."

"Reckon I could show you a few," Draco replied, grinning.

"Oh, you think so?" Remus challenged.

"As long as you don't rat about them to Dumbledore."

Remus laughed. "You aren't wandering round the roof or leaping down stairwells, are you?"

"No."

"Then I think your secret is probably safe with me."

Draco stopped him in front of a staircase. "Do you know about the music room?" he asked.

"Music room?" Remus said, raising both eyebrows.

***

"Wait for it," Draco told him, climbing through the portrait-hole into the music room they'd uncovered last year. "Padma found this place and somehow weaseled the passwords..."

"Brilliant," Remus breathed, sounding very like a student as he stepped into the music room. "This place never showed up on -- "

"On what?" Draco asked, his voice muted by the room's acoustics.

"Nothing," Remus said absently, strolling over to the window that looked down on the Hogwarts grounds.

"Now listen," Draco declared, going to stand in the centre of the room, on the sunburst that was laid into the floor. He opened his mouth to sing one of the naughty limericks they'd written last year, then changed his mind and recited, instead.
Derwent College, Oxford, '36
My father's laughter still in echoed halls
The disapproving click of heels on stone
And time, as ever, subjugating all.
Two hours each week I had, in colonnades
Arched slyly over walkways few will see.
My father's world is books and wooden chairs
A lifetime spent in peaceful academe.
But passion spirals down another path
In dreams of books and chairs of different kind
And fame unwanted crowned my sandy head
The colonnades unfaded from my mind.
Sometimes it longs for rich obscurity
(My father walks with Tolkien and Belloc)
But dreams of quiet contemplation yet
Must wait for one more poem, one more book.
Such silence as my father's study saves
Awaits, as my inheritance, the grave.

As he spoke, the words appeared on the chalkboard that took up one wall of the room. When he was finished he glanced at Remus, but his professor was leaning against the window, listening raptly.

"That's impressive, from memory," he said.

"It rhymes," Draco said. "Makes it easier."

"Undoubtedly. Did Harry give you Graveworthy's book? I didn't think he had the collected poems."

"No -- I've been nicking the novels off him, though. One of my tutors gave me his poetry book," Draco admitted. "He said it was one of the Great Works. Mum's never read it or she'd probably make me throw it out."

"Do you know what it means?"

Draco scowled. "I'm not stupid."

"I didn't say you were, Draco."

"Graveworthy's dad was a professor at Derwent, it's obvious enough. He wishes he was too, but he decided to write instead and now even if he was going to go and teach he'd never get any peace because he's famous," Draco said.

Remus smiled, as if he knew something Draco didn't. "Very good. You've given me an idea, actually. I'll work on it later; come on, let's go have that tea. I'm exhausted from the stairs."

He rested his hand on Draco's shoulder again after they climbed out of the portrait-hole, but Draco could feel the weight behind it now, and walked slow so that Remus wouldn't have to hurry to keep up.

***

Harry, Padma, and Neville returned from Hogwarts windblown and happy, well-fed from a ridiculously large lunch with Sirius and bearing sacks of sweets and jokes. They congregated with
Draco after dinner in the library, unceremoniously kicking a handful of first-years out of the study alcove that Madam Pince couldn't see from her desk.

"Hogsmeade's really historic," Padma said, paging through a book she'd bought on the town's history. "The Three Broomsticks was the headquarters for a Goblin rebellion in the seventeenth century, and most of the houses are incredibly old. I don't see why more people don't want to properly study it, it's got to be so interesting living in the last wizarding village in Great Britain."

"Brought this for you," Harry added, upending a small paper bag onto the table. Dozens of sweets tumbled out -- chocolates wrapped in waxed paper, a box of Fizzing Whizbees, Pepper Imps and Green Dragon Toffee (one of Draco's favourites) and a small cheap balsa case filled with exploding bonbons packed in dried coconut shavings.

"We looked at broomsticks too," Neville said. "Soon as you want, Sirius can go down to Dervish and Banges, they have a Quidditch department and they sell Nimbus two-thousand-ones. Really top-level."

"You have to come see the post office at some point," Padma added. "Hundreds of owls all sorted by speed and size -- and the smell!"

"Thanks, I'll pass on that," Draco said, smiling.

"You're in a good mood," Neville observed.

"I had a nice day," Draco replied.
"Sirius? Sirius, are you there?"

Sirius, yawning sleepily, rolled over in the bed and muttered into his pillow. "Nonnow, s'jussa full moon..."

"Sirius, please..."

Sirius opened one eye at the frantic tone, then sat up in bed quickly. Andromeda's head was floating in the fireplace in their bedroom, looking worried and strained. He glanced at Remus, who was sleeping fitfully next to him, and rolled out of bed. He pulled some trousers on over his underthings and knelt on the hearth, throwing a pinch of floo powder in.

"What is it, Andi?" he asked, muzzily. "Better be good, I'm knackered -- last night was the moon, you know -- "

"Yes, I know," she said worriedly. "It's -- it's our tenants."

Sirius tensed. "Your Werewolf Network Thingy people? Did one of them get loose?"

"No -- " Andromeda bit her lip. "It's Anne, our young girl, she's hurt herself and she won't let anyone near her -- she scratches and bites. We let her use the basement because she doesn't like to go too far from the house."

"How bad?" Sirius asked, glancing over his shoulder. Remus was stirring, sitting up stiffly.

"I can't tell, we can't get close. I thought -- I know it's hard after the moon, but Remus..."

"What is it?" Remus asked hoarsely, resting his cheek on his bent knees and turning his head to watch Andi with remarkably alert eyes.

"None of your concern," Sirius said, turning back to Andromeda. "He's in no condition to do anything."

"Sirius, I'm all right -- what's going on?" Remus slid out of bed, half-falling to the floor, and edged across to the hearth. "Andromeda, did something happen with one of your Support Network people?"

"Anne's hurt herself and she won't let us near her," Andromeda said. Sirius reached behind him for a dressing-gown slung carelessly on a chair and draped it across Remus, preserving his dignity. "I'm really worried, Remus, I didn't know who else to call -- St. Mungo's will have to report her -- "

"What about the others?" Remus asked.

"They Change somewhere else, they're never home for at least a day after -- "

"Okay, I'll come through," Remus said. Sirius grabbed his shoulder, but he shook his head. "I'll dress and be there soon."

"What should I do, though?" Andromeda asked.

"Have Ted fix some food -- meat, preferably greasy," Remus suggested. His joints crackled as he leaned back and stood up, staggering to the dresser and determinedly taking out a shirt.
"You'll do yourself a harm," Sirius said, hovering anxiously.

"I'm all right, I had the potion," Remus replied.

"You're not all right --"

"Then come with me, but don't stand there like an arsehole," Remus snarled. Sirius' jaw dropped. "Well, unless you're going to tie me up, I'm going to help that girl, Sirius. What would you do if it were me?"

Sirius sighed. Remus gripped his shoulder for balance as he stepped into some trousers. As soon as they were done up, Sirius pushed him gently onto the bed and took a pair of socks from his drawer.

"Stay there," he said, putting them on Remus' feet, following with his shoes. "We'll go through together. I'll talk, you stay quiet."

Remus nodded and stepped into the greenish flame, wrapping one arm around Sirius' shoulders when Sirius joined him, holding tight.

"Twelve Grimmauld Place!" Sirius said loudly and clearly, and soon they were stepping into the warm, sun-filled living room of Ted and Andromeda's upper-floor apartment.

"Remus, thank you," Andi said, helping them both out of the fireplace. "She's in the basement, she won't come out."

"All right," Remus said. "Sirius, the stairs..."

"You're an idiot," Sirius said, but he helped ease Remus from step to step, down into the back-room of Tonks & Tonks and around the staircase, through the door to the basement.

"Stay here," Remus said. "Nothing happens if she bites me."

"Except you hurt and bleed and --"

"Sirius!"

Sirius sat down on the top step. "I'm not leaving."

"Fine, but keep quiet, all right?" Remus leaned heavily on the banister and limped slowly down into the basement. From the darkness came the sound of harsh, heavy breathing.

"Anne?" Remus called. "Anne, my name is Remus, Andromeda called me. Is it okay if I light the room a little?"

No reply. Remus muttered a charm and green flame leapt up from one shaking hand, turning the murky blackness a flickering green. There was a curled shape in one corner, shaking.

"Hi, Anne," Remus said.

"Hi," said a young female voice, rich with pain.

"I'm a werewolf, like you. Andi thought I might be able to have a look at your wounds, okay?" Remus took two steps forward.

"Don't touch me," she said. "You're filthy."
Remus smiled a little. "Well, I haven't had time to wash -- "

"Filth," she shrieked. He paused.

"Anne, I just want to make sure you're not hurt too badly, okay?"

"Your kind made me like this!"

Sirius growled low in his throat. Remus shot a look back at him that Sirius had never seen before and never wanted to see again, a look of pure annoyance tinged with disdain.

"Come on, Anne, I know what it's like. Just let me have a look at your cuts," Remus said, but he didn't move forward. "Someone's got to, sooner or later."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine, we both know that. Andromeda's worried about you."

Silence. Remus took another few steps forward and crouched, level with her and perhaps four feet away.

"Who told you we were filth?" he asked, softly.

"Everyone," she answered. "I had a normal life before you -- you freaks!"

"You haven't been a werewolf long, have you?" he asked. "What happened, Anne?"

She pulled in on herself and Sirius saw blood trickle down her cheek.

"What happened?" Remus asked.

"How do I know it wasn't you?" she asked.

"Because I don't bite people. I make sure I'm safe, just like you," he said. "Come on, Anne, I just want to look at your cuts, can you show them to me? So that Andromeda won't worry?"

The girl lifted her face, streaked with blood and tears. There was a huge jagged slice down one cheek, but it didn't look deep. She was cradling her left arm in her lap.

"Is your arm hurt?" he asked.

"No," she said rebelliously. Remus held out a hand and, when she didn't flinch, he touched her left shoulder. Slowly he moved his hand down her arm. When he reached her elbow, she grunted.

"It's just sprained," he said with a smile. "Can you show me where else it hurts?"

Sirius hadn't realised until then that she was naked, wrapped in a dirty plaid blanket; Remus looked so clinical that it hadn't occurred to him the girl wasn't wearing much of anything. Then she reached down with her right hand and hiked up a corner of the blanket, displaying her upper thigh.

Remus looked down and sucked air in through his teeth.

It wasn't possible for a wolf to bite itself where the bitemark was, high on her thigh, nearly crossing her hip. Besides, it was half-healed, more scar than wound at this point, though Sirius could see her pulse throb darkly where a blood vessel passed too near the surface of her skin. Remus spread his fingers and touched thumb and pinky to the wound; the deep canines were as wide across as his hand, and there was one sharp zig-zag where the wolf's tooth had broken or been pulled crooked at
"Two, three months?" he guessed, looking at her.

"It hurts," she said, her voice a thin, keening whine.

"I know. I know," he said softly, spreading his hands. She looked at him warily, but when he didn't move she scooted forward, letting him pull her and the blanket into his arms.

"Sirius," he said unsteadily, and Sirius bounded down the stairs to help them both up, Andromeda on his heels. Anne gave a little shriek and darted from Remus to Andromeda as if his embrace had burned her. Remus looked at her sadly.

"Take her upstairs," he said to Andromeda, who tightened the blanket around her and obeyed. Once they were nearly to the top, Remus leaned on Sirius and let himself be half-carried upstairs as well. Anne and Andromeda were ascending to the flat, but Remus moved towards one of the stock-benches on the ground floor, sitting on it heavily.

"Well, that was exciting, you idiot," Sirius said. "You could have really hurt yourself, and all she has is a sprain."

"It's not the sprain, Sirius," Remus sighed, rubbing his left thigh distractedly. "She's one of those, you know. Raised thinking werewolves were filth, beneath human notice. It's not easy for her."

"That excuses it, does it?"

"She was assaulted, it's not as though this just happened spontaneously," Remus replied.

"I won't have you running all over England soothing weepy teenagers," Sirius warned.

"I seem to recall you doing quite a bit of running all over England for me," Remus retorted. "Just shut up for a minute, would you? I need to think."

"About what? How you're going to single-handedly --"

"She's my family, Sirius."

Sirius stopped dead, eyes widening. "What?"

"Not like that," Remus said, sighing. "Not blood. Just..."

He fumbled with the flies of his trousers, standing to pull them down. Sirius had seen the scar thousands of times, both when they were students and after, as a lover. He'd never paid much attention to it; it was just there, like an oversized birthmark -- on the outside of Remus' left thigh, high on the leg, nearly crossing his hip. Remus spread his hand wide and pressed his fingers against it. The canines were exactly the width of his hand, from tip of thumb to tip of pinky. Just above his index finger was a sharp zig-zag where the wolf's tooth had broken or been pulled crooked at some point.

"Whoever did it to her, did it to me," Remus said. "Which means he's still alive. Which means whoever Walden Macnair shot, it wasn't the one who did this to me."

Sirius stared at the scar, at the way Remus' fingers curled against his skin.

"Even if she weren't, she's a child and she's hurt. If your compassion is big enough for me, it's big enough for her, too," Remus continued. "I can't do much, hardly anything -- this I could do. You
have to let me do it."

Sirius took Remus' fingers away from the scar with one hand and hitched his trousers up with the other, re-dressing him carefully.

"Promise me," he said, staring in Remus' dark brown eyes. "Promise me you will never go help someone else before you have help yourself, all right? If you go, I go too. Promise, Moony."

Remus nodded. "All right. I promise."

Andromeda came back down the stairs then, carrying a plate of sausages in one hand and two mugs of tea in the other. Remus fell on the sausages as though he'd never seen food before, picking them up with his fingers and then sucking on the fingers when they burned. Sirius blew on his tea to cool it.

"I can't tell you how grateful we are," Andromeda said, hugging Sirius one-armed around his neck and bending to kiss Remus on the crown of his head. "I was so worried. We love Anne, she's a good girl at heart."

"Better you than me," Remus said around a mouthful of sausage.

"She's just...a little confused still," Andromeda replied. "Ted's fixing her up a sling and working on her face. I just seem to pace and fret."

"You're very good at both," Sirius grinned.

"You're not too big to take a pummeling," she warned. Remus, having finished off two sausages in record time, sucked on the tip of his finger thoughtfully.

"Andromeda, do you know where Nymphadora is these days? I need to subvert her for personal ends," he said.

"You're more likely to see her than I am, seems she spends every spare holiday she gets up at Hogwarts with Severus," Andi replied. "I'll write to her if you like. Is anything wrong?"

"Too much to list off, I'm afraid," Remus said quietly.

***

Harry didn't expect to see Remus for the Hallowe'en feast, given that the night before had been the full moon. He had made plans to go exploring after the feast; not outside the castle, since they weren't fools, but there were plenty of interesting places to go inside the castle. He and the others had considered a seance, or perhaps merely scaring the bejesus out of some seventh-years. Sporting with the seventh-s was one of Harry's favourite pastimes, and he almost never got to do it.

Neville was fond of a lie-in and didn't wake up until noon on Sundays, generally. He probably wouldn't be really human until the feast, so Harry and Draco had spent the afternoon in the library discussing Quidditch in hushed tones until Padma joined them with her loads and loads of homework to do.

"Tonight's the night," Harry told her as she worked. "We're going to misuse your Time-Turner tonight. We've just got to, Padma, it's too great not to."

"Have you got a plan?" Padma asked suspiciously.
"Will you be happier if I do or if I don't?" Harry replied.

"If we're going to abuse a sacred trust we're going to do it properly and with malice aforethought," she said. "So you'd better have a plan, Harry Potter."

"Well, I have a few," Harry admitted. "I was thinking, let's charm our faces glowy-red and jump out at people."

"That's your plan?"

"It has the brilliance of simplicity," Draco said weakly.

"That's not a plan, that's just mean-spirited aerobics," Padma said acidly. "A plan involves split-second timing and possibly the use of pulleys and levers."

"Oh, I'll give you pulleys and levers -- " Harry began hotly, but Draco kicked his shin under the table.

"Pince!" he hissed, and Harry subsided.

"What can you actually do with a time-turner, prankwise?" Draco asked. "I mean, we just assumed it would be the best thing ever, but do we have any actual ideas?"

"Well, you could pick someone and start showing up everywhere they did, all the time," Harry said. "Or keep putting something in their bag after they've taken it out. It must be brilliant for escaping if you're being chased."

"You're thinking about it backwards," Padma said. "It's not something that stops time. It just lets you jump back an hour or two. It'll help with escaping, maybe, but I honestly don't see what else you could possibly plan to do with it."

"Here's a thought," Draco said. "If we go back in time and arrange something, then we'll see it happen, won't we? And then we can figure out what we arranged after we see it happen, and go do it."

"I think that's a paradox," Padma said. "Anyway, it's nearly time to go down to the feast. Pack up your paradoxes and come along."

"Are you hauling all those down to the feast too?" Draco asked as she stuffed books into her bag. "At least let me take a few. And Harry," he added hastily. Padma gave him a lifted eyebrow, but offered each boy two large books.

They ran into Neville on the stairs, apparently coming up to find them.

"I've been down to the feast already, thought you'd be there," he explained, returning down the stairs with them. "It's pretty brilliant this year. There's a great big marzipan skeleton on each table -- " he stopped in laughter as Draco's eyes lit up. "The House-elves like you, Draco."

"This isn't news," Padma said as they reached the side-entry doors to the Great Hall, pushing them open. Inside, candlelight from a thousand illuminated jack-o-lanterns flickered over the four House tables and the High Table where the professors sat. All the House banners had been blacked out except for a glowing white insignia, and --

Things on the tables were moving.
"Look at this!" Harry said, picking up one of the small white objects that was leaping around the table. It turned out to be a snapping pair of fake vampire teeth. He shoved them in his mouth and grinned at the others, fangs gleaming. "Tafes like bebbermin!"

"Dora!" Neville shouted, pushing past Harry. He ran to the High Table, where Professor Snape was standing by his chair, talking to Dora Tonks. "Hi! What're you doing here?" Neville blurted.

"Hiya, kid!" Tonks answered, bending over the table to tousle Neville's hair. The others joined him in a little knot at the table. "How are you? I'm here for the feast, with Severus."

"Oh," Neville said, glancing with wide eyes at Snape, who glowered. "Sorry, Professor! I mean! Not sorry -- I -- you're...you'd better look after her properly!" he said, face turning red, and bolted away again.

Harry walked past Snape calmly and winked. "You had better, you know," he said conversationally.

"How're you, Harry?" Tonks asked.

"Pretty well. You?"

"Thriving. Is your godfather around?"

Harry shrugged. "Probably down in Hogsmeade."

"Oh! At the Three Broomsticks, probably, they're having a big party. We're going after," she said, then glanced at Snape apologetically.

"Have a good time," Harry said, wandering on. "Say hi if you see him!"

"Will do -- Remus! Hallo, you look like death warmed over!"

Harry turned so fast he nearly knocked Padma over; he stood aside to let her and Draco push through the crowds to their tables, craning his neck to try and see Remus.

When he finally managed to work his way back to where Tonks was sitting, he saw her shaking Remus' hand. Remus looked awful, eyes deep-sunk in his face and skin a pale, almost yellowish colour. He was leaning heavily on the back of Snape's chair.

" -- glad you're here, I need to ask you some questions," he was saying. He didn't even look happy, but rather grim, as though he'd had bad news. Harry wondered if he and Sirius were in a fight. They almost never were, but lately he'd been too wrapped up in his own affairs to notice much.

"Any time -- oh, do you really have to sit at the other end? Professor Sinistra, you wouldn't mind changing, would you?"

Sinistra, who had experienced Dora's accident-prone table manners before, smiled knowingly and ambled down the table to Remus' seat on the end.

"Hi Professor Lupin!" Harry called up. Remus turned down to face him, the unhappy look replaced with a smile.

"Hallo Potter," he said. "Happy Hallowe'en to you!"

"Happy Hallowe'en! How are you?"
Remus glanced down at his hands, where the skin was taut over the knuckles. "Better than I look, Harry," he said in an undertone. "Don't fret about me."

"Never do," Harry answered cheerfully, which only he and Sirius knew was a lie. All the times Harry had read to Remus after Changes, down in Betwys Beddau, had been as much for their sanity as for Remus' own comfort. "See ya later!"

Remus waved him on and seated himself next to Tonks. As Harry went, he heard him say something to Tonks about research, which must mean he was okay; Remus was always okay when he was researching.

***

"I need your help with some off-the-boards research," Remus said quietly, mindful that other members of the faculty were still passing behind him and students were passing in front, stopping to say hello to their former Professor Tonks.

"Sure, anything I can do," she replied, popping a grape from a nearby platter into her mouth. "Work's taking me away a lot, though. What do you need?"

"Don't make promises you can't keep just yet," Remus said. "I need you to look into some MLE files for me."

She frowned. "What do you want with Magical Law Enforcement?"

"Dark Creatures affairs are all kept in the MLE archives, aren't they? I know formal reports are filed, at least usually."

Tonks was all attention now. "Is this to do with what Mum's up to with the Support Network?"

"Indirectly. I think an error may have been made in one of the files. One of the people staying with your mother has a bite pattern that's too similar to mine," here his voice dropped to almost nothing, "to be a coincidence. For the last twenty-five years we've believed that Walden MacNair -- "

"That arsehole!"

"Yes -- that he shot the wolf who bit me," Remus continued. He nodded to Dumbledore as the Headmaster passed to the front to signal the start of the feast. "We know he shot a werewolf, but if this girl was bitten two months ago by the same person who bit me -- "

Tonks turned to him, horrified. "He shot an innocent person?"

"We don't know that, but I think it might be likely."

"He's got to be brought up on charges!"

"Tonks, you can't. We'd have to testify and the whole thing would come out -- I'd lose my job, she'd lose any chance she had at a normal life. Imagine what Harry would go through on my account."

"But Remus -- "

"That's not why I asked you this," Remus said, helping himself to potatoes with a hand that barely trembled. "I need to know everything you can find about who bit this girl Anne, and where it happened, and whether there were any witnesses."
She gave him a long look under the fringe of her pink hair, then nodded. "I'll do what I can. You may have to settle for censored copies. I -- "

At that point Severus touched her wrist and pointed upwards, and Remus followed their gaze. The candle-filled pumpkins that had been illuminating the Great Hall were fading into nothing, and the hall itself was falling very dark indeed.

Several of the Hogwarts ghosts suddenly appeared, drifting up through the floor with shrieks and yells. They crowded together at the top of the vaulted ceiling and suddenly arrowed away in all directions. Behind them, wherever they flew, the ceiling burst into points of starlight until the entire room was filled with them.

Remus glanced down and smiled at the furry black head resting on his leg. Sirius had insisted that he could only attend if Padfoot came with him, and Remus was disinclined to argue. The heavy weight on his thigh was comforting, as was the pure adulation in Padfoot's eyes.

He rubbed behind his ears and glanced back up at the brightly-lit ceiling, thinking of other times he had spent with Sirius looking up at the stars.

***

The feast generally lasted quite a while, and often the Professors went down to the Three Broomsticks after to attend the party there, drawing straws to see who would stay behind to keep watch over the school. Remus and Snape had both been exempted from the lottery, because Remus was hardly in a condition to prowl the halls and Severus -- well, young love does have its way. Young was relative, in this case, but he was still the youngest of the professors save Remus, which conferred special indulgences at times.

Remus had wished Snape and Dora a happy Hallowe'en and left the feast early, escorted back to his rooms by his enormous Padfoot. When they were well away from the feast and unlikely to encounter anyone but Peeves, Sirius changed back and wrapped his arm around Remus' waist, tacitly offering support.

"You were very well-behaved tonight," Remus said, smiling despite the pallor of his skin and the slight rattle in his throat. "Good dog."

Sirius smiled and kept walking. "Come on, you sound like you need some sleep. You could have sent me to find Dora, you know."

"I wanted to go to the feast," Remus said. "I loved Hallowe'en at Hogwarts. Remember the costume parties Gryffindor threw?"

"Course I do. Seventh year we all went as Greek Gods."

Remus laughed. "That's right. You went with James as Castor and Pollux."

"And you were Haephaestus, and P -- " Sirius stopped himself. "And Lily," he said, "went as Athena."

"That's right."

"And then James was annoyed because Andrew Bones was only a sixth-year and he showed up as Apollo, but you wouldn't let us prank him at all."

Remus coughed lightly. Sirius turned his head, then stopped in the hallway about ten feet from the
door to Remus' rooms.

"Moony," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Yes?" Remus asked innocently, digging in his pocket for the charmed key to open his door.

"Did Andrew Bones know about the Greek Gods ahead of time?"

Remus gave him a small smile. "Whatever do you mean, Padfoot?"

"I mean," Sirius turned slightly, pressing him into the stone wall, "Were you and Andrew Bones shagging behind our backs?"

"You're very direct," Remus replied, kissing him. "Don't tell me you're going to be jealous of wee Andy Bones, Sirius. He may have looked nice in a chiton, but he's married now, and was never a patch on you anyway."

"You and Andrew Bones?"

Remus nuzzled his ear. "I may have been pining for you, Sirius, but a boy has needs, you know."

"Pining?" Sirius asked, sounding pleased. "Really?"

"Pining," Remus confirmed. "Wasting away."

"Now you're just making fun."

"Step into my parlor and see how earnest I am," Remus replied, pushing Sirius gently down the hall, walking behind him. He was reaching around him to unlock the door, his other hand firmly secured on Sirius' belt, when Sirius grabbed his wrist suddenly.

"Don't," he said.

"Sirius, I'm not going to have sex with you in the hallway," Remus replied, moving forward again, but Sirius held his wrist too tightly.

"Don't touch the door, Moony," he said. The tone of his voice finally penetrated Remus' brain, and he raised his head to see why Sirius was suddenly afraid.

Criscrossing the solid oak door were a series of deep gouges, stained here and there with what looked suspiciously like blood. As though someone had taken a bloody knife and attacked the door in rage.

He watched, the world slowing down to half its normal speed, as Sirius reached out and plucked something small and white out of one of the grooves. He held it flat in his palm, staring at it.

Remus stared over his shoulder.

"It's a fingernail," Sirius said. With mounting horror, Remus realised that whoever had done this hadn't bothered with a knife. He'd simply scratched furiously at the door until his nails broke and his fingers bled.

"Peter," Remus said. Sirius shook his head.

"Peter's not this mad," he answered. "This was Lucius Malfoy."

Time actually stopped for a second, Remus was sure. Then Sirius took a deep breath that sounded
like a rumble of thunder, and things clicked back into place.

"We've got to warn everyone," he said. "If Peter and Malfoy are in the castle, they'll come for Harry -- fuck, they'll come after Draco."

"Go," Remus said. "I can't run, I'll slow you down."

"Yeah, I'm leaving you here for Lucius Malfoy to find," Sirius retorted. "Come on, we'll go as fast as we can."

His breath was hitching by the time they reached the Great Hall again, but they'd made good enough time -- nobody had begun to leave, and Dumbledore was still at the head table.

"Stay here -- or come in as Padfoot," Remus gasped, leaning against the outer wall. Sirius changed without question and loped inside, making a beeline for Draco. The commotion of a large black dog bolting through the Great Hall did not go unnoticed, and Harry was at Padfoot's side almost as soon as he arrived. Remus leaned in the doorway.

"Close the doors," he shouted to Dumbledore. "Don't let anyone leave. There's an intruder in the castle."

The uproar was immediate, but even over the shouts of confusion Remus heard Sinistra's sudden cry.

"Headmaster," she called, pointing at the windows on the far side of the hall.

Outside it was dark, of course, that was expected; but now the glittering lights of the Hall threw shadows on the darkness, picking out the fall of a cowl or the reflection off slimy grey skin. The Dementors were flocking at every window, gazing in. Everyone fell silent.

Remus hoped he imagined the feeling of a low hum, just below human hearing, coming from the massed Dementors.

***

Nymphadora Tonks had really been looking forward to Hallowe'en.

She was going to go to the feast at Hogwarts and sit next to her insanely smart boyfriend and say hi to all her students, and then after that she and said insanely smart boyfriend were going to go down to the Hallowe'en party at the Three Broomsticks. She'd always wanted to go to the party as a student and of course none of the tricks any student tried ever got them in, but that night she had planned on going. And after the party she was going to walk back to Hogwarts under the starlight and spend the night doing things with Severus that made her shiver happily just thinking about them. One of her friends at work had made fun of her for dating her former professor, but Dora couldn't care less. And the way Severus looked at her sometimes told her that he didn't care either, no matter what he said.

Instead of all that, however, she was sitting on the steps to the Hogwarts cellar, offering a handkerchief to a house elf with an eerily-crooked nose that was crusted all over in dried blood.

"Dobby innoo nuffin!" Dobby said, grasping his nose with the handkerchief and carefully bending it back into place.

"We know you didn't do anything, Dobby," the Headmaster said patiently. "We want to know what you saw."
"A MIG MOOT!" Dobby shrieked. Dora looked at Severus, sitting next to her on the stairs.

"A big boot," he muttered in translation. She nodded.

After Remus had burst into the Great Hall with orders not to let anyone leave, there had been a hurried conference amongst the professors before several ghosts were dispatched to check the professors' quarters and House common rooms. After half an hour most of them returned. The Fat Friar, however, was gone for forty minutes, then an hour.

When he finally returned, he reported that the painting covering the entry to the Hufflepuff common room had been ripped to shreds, and there was an unconscious house-elf nearby, just outside the kitchen entryway. Dobby, down from Hogsmeade to help with the feast, had apparently happened upon whoever was trying to get in and been booted in the face for his troubles. The painting's occupants, three medieval men who normally sat around a kitchen table playing cards, were nowhere to be found.

"We must search the castle," Dumbledore said, sitting on the step next to Tonks. He looked worried for the first time she could remember, and Severus looked positively gaunt in his concern. "Nymphadora, I am certain you understand why this is not a matter for the Aurors."

"They'll let the Dementors in," she said in a small voice.

"Yes. If, however, you would remain -- "

"Course I will," she said immediately.

"Stout woman. Dobby, you will return to the kitchen and have the elves see to your nose."

Dobby nodded groggily.

"Tell Denbigh to close down all kitchen entrances and send up hot cocoa and biscuits to the students. They will remain in the Great Hall tonight. No elf is to leave the kitchen without my express permission."

Dobby straightened and saluted with the bloody handkerchief before bolting off down the corridor.

"Come; there is much to do," Dumbledore said, rising and beginning the ascent to the ground floor of the castle.

"The elf does have a history of troublemaking," Severus muttered as they climbed.

"With motivation, perhaps, but there is no reason this time -- no, I trust his testimony," Dumbledore replied. "Severus, you will search the Dungeons. If this is Lucius Malfoy's work, he may go to ground there. Nymphadora, take Argus Filch and make sure the other dormitories and tower entrances are sealed tightly. The rest of the professors will search the main halls. Give the passcodes only to the Heads of House."

"Yes, sir," Dora murmured. She glanced regretfully at Severus; no party tonight, no private affection (the only kind he showed) after. Dumbledore could not have separated them more completely if he'd sent her to Siberia.

But his hand did find hers, and he squeezed it tightly in the dim stairwell before letting go again.

"I will mind the children," Dumbledore continued. "Hagrid gets on well with the paintings; he'll try and see where our valiant cardplayers have gone, and make sure the others understand what is at
stake. Canvas can be mended. Go now."

Severus veered off towards the dungeons and Dora began climbing the stairs, knowing full well that Argus Filch would be in his odious little office. Privately, she cursed Lucius Malfoy to hell and back.

***

In the Great Hall, the students sat quietly at their tables, watching the High Table warily. McGonagall had briskly taken charge and made the students squeeze down to one end, away from the windows where the Dementors leered in. She had then covered each window with black drapery to block the horrible sight, but nothing could quite block out the knowledge that they were there.

Remus was sitting at one end of the table, drinking a glass of brandy that Professor Sprout had fetched for him. There was more colour in his cheeks, but he looked very ill to Harry. Padfoot had not left Draco's side, and was being petted reassuringly by some of the other Hufflepuff third-years. Draco had his fingers twined in the thick coarse fur of Padfoot's neck and looked about as healthy as Remus did. The ghosts -- almost all of them, now -- were drifting around near the ceiling, speaking in low voices.

Harry glanced at Neville, who mouthed "Lucius" at him. Harry gave a slight nod. Padma was sitting very close, just across the aisle from Harry at the Ravenclaw table, and he leaned back to whisper "Lucius" in her ear.

"I think so," she replied in a hushed tone. "But how?"

"Dunno. Neville can hear them talking, maybe he knows."

He leaned forward again, suddenly, because Dumbledore had appeared in the doorway. The Headmaster crossed the room and stepped up onto the platform where the Head Table sat. He held up his hands for attention, rather unnecessarily; the room was stone-quiet.

"It appears as though there has been an intruder in the castle," he said, looking grave. "We do not know who or how yet, but the Hufflepuff dormitory painting has been slashed severely, and Professor Lupin's quarters were attacked. I am placing the prefects in charge of their Houses; the professors will need to search the castle. This naturally means that you must remain here, where you may be accounted for at any time. Stand, please."

As one, the students stood. Dumbledore waved his wand and the tables rose into the air, stacking themselves neatly against one wall. The benches followed. Another flick of his wand and the room filled with squashy purple sleeping bags.

"I have given orders for cocoa and biscuits to be served," Dumbledore said, just as small trays appeared next to each sleeping bag. "Very good. I will remain here with the prefects, so I would appreciate an absence of...monkey-business."

He turned to speak to the professors, and the students slowly began to unzip their sleeping bags and crawl inside. Harry elbowed Cricket Creevey, who'd been sitting next to him at dinner.

"Do us a favour, Cricket," he said. "Swap out with Longbottom, would you? You've pals in Gryffindor, shouldn't be any trial for you."

"Sure, Harry," Cricket said, looking as though he'd like to be closer to the High Table anyway. Behind him, Harry heard Padma striking a similar deal with one of the Ravenclaw boys, who
sidled across the rows of bags and jerked his head at Draco. Draco bent down and spoke briefly in
Padfoot's ear, then trotted across the Great Hall while the professors were still conferring amongst
themselves. Padfoot slunk behind him, low to the ground, almost comically.

"Any news?" Harry asked Neville, scooting his sleeping bag closer to Draco and Padma's.

"Couldn't hear very well. Professor Lupin thinks it's Lucius Malfoy. Doesn't see who else it could
be 'cept Peter Pettigrew."

Padfoot nosed Harry's hand, and Harry absently scratched behind his ears. The big dog wove
himself around and between the four children, eyes watchful.

"No pranks for us tonight," Padma said, and Harry remembered she wasn't aware that Padfoot
could understand more than he let on.

"You'd better go to Professor Lupin," he said to the dog, who snuffed reluctantly. "He's going to
need you. We'll look after ourselves."

The dog gave a heaving sigh, but licked Draco's hand and crept back the way he'd come. Harry sat
on his sleeping bag, and the others followed suit.

"Do you think he's in the castle?" Draco asked miserably. Padma patted his leg.

"The professors must think so," Neville said. "Lucky we were all here when it happened, you
know. If we had gone pranking tonight he might've got us."

"Wonder how long it'll take word to get out," Draco said. "You know they'll be horrible about it.
Everyone, I mean. He must've -- he must've been coming for me, mustn't he? Why else would he
try for my common room?"

Harry, not knowing what to say and not quite able to look Draco in the eye, found himself watching
the rest of the Great Hall instead. Other students were doing as they had done, brokering small
swaps so they could be near their friends. He noticed suddenly that they were nearly encircled by
the Slytherin Quidditch team; Towler gave him a small smile and a thumbs-up sign. Hufflepuff's
team was slowly drifting over too, and Oliver Wood didn't bother to be secretive; he strode right up
to them and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"All right then, Malfoy?" he asked. Harry glanced over his shoulder. The rest of the team had
formed a tight knot around Ron and Ginny Weasley, probably the Twins' doing.

"All right, Wood," Draco replied. Harry had a sudden sense of smallness; next to Oliver, the four
of them looked very slight and fragile indeed.

"You, out," Wood said to a nearby Slytherin, and the girl hastily retreated to an empty sleeping bag
on the Ravenclaw side. Oliver settled in next to Marcus Flint and silently dared the other Captain
to say anything.

"He's a nutter, and he's your dad," Oliver said. His voice was calm and even. "But mostly he's a
nutter. You're not. So. Up the school and down with nutters, eh?"

"Ta," Draco replied meekly. Harry gave Oliver a grateful look. Just beyond him, Cedric Diggory
was bedding down next to Cho Chang.

"So," Oliver continued, now addressing himself with admirable civility to Flint, "Ja hear about the
Cannons? Their Seeker lost an eye last match."
"Perfectly justifiable foul, he was blocking the Chasers," Flint answered. "Besides, he's getting fitted for a magical replacement."

"You can't play Quidditch with a magical eye, it isn't sporting," Oliver retorted. Their bickering was oddly soothing, and Harry turned back to Draco.

"If he's in the castle, Padfoot'll find him," he said. "You can't hide smell."

"Sure," Draco said. "Listen, I'm going to sleep, kay?"

"Okay," Harry replied. Neville followed Draco's lead, and soon most of the students were, if not sleeping, at least pretending to while they talked amongst themselves.

***

"I think you'd better go change," Remus said to Padfoot, when the dog returned to him. "Look, there's tons of big strapping students around Draco, he'll be all right. I want to talk to you."

Padfoot rolled his doggy eyes but crept off the dais, slipping out a side door. He returned a few minutes later, walking up to Dumbledore and greeting him loudly.

"You sent for me, Headmaster?" he said, in a voice that at least the Gryffindors would hear. Dumbledore played along immediately, to Remus' pleasure.

"Mr. Black, thank you for coming. You're well-versed in the school's layout -- I was wondering if you'd lend a hand. Professor Lupin, if you please?"

Remus rose and joined the pair, the three of them now the only adults left in the Hall.

"You two are more familiar with the ways and means of getting in and out of this building than any of the students, and I daresay most of the professors," Dumbledore said in a low voice. "If you have any information, now would be a good time to share it."

"There are six secret passages in and out -- Filch didn't know about any of them when we were here, but that might've changed," Sirius said promptly.

"Seven, weren't there?" Remus asked, frowning.

"No, I'm sure it was six -- " Sirius ticked them off on his fingers. "The one behind the mirror on the fourth floor, the one under the Whomping Willow -- "

"The first caved in, ten years ago," Dumbledore said. "I doubt even Lucius Malfoy could pass the Willow unharmed, but I will see to that myself tomorrow morning."

"Right. Then there's the dumbwaiter -- that won't help, it's only within the school -- and the secret door in the library." Sirius glanced at Dumbledore.

"The library door was sealed the same year you left Hogwarts, I believe," Dumbledore said.

"That makes four. There's an old servant's entrance behind your chair -- "

" -- removed during the kitchen renovation last year -- "

"And the first-floor boys' toilet. That was the one that led to the sweetshop, wasn't it? That was our favourite."
"The door is still there, but the big oak's roots have completely blocked the tunnel. Oak is surprisingly impervious to most blasting charms," Dumbledore finished.

"That makes six. Were there any others?" Sirius asked Remus. Remus shook his head tiredly.

"I don't think so. I don't remember. I wish we had the map," he said, then realised what he'd let slip.

"The map?" Dumbledore asked, and finally they saw a dangerous look in his eye.

"We used to have a map," Sirius said briefly. "We don't anymore. We gave it to Cara Kung when we graduated."

"A few years later she told me it was confiscated by Filch. He said he was going to burn it," Remus added. "It would have shown every possible way to get into the castle, and everyone within it on any floor."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "It's quite a shame you're much too old to be given detention. Peter Pettigrew knew of these passages?"

"He did, but if they're all sealed anyway..." Remus felt deep shame wash over him. Dumbledore was a good man and hardly deserved the sort of constant betrayal they'd committed at school. Sirius was studying his shoes.

"Sirius," Dumbledore said. "You will investigate both the damaged door and the torn painting, and track any scents you find to their source. Report to me when you are finished."

"Yes, Headmaster," Sirius said.

"Professor Lupin will remain here and supervise the search. Don't trifle with me, Sirius; he's much too ill to run about the castle with you. Go."

Sirius left, looking as guilty and ashamed as Remus felt.

"Headmaster --"

"You were young, Remus, and I make great allowances for youth, but surely even you could have seen what a dangerous weapon the map could have been. You knew what was occurring outside of the school."

"I..." Remus spread his hands. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Yes, well. The blame is shouldered equally by a dead man, a madman, and your partner in crime. There's nothing to be done now and, as you say, the map has been destroyed." Dumbledore sighed. "We won't speak of it again. Are you well enough to remain here? Please don't lie to me."

"I am. There's nowhere I'd rather be," Remus answered quickly.

"Good. I don't expect that Lucius Malfoy lingered overlong, but one can't be too careful. This search will take time, and there are places I must search personally. Take reports, make sure nothing is overlooked, and in the meantime try to keep the students from killing one another."

Remus watched him leave the Great Hall, feeling very tired by the events of the past hour. He fought down the urge to burst into grateful tears.

***
Harry was nearly unconscious, in the dreaming twilight that was more hallucination than sleep, when he heard rustling and soft movement across stone. He incorporated it into the passing dream, hearing it as Snape walking swiftly across the cobbles of Knockturn, robes blowing in the wind. He was eight again, nearly nine, and it was Severus Snape who had rescued him from the shop in Knockturn and carried him back to the arms of Sirius when he was lost.

_Do you know what they do to children who are disobedient to their parents, in Knockturn Alley?_ Snape asked, not towering over him as he had when it happened, but whispering in his ear. _They eat them. Or turn them into mice._

Even as he dreamed it, however, he was aware of other things -- the overheated curl of Draco's back against his own, the soft wheezing of Neville's snores nearby, and of something crawling up his arm.

He started awake, sure that when he struggled out of the dream it would all blow away, but instead he felt the horrible crunch-hard sensation of insectoid legs on his arm, and looked up into eyeless sockets in a red, oozing face.

He screamed, which was all he could think of to do, even as he felt Draco jerk next to him and heard his accompanying cry. The horrible eyeless face jerked forward and Harry scrambled back, tumbling against Neville's stomach.

"OOGA BOOGA!" the face yelled, just as he heard Remus call "Lumos!"

The room flooded with light. Blinded, Harry shouted again in fear and kicked.

The owner of the horrible face grunted whoofingly and keeled over to one side. Harry stared, certain that one kick from a thirteen-year-old boy couldn't possibly have done that much damage to Voldemort himself, when he suddenly realised that the red, melting face had vanished and in its place was Fred Weasley's freckled snub nose and mocking mouth.

Another shape -- George -- tossed himself to one side, away from Draco, and skidded across the floor.

"What'd you do that for?" George demanded of Harry. Harry, furiously, kicked George too and thrust himself to his feet, meaning to leap on the pair and beat them senseless, fifth-years or not.

Remus, seemingly from nowhere, caught Harry by the collar and jerked him backwards, pushing past him. Other students were sitting up and shouting about the racket; Draco was pale and trembling, still only half-out of his sleeping bag. Remus hauled Fred and George upright effortlessly, both boys doubled over from Harry's kicks. Fred clutched his stomach, George his left shoulder.

Harry looked up at Remus, who was white with rage. He didn't speak, didn't seem to be capable of talking, just clenched Fred and George's arms in his hands until Fred cried out.

"Professor, you're hurting us!" he said. Remus shook him silent.

"Good," he replied, in a low and dangerous voice. "Remember it."

He released them both, and Fred rubbed his arm regretfully.

"I should lock you out of the castle," Remus continued. There was a tremble in it that had nothing to do with grief or weakness. "I should shove you into the arms of a Dementor and see how you enjoy it."
"We were only having a little -- "

"Fun?" Remus asked, and Severus Snape could not have poured more scorn into a single word. "You think it's fun to torment other children, do you?"

Oliver Wood loomed up on Harry's other side. Slowly, the Slytherin Beaters got to their feet.

"You enjoy making light of a murderer in the castle?" Remus demanded. "You find disturbing the sleep of others entertaining, Fred Weasley?"

Fred looked down at his feet.

"Do you, Fred? George?" Remus inquired.

"Nosir," they replied.

"What happened, Harry?" Oliver asked softly. Harry opened his mouth and found his throat was too dry for speech.

"Draco, are you all right?" Remus asked, without looking away from the shamed, penitent twins.

"I'm fine," Draco whispered. Padma, who had missed the action, was sitting up in her sleeping bag, arms draped protectively around his neck from behind, chin resting on his shoulder.

Remus lifted his head and raised his voice. "Does anyone else think it would be funny to play pranks tonight? Does anyone else think now is an appropriate time to cause confusion and distress?"

There was a chorus of frightened replies, scored for a few hundred anxious voices to the tune of "No, Professor".

"He kicked me!" George burst out, unable to take the shame any longer. "He knew it was me and he still kicked me!"

"You'll have worse before much longer," Remus answered coldly. "From your Head of House, to start, and I imagine from your Captain as well."

The twins looked apprehensively, pleadingly, at Oliver Wood. Oliver put one large hand on Harry's shoulder. Remus crossed his arms.

"High Table, both of you," he said. Fred and George glanced at each other, then made their slow way across the field of sleeping bags towards the front of the Great Hall. Remus looked at Oliver.

"I can take care of things here," Oliver said. "Right, Harry?"

Harry opened his mouth again and found speech this time. "Just startled," he managed. "We're all right."

Remus nodded curtly.

"Back to sleep, everyone," he called, dousing the lights once more. He charmed a small handful of green flame and Harry watched it dip and bob as Remus followed the twins back to the high table. He sank slowly back down on his sleeping bag.

"We'll kill them," Neville whispered in his ear. Oliver dropped among them, crossing his legs. Harry glanced at Marcus Flint and saw that his own Captain had slept through the entire thing.
"What the bloody hell happened?" Oliver asked in a soft voice.

"Fred and George," Padma sighed.

"I gathered that much."

"They made themselves up to look like -- like monsters," Harry said. "With no eyes and all."

Oliver ran a hand over his face. "And woke you up?"

Draco swallowed. "Guess so," he murmured.

"They're off the team," Oliver told Harry. "There's pranking and that's all well and good, but not tonight. They're off."

"You can't do that," Harry said, though he was startled to hear himself say it. "You're playing us in a week. You won't have time to train new Beaters."

Oliver gave him an odd look. "You're worried about that?"

"Well, they didn't do anything unsportsmanlike," Harry continued, though it felt as if someone else was saying the words. He felt detached from it all, as though "Harry" had fled to somewhere in the back of his brain. Oliver was staring openly at him now. "You can't punish the whole team because Fred and George are arseholes."

"Hear hear," Neville said. "McGonagall's bound to do something really awful to them, Oliver."

"I think they should be expelled," Padma said vehemently. Draco made a little choking noise as her arms tightened painfully around his neck. "Sorry," she added, releasing him.

"Sokay," he gurgled.

"We'll talk about it in the morning, anyhow," Oliver decided. "Think you lot can sleep?"

Harry and Draco nodded, though Harry privately thought neither of them actually would. Oliver waited until all four of them were once again lying silently in their sleeping bags before he crouch-walked back to his own and crawled inside.

Harry lay awake a long time, straining to hear what Remus was saying to the twins, but they were much too far away and the sudden shock had made him strangely tired. His last vision before he slipped back into sleep was of Draco's eyelids drooping slowly over his pale grey eyes.

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Remus knew he was shaking visibly and he knew he was frightening the twins; he knew that even Molly, who was fairhandedly stern with all her children, and especially Fred and George, would be angry with his treatment of her sons.

"Professor McGonagall will be notified as soon as she is available, though I don't see why you want to waste her time punishing you when a dangerous man could be loose in this castle," he said to the two silent, now-sullen boys. "I will personally notify your parents of what you have done. I won't bother asking what you were thinking, because I'm certain you weren't. You do realise that you may have been mistaken for the man who attacked the castle this evening? That I might have killed you because I thought you were someone else, attacking a student?"

The twins were saved from answering by Sirius, who put his head in the door that Remus was
"I'm bollocks-freezing and the professors are all wandering the halls, running into each other and throwing hexes without thinking," he said. "I've done all I can -- hallo boys," he said, coming around Remus to greet them. "What're you doing up? Volunteering to help? Because if you go out there you're liable to be knocked on your arses -- "

He turned at that point and Remus knew he must look actually terrifying, because even Sirius started.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"You two, sit there," Remus said, pointing to two chairs at the opposite end of the high table. "If you so much as move, you'll be sweeping halls with Filch until you graduate."

The boys obeyed silently and stiffly. Fred rubbed his ribs as they went. Remus took Sirius by the arm and pulled him back out the door, into the dim hallway.

"Did they -- " Sirius managed, before Remus slammed him up against the wall so hard he grunted. Remus pushed up against him and kissed him roughly. He knew he was shaking, knew Sirius could feel him shaking, but all that adrenaline had to go somewhere and Sirius was closest. He had felt a strong and terrible urge to hurt the twins, something that he recognised from full moons as the wolf's urge to eviscerate anything that came near his pack. Even now, with Sirius' fingers in his hair and willing body arching against him, he could feel the low instinctual push to kill.

Sirius moaned. "Moony -- "

Remus bit his earlobe.

"If I didn't have to see to the children in there," he heard his own voice rasp, low and aggressive, "I'd take you right here."

He stepped back, really more like pushed himself back, and Sirius stared at him with dark, confused eyes.

"Get McGonagall," Remus said, breathing deeply. "Tell her Fred and George Weasley assaulted two students and I'm locking them in her office for the night. You'll need to take them there. I have to stay with the students."

Sirius, still leaning against the stone, nodded slowly. He moved forward, kissed Remus a second time, and loped down the corridor, heading for the main stairs.

Remus wiped his mouth, faintly appalled at himself, and walked back into the Great Hall. The rustle of whispers that had risen in his absence abruptly ceased.
Chapter 7

Sunday morning found the search for Lucius Malfoy still continuing, now in shifts. Hagrid had found the Hufflepuff Portrait's card-players on the fourth floor, their wounds being attended to by a nineteenth-century portrait of a famous Healer (Ravenclaw, '67). House by House, the students were allowed to return to their common rooms. They went with quiet obedience, under strict orders not to leave for any reason.

The card-players described a man who might or might not be Lucius; certainly a tall, mad-eyed man with a face like a fox sounded like him. The man, they said, had a shaved head and quiet manners and wore fine-looking green robes. They'd almost taken him for a new professor, perhaps a substitute for someone, except that on first refusal he had flown into a rage and torn their painting to shreds. Dumbledore promised repairs, which soothed the agitated men somewhat.

Sirius took Remus to his rooms at dawn and put him to bed while the rest of the professors gathered to sift through his carefully-kept notes and ascertain what still needed to be searched. Being something of a free-agent and wanting to pass on his information to Dumbledore personally, Sirius wandered down to the kitchen for some cocoa and found the Headmaster there, serenely drinking tea at the long kitchen table. The kitchen elves seemed to be split equally between dancing unnecessary attendance on the Headmaster and preparing huge vats of porridge for breakfast. Sirius collared one and demanded cocoa.

"Everyone's upstairs, divvying up the rest of the castle," he said, by way of greeting. "Remus is asleep."

"As he ought," Dumbledore replied, as an elf served Sirius and skittered away. "I didn't really expect Lucius would stay after being twice-fooled. What have you found?"

Sirius stared into his cup. "I've been back to both doors three times. I thought maybe the first time it was just that I was distracted."

"Oh?" Dumbledore raised one shaggy eyebrow.

"There's Peter," Sirius said. He could hear the puzzled tone in his own voice. "I know there were wards put up around the castle to keep him out, but there's just a trace of him everywhere the damage was done. Otherwise -- the grounds are just animal, and the castle's too full of children to pick up anything vital. I can smell something powerful when I'm at the doorways, but I don't know how he got in, or from one door to the other."

"Could he have been with Pettigrew recently?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, that'd account for the stray traces." Sirius rubbed his neck, angrily. "I wish I could have got more."
"Even Sirius Black has his limitations, few as they are," Dumbledore said, with gentle reproof in his voice. "Tell me -- is it true that dogs can smell fear?"

Sirius laughed bitterly. "It's not, but I know what you're asking."

"By all means then, answer."

"He's healthy -- probably pretty well-fed -- but he hasn't bathed in a while. The clothes are new, might be stolen from a shop in Hogsmeade."

Dumbledore digested this, sipping his tea.

"Fortunately," he said finally, "whoever it was -- and I agree that Lucius Malfoy is likely -- he is all too human, and has left us invaluable gifts."

He placed a small vial on the table. Inside, two broken fingernails rattled.

"Six fingernails and a few scrapings of blood. Enough for Severus and Minerva to erect wards within the school against whoever they once belonged to," he said. "That will be carried out as soon as the search is complete. These are for you."

"You shouldn't have," Sirius replied drily.

"They are intended to create similar wards around your home in Hogsmeade. It was not by accident that Remus Lupin's door was the one attacked. For whatever reason, he is a target; possibly his close association with you, probably because Lucius Malfoy knows from Peter what Remus is, and that he would be weak. Quite probably, if he is in the thrall of Peter Pettigrew, the attack was meant as belated vengeance."

"Vengeance?" Sirius asked.

"Peter is a small-minded man, and small-minded men make small plans, which is in some ways a mercy for us," Dumbledore told him. "When he was defeated, he wanted the strongest possible ally; Lucius was the most powerful wizard he knew, as a Death Eater, discounting Voldemort himself. The fact that he is now mad would mean little to Peter. I believe that, having recruited a strong partner, he has set out for nothing more or less than full revenge. Remus is the easiest target, the day after a full moon. Harry would undoubtedly be next."

Sirius stared at him in open horror. That Peter might be gathering strength for some atrocity had crossed his mind, and even that Peter might one day try to come for Harry again. Pure, murderous, pointless revenge had never occurred to him. It was his duty to protect Harry, so instinctive that it didn't even need to be spoken, but Dumbledore had always given the impression that it was for some larger cause as well.

The idea of Peter murdering Sirius' family out of idle spite made his belly clench and his shoulders pull inward.

"I believe Lucius found his way into the castle with the intent of murdering Remus," Dumbledore said in a low voice. "He may have intended to retrieve his son as well, or he may have been sidetracked by the knowledge that Draco was close by."

"There must be a way to find them," Sirius said. "We can't go on double and triple warding forever. There's always a break. James and Lily died to teach us that."

"Indeed. Have you any suggestions?"
Sirius bowed his head, knitting his hands through the hair just above his neck. They sat in silence for some time.

"No," he said finally. "Short of going into the forest and scent-tracking them. But they're all over, there's no way to find out where they're hiding. And I know how dangerous the forest is. I have to think of Harry -- I won't be any good to him dead."

"Then all we can do is make things as secure as possible," Dumbledore said.

"I can help."

"I was depending upon it."

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There is the feeling of gauntness again, alien to his well-fed body in the other life. There is also cold, the wind in the Quidditch stands whipping through his thin cloak. He huddles down, grateful for the warm bodies on either side of him -- Dumbledore on his left, Sprout on his right. He is watching Quidditch, but not really watching the game; the sport never interested him much at school, nor does it now. He wishes he could be inside, with a book in his lap and a bowl of hot stew in his hands.

He remembers fifteen, sixteen, twenty years ago, sitting between Sirius and Peter (better not to think on them but remembering all the same), wishing for the same things but determined to show willing for James, who would be out on the pitch showing off for Lily Evans. Thirteen years old himself, wanting nothing more than to be in the common room with a book, though at the same time feeling oddly glad, in a way he wouldn't understand until much later, that Sirius was so close. And by that time Sirius was playing himself, beating Bludgers every which way.

Now he is watching James' son out on the pitch. Not as showy as James, perhaps Harry hasn't got a girl he wants to show off for yet, but a dark head of hair and a set of Quidditch robes and those wild Seeker acrobatics just the same.

He is watching Harry, so he does not see the Dementors, though he sees Harry halt and then shudder and then slump over, tumbling off his broomstick. Surely not, surely it is just a dive.

But Dumbledore is standing and shouting something and Harry is falling --

This time, though, he slips out of the dream without the usual cold-sweat-waking, as if someone has covered his eyes and wrapped a thicker, warmer cloak around his shoulders. He opens his eyes to see Sirius, head resting on his hands on the edge of the bed, watching him sleep.

***

Sirius came away from his meeting with Dumbledore more confused than ever, but McGonagall said she was "handling" the twins and that he should sleep too, as Sinistra and Hooch and Sprout were doing while the others continued to work. He fled gratefully for the comfort of Remus' quarters and found Remus sleeping fitfully, light enough that he woke when Sirius crouched down to study his face.

"I've been sent up," he said. "They're still working but they don't need me right now. I'm just climbing in -- go back to sleep."

"But Malfoy -- "
"Probably gone, and I've given my report to Dumbledore. He's managing things."

"Harry --"

"Tightly locked up in Slytherin with most of the Quidditch team guarding him. You can't even see Draco for his Hufflepuff honour guard."

"I should talk to McGonagall about the twins."

"It's being handled," Sirius said, pushing Remus back down onto the pillows. "It's all being taken care of."

"Everything?" Remus asked in a tired voice.

"Everything," Sirius assured him, sliding under the blankets. "We won't be needed for a few hours."

He settled himself up against Remus, in the way they often slept, Remus on his back and Sirius haphazardly flung up against him, arm across his chest. He waited for Remus to fall asleep again, but while the tension was gone from his body, his eyes still stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"Did I hurt you last night?" he asked. "With -- the wall and everything?"

"Nup," Sirius said, nosing his shoulder. He felt as pensive as Remus sounded, and wondered if now was the proper time to speak of why. "I worry about you, sometimes."

"I was just strung up -- I could strangle those twins."

"It's not just that," Sirius said. "You know I love you. And I like that you're not as quiet as you used to be."

Remus snorted.

"But -- you're angry. Not at me, not at Harry, just -- you've never had a temper before. Now...you were so furious about Umbridge, and that girl Anne that Andi's looking after, and now the twins. I know what the wall was about, not about you or me, just anger. I worry you're unhappy here."

Remus turned his head to one side, to meet his gaze.

"If you say the word, we'll take Harry and go away," Sirius continued. "Back to the River House. Or to anywhere you want. Somewhere warm and quiet. We can protect Harry on our own."

"I can't do that, just leave. Neither could you."

"Are you unhappy?" Sirius asked, ignoring the unpleasant truth Remus had just spoken.

"No -- I love Hogwarts, I like teaching. I get to see Harry every day. I feel useful here, like I did at Sandust." Remus curled closer. "But I feel like..."

"What?" Sirius asked, suddenly afraid.

"I feel like there's a breaking point coming," Remus said. "Not here or now, just -- in the other place. In my dreams, that place."

"Harry?"
"I don't know. I don't remember. I know I was terribly sad and always cold and always frightened. Am," he corrected himself. "The other me -- I sound like I'm going mad."

Sirius pulled the blankets tighter around them. "You're not mad."

"I know that I helped Harry," Remus stuttered a little. "But I know that I -- he -- he's going to betray Harry, too. Hurt him. Or maybe it's you he'll betray. Maybe both. When it comes it's going to be bad, it's already echoing across. I hate myself," he said suddenly. His voice was harsh. "I hate to think I'm capable of that."

"We all are," Sirius said, after a moment. "Even when we don't mean to. I've done it. I did it to you."

"You've never -- "

"For two years. Before you came to Sandust. I let you starve. Don't tell me you hid it from me, I have eyes, I could have seen. We lost them and Harry and I was so wrapped up in my own misery I let you starve, Remus."

Remus was silent.

"But things can be fixed. We fixed it. Or I wouldn't be here with you, I'd be some lonely bastard picking up girls in the bookshop."

Remus laughed, a good sound. Sirius kissed his shoulder.

"Here and now, there's nothing to be done. Just you and me. Dumbledore's here in the castle, he'll take care of everything. He always does."

Remus closed his eyes, nodding.

"But he won't always," he said, trailing off a little as he mumbled his way into sleep.

"Long enough. He might outlive us all."

"No..." Remus muttered.

"Why, you know something I don't?" Sirius asked, amused. "Been scrying with Trelawney in your spare time?"

Remus said something that Sirius couldn't quite piece together; it sounded like "Sixteen" but that made no sense. Then again, he was asleep before Sirius could say another word, and perhaps it was only some random syllables bounced up from his dreaming unconscious.

And anyway, this was Moony. What possible betrayal could he commit? It was probably just his old fear, the fear of hurting someone on the full-moon nights. Always so many questions, after each schooltime moon -- did we see any people? Did I try to hurt anyone? Are you sure? You were always there?

Probably.

***

FRED AND GEORGE WEASLEY, YOU ARE TWO OF THE MOST TROUBLESOME CHILDREN ANY MOTHER EVER RAISED. I DON'T KNOW I'M SURE BECAUSE I KNOW I TAUGHT YOU MANNERS. WHAT ON EARTH WERE YOU THINKING, ATTACKING
OTHER STUDENTS LIKE THAT? YOU WEREN'T THINKING, WERE YOU? YOU NEVER THINK! IT'S BY MERLIN'S OWN GRACE YOU AREN'T EXPULLED AND I DON'T KNOW WHAT WE SHALL DO WITH YOU AT CHRISTMAS. JUST WAIT UNTIL YOUR FATHER SEES YOU. IF YOU DON'T TAKE YOUR PUNISHMENT WITH THE PROPER HUMBLE SPIRIT YOU'LL BE BANISHED FROM CHRISTMAS DINNER COMPLETELY! I HOPE PROFESSOR LUPIN SHOOK YOU UNTIL YOUR TEETH RATTLED!

AND NO, I WILL NOT STOP SENDING YOU HOWLERS UNTIL I SEE IN HARRY'S OWN HAND THAT YOU HAVE PERSONALLY SAID YOU ARE SORRY TO HIM AND DRACO MALFOY!

Love, your mum.

***

All work on the house in Hogsmeade came to an abrupt halt as Sirius took up his new mission. In the days after the search ended he spent all his time in the castle, carefully walking the hallways and stopping up any gaps, putting new charm-locks on windows, checking false walls long since forgotten by the collective student memory. He became a familiar sight to the students in the corridors, who would gather around between classes and take in an impromptu lecture on repairing weakened charms or blocking off old dead-ends in the towers. Severus seethed and ignored him pointedly, except when he made students late for Potions class. Merlin help the tardy child who had no more wit than to say they were watching Sirius Black lecture the portraits on how to raise an alarm if suspicious villains were lurking.

It did not help his mood that Dora had gone back to London to quietly keep her ear to the ground. Severus would not admit that he ever demanded less of his students than their absolute best efforts, but he was noticeably sharper and marked more severely the day after she left.

The students were more subdued than normal and spoke in quiet tones, even in the hallway, though there was a rash of misbehaviour of the sort that usually only showed up around end-of-term.

"I think I understand it a little better now," Remus said to Dumbledore, standing on the steps to the school. It was a crisp day, promising early snow that year, and he had his hands shoved deep in his pockets for warmth. Severus was sitting nearby, ostensibly supervising the activities on the field but in reality correcting a handful of longwinded seventh-year essays.

"Splendid. No understanding is ever wasted," Dumbledore replied.

"He wants you to ask him what it is he understands," Snape growled. "Don't give him the pleasure."

"I'm quite capable of talking to myself, if you don't care to listen," Remus replied. "I was speaking, generally, of the rash of pranks these past few days and the twins in particular. I think I understand why they did it."

"Because they are two pinheaded brutes in need of a sound whipping?" Snape asked.

"The children are tense. The tension has to go somewhere. Pulling pranks is cathartic. Getting punished is too, in a way. Reminds you that you're alive. Puts blisters on your fingers." Remus nodded to himself. "The game tomorrow ought to put paid to their mischief for a while. Lots of shouting and running around. Do them all good."

"They should have been thrown off the team," Snape replied, without looking up from his papers.
Remus looked out again over the grounds, to where Fred and George were serving their punishment. McGonagall had thrown up her hands, not knowing what to do; for all intents and purposes the prank itself had been a minor event, its crime heightened by bad timing and choice of victim. Dumbledore, who preferred the punishment, when possible, to fit the crime, could not very well spend a week scaring the daylights out of the twins. They had finally settled on something both humbling and apt: Fred and George were to spend their evenings, under adult supervision, teaching the first-years to play Quidditch. They had brightened quite a bit at this suggestion, but were probably now wishing they could have been scrubbing toilets instead. To a fifth-year, the small and homesick first-years were hardly worthy of notice, and now they had to be polite to them and patient with them.

The first-years, who felt a certain solidarity with anyone below fourth-year level and thus with Harry, were not making it easy on the Weasley boys.

"I understand it was offered," Dumbledore said. "I'm told by fairly reliable sources that Oliver Wood had every intention of removing them from the team."

"Oh?" Snape asked disinterestedly. "Clearly he was persuaded otherwise."

He finally looked up from his papers, a sidelong glance at Remus which said he knew perfectly well who the culprit would be in that case.

"Yes -- Harry has a very good sense of fair play," Dumbledore said. Snape dropped his papers. Two or three went fluttering across the field and a dozen first-years broke formation to retrieve them for him.

"I understand why he might prevent them being removed," the Headmaster continued. "Unfair to punish Gryffindor with substandard Beaters because two of their number have poor decision-making skills. Besides, it spoils the fun of the thing. Immensely sporting of him, don't you agree?"

"Foolish; he'll never learn to press his advantage," Snape muttered. "Why the boy is a Slytherin I'll never know."

"Harder to play against a decent team," Remus said, looking thoughtful. "Why make life easier now? He knows enough to push when it counts. It's only a game, Severus. Besides, Harry knows how to pick his battles."

"Well, we shall hope he picks tomorrow, then. I would like him to put the fear of Slytherin into those two."

"Merlin, I'll have to wear black tomorrow, I suppose," Remus mused.

"Black?" Dumbledore asked.

"Everyone knows I was a Gryffindor. Bad form to be seen rooting for Slytherin as a professor. Best to be neutral."

Snape looked up again. "Slytherin?"

"Harry's team. I wore green every game day for two years."

Snape cocked his head curiously at Remus. Dumbledore, with his usual impeccable timing, disappeared into the castle. Remus laughed as one of the first-years tumbled off his broomstick and onto Fred's head.
"Rooting for the House is well and good when you're in it," he continued casually, "but we become men and have children of our own, and live and die by their triumphs. Unavoidable, really."

"Vicarious," Snape sniffed.

"No -- well, perhaps for some. I want Harry to be happy; winning Quidditch makes him happy. If winning unfairly wouldn't satisfy him, there's no point in it. Children want to please their parents. Which means their parents should be pleased by things that satisfy their children. Vicious circle, some would call it, but it seems to work."

"You are aware Harry is not your son."

"No more, Severus, than he is yours," Remus replied, confident that Snape would understand. The other man sniffed and rolled up a freshly-marked essay. "Here, pass me some, I'm bored."

"You're notoriously bad at Potions."

"So, I'll mark for grammar and you can mark for content." Remus held out his hand and Snape reluctantly put three rolled-up parchments in his hand. An hour later, Sirius found the pair of them sitting on the steps like bookends, heads bent over the essays, working quietly.

***

Harry woke, the day of the term's first Quidditch match, at a truly unreasonable hour. He knew that he wouldn't sleep again, because his first thought on waking was Quidditch and his nerves immediately strung themselves taut, his stomach cramping with anticipation.

The clock in the Slytherin common-room said it was not quite five, so the kitchen elves ought to be up, at least. He could hear rain pounding against the castle walls as he dressed and wandered up to the Great Hall. Oliver Wood was sitting at one end of the Gryffindor table, the only other person in the big echoing room. He waved at Harry with his oatmeal spoon.

"You're up early," Harry said, dropping down on the bench across from him.

"Rain woke me," Oliver grunted. "You?"

"Nerves."

"Shouldn't admit that to the opposing team, f'I were you."

Harry grinned. "Like the way you're bolting that oatmeal isn't any kind of sign."

Oliver put his spoon down and swallowed carefully.

"Miserable weather," Harry said, casting about for a new subject. "Rotten playing conditions."

"Part of the game," Oliver replied, looking relieved. "They were going to build a big indoor stadium for the Pride of Portree, and the entire league put their foot down. Wouldn't have it. Said it would kill the surprise of things."

"Well, it'd make the snitch a lot easier to catch," Harry agreed.

"Plus, rebounding bludgers. Buggers would crack the roof sooner or later." Oliver grinned. "I'm going out for Pride as a free agent next year. Would be nice to be able to say Gryffindor took the cup my last year."
"Nicer if you can say I made you work for it," Harry retorted.

"You are the most arrogant little bastard who ever chased a Snitch," Oliver answered.

"Fine talk from someone who sits in front of a bunch of hoops all day," said Harry, and both of them cracked up laughing. "Hey, how do you know when you've got a Keeper as a houseguest? He sits on the sofa, never gets up, and just tries to grab food if you carry it past."

Oliver nearly snorted his oatmeal out his nose. "What does a Seeker do in the morning?"

"Dunno, what?"

"Pays her and goes home."

Harry laughed even as he turned bright red. Oliver leaned in close.

"Potter, all this stuff about House loyalty and rivalry -- off the pitch it's just so much dragon dung, you know that, right? Even when I talk about it, it's utter shite. That's why Flint and I can't get on. He really takes it all seriously."

"Sure," Harry said, though he hadn't known. Or rather...he had known it, in some fashion, but he'd never articulated it. Not that Oliver had put it particularly well, but he'd at least put words to it.

"Good luck," Harry said.

"Fly like hell," Oliver replied.

***

The professors came out of the castle like so many enormous birds, heads bowed under umbrellas against the rain and cloaks flapping around their legs in the fierce wind. The students poured around them, louder and much more brightly coloured, bearing gaudy rain-hats and almost to a one in House colours.

Padma and Draco, who had flipped a coin over who to back, were in vivid Slytherin green with Neville trailing behind them, amiable in Gryffindor scarlet. The weather was vile, but Quidditch was worth it, and all three were in high spirits.

Just as they passed the professors, they heard someone shout "Severus!" and Nymphadora Tonks crested the hill from the front gate. She ran through the rain and mud, apparently making for the cluster of professors with umbrellas. At the last minute she slipped, skidded in the mud, and slammed into Professor Snape, who caught her around the waist before she could fall down. She threw her arms around his neck and grinned. The entire student body of Hogwarts hooted and laughed.

"Wench," they heard Snape mutter, but he offered her half of the space under his umbrella, which did necessitate them huddling close underneath it. The students ran on, towards the stands and the paltry shelter they would provide.

"Harry's going to die in this deluge," Neville shouted into the wind. "He won't be able to see a thing!"

"I charmed his glasses!" Padma called back. "They'll keep clear anyway. Are you going over to Gryffindor?"
"I ought to. Where will you be?"

"Other side of the Professors' box, Ravenclaw benches," Draco answered. "See you after the game!"

Up in the stands, they found seats near the Professors' box and watched as their teachers filed in and sat down, passing around thermos bottles full of cocoa and flasks full of something a bit more powerful. Dumbledore, resplendent in an enormous white ulster, was hosting a pair of unknown men in the first row, with McGonagall on the other side of them. Lee Jordan leaned over to shake their hands from the announcer's chair and Padma caught the words "Professional" and "Recruit". Professor Snape and Dora were sitting in the back row, huddled against the wall.

"I THINK THEY'RE CUTE," she shouted, above the roar of cheers as the players took the field.

"WHAT, ALL OF THEM?" Draco shouted back.

"ALL OF WHO? WHAT?"

Draco pointed at the players, and she giggled.

"NOT THEM! PROFESSOR SNAPE AND PROFESSOR TONKS!"

Draco rolled his eyes expressively. There was a whistle from the field and their attention was drawn away as the Quidditch balls rose in the air, the Snitch vanishing almost before it was seen and the Bludgers circling the pitch menacingly.

"Slytherin takes the Quaffle to start, and they're off!" Lee Jordan announced.

***

Harry, if he had heard Remus talk about catharsis and misbehaviour, might have agreed once he was in the air. He always loved Quidditch, but in the screaming wind and furious speed he felt a fierce joy warm him from the inside. He almost believed the rain would steam right off his skin.

He had been a little worried about the game -- they had two new Chasers and Crabbe really wasn't as bright as a Beater ought to be, but then that was Flint's lookout, not his. Harry's job was to get the Snitch, and he had a full year's experience on Ginny Weasley, who had landed the coveted Seeker's spot on Gryffindor. Harry vaguely remembered Ginny putting paint in his hair back when he'd attended Molly Weasley's little home school, and wasn't precisely intimidated by her.

Down below, the Twins were playing merry hell with Slytherin's Chasers, and Harry scowled. They had come and apologised, and seemed to mean it, but he was still angry. Oh, he'd written Molly a letter saying all was fine, and they'd said sorry, but he was unwilling to let them off so easily. School discipline had been satisfied, but Harry had not. He liked the twins, used to play with them, and trusted them; in return they'd embarrassed and frightened him in front of his friends. He was not going to forgive them so easily as he'd said in his letter to Molly.

And he was circling uselessly; the Snitch would be hard enough to see in sunlight, but in the rain it was nearly impossible. He would find it or it would find him so, with one eye on Ginny and the other scanning endlessly for the Snitch, he dove into the middle of the scrimmage and started getting in the way. In the way of the Gryffindor Chasers, in the way of Fred and George's bats so if they hit a Bludger they'd foul him, in the way of Oliver Wood as he dove for the Quaffle.

"What the hell are you doing?" Towler demanded, zipping past him.
"Making myself useful!" Harry shouted with a laugh.

"Don't get killed," Pucey warned him, passing on his other side. Harry saw Pucey drop like a stone and throw the Quaffle straight up to Persephone Ackerly, one of the new Chasers. She fumbled in the rain but managed to hang on to it, righting herself before ducking under a bludger and racing back to the Gryffindor goal.

Harry rose again, high above even the multi-level play that was now standard for Quidditch at Hogwarts, and circled. He could see Ginny doing the same, and wondered what she'd thought of his dive into the middle of things. She dropped suddenly, but he ignored it; she hadn't looked down first, and it was an amateur feint.

As he was scanning the north end of the pitch, he pulled his broom up short, then eased closer to the Hufflepuff seats, still alert for any flash of gold in the silver rain. Two men were standing next to the side wall of the stadium, nearly on the pitch itself. And they were fighting.

Harry dropped down for a closer look, wondering if it was two seventh-years in a spat. He was so distracted by the men that he didn't hear the shouts of warning or the fearful cries of the other players. The Snitch was forgotten, because one of the men seemed nightmarishly familiar...

The smaller of the two men seemed, oddly, to have the upper hand. He had finally got hold of the other man's arms and was twisting them behind his back. The first man raised his hooded head and the cowl slid off; rain pattered down on a shiny, clean-shaven head, pale and gleaming. The smaller man threw him to the ground and looked up.

Harry caught his breath and froze. The eyes that gazed up at him were goat's eyes, two crossed dark stripes in golden pupils.

He opened his mouth to scream or curse or call for help, he was never sure, but before he could get the words out he suddenly heard other words, words in his head.

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

"Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now...."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead --"

White mist filled Harry's brain and he looked down stupidly. Below him, Dementors were surging across the pitch. He heard students screaming, but they were dim echoes behind these new voices in his mind.

"Not Harry! Please...have mercy...have mercy...."

There was a shrill laugh, like an iciclepick in his skull, and then Harry slumped forward, fingers numbly releasing the broomstick as the world went dark.

***

When the Dementors began to surround the Pitch, people started to shout warnings, more to the players than each other. Severus Snape, who had more presence of mind than many, stood up and leapt to the thin edge of the stand's back wall, running along it like a child on a ridgepole. He was sliding down the ladder to the ground when he looked up and saw Sirius Black following. Good; an ally.

They ran, Sirius a step behind, towards the pitch and the black cowled figures seeming to swim
through the air across it.

"Expecto patronum!" Severus shouted. A large silver-white fox leapt forward, charging in and around and through the Dementors, who veered off sharply. They went upwards, which wasn't much help; the Quidditch players scattered to the stands.

"HARRY!" Sirius bellowed, bolting straight through the Dementors as if they weren't there. Some small corner of Snape's mind said *adrenaline* but the rest of him looked up just in time to see Harry slump off his broomstick and tumble down.

At first, he thought that the world was slowing down, the way he had heard it sometimes did when the senses kicked up into overdrive. Then he realised the Dementors were still scattering away from the flashes of silver on the field, at least three of them now, and it was Harry who was falling in slow-motion. He looked up and saw Dumbledore standing like a white pillar with his wand outstretched.

An enormous silver hawk, another patronus, was wheeling and circling over the crowd now, dipping whenever a Dementor tried to rise, herding them towards the wide gap at one end of the field. A bearlike dog was standing in front of Sirius with its hackles raised as he picked Harry up and ran for the safety of the stands.

Nymphadora arrived at his elbow at the same time a silver-white peacock ran furiously squawking across the grounds, wings spread wide, tail in full fan. Severus had enough presence of mind to turn to her, his hair plastered wetly against his skull, and demand, "A *peacock*?"

"Come on, let's get inside!" she replied, grabbing his arm. "The game's over!"

"I SHOULD BLOODY WELL THINK!"

"No -- it's *over*. The Weasley kid caught the -- "

"SON OF A -- "

"Snitch!" she finished. She tugged his arm, slipped on the mud, and righted herself using him as leverage. Hagrid, puffing and blowing, trotted past them with a black bundle in his arms and absently shoved his enormous pink umbrella into Snape's hands. As he passed, Remus Lupin's death-white face was visible against the wet, hairy coat Hagrid wore.

"What happened to Lupin?" he asked, bobbing under the ridiculous pink umbrella.

"Passed out," she grunted. "How's Harry?"

"Black's got him," he replied as they half-ran, half-climbed the slippery hill to the castle. Inside, the children had bottlenecked in the doorway, shedding damp coats and shouting excitedly at one another.

"Move aside, you brainless spawn!" he snarled, and the students quickly hurried down the corridors. "Back to your common rooms, everyone! Prefects!"

"Trying, sir!" Percy Weasley, an oiksome boy, was herding Gryffindors up the stairs.

"Try harder!"

"Yessir!"
Severus dropped the pink umbrella in a corner, his sopping cloak and Nymphadora's smart rain-slicker following. They hurried through the halls, occasionally encountering a confused youngster who he dispatched to their House common rooms with barely-veiled hostility.

He ran into Hagrid in the doorway of the hospital wing, and Dora bumped into his back. They both slipped on the wet floor and finally went sprawling. Hagrid hauled them up effortlessly.

"In there," the enormous groundskeeper said, hurrying on his way.

"Nothing broken?" Severus asked Dora.

"If there is, I'm in the right place," she answered, leading him inside. He rubbed his elbow and followed.

Dumbledore and Black were there, deep in conference while Poppy Pomfrey stewed something on a table nearby. Harry lay in one of the beds, his cheeks still damp. Remus Lupin was sitting on another, doubled over, hands on his knees and head bent low.

"How are they?" Dora asked, turning instinctively to Dumbledore as the authority figure.

"I'm fine," Remus answered for himself, sounding irritated.

"You just stay there," Black called back.

"Professor Lupin is, as you see, conscious," Dumbledore said gently. "Harry is well; no broken bones. A bad brush with a Dementor, nothing more."

Severus pushed past them all, passing Harry's bed as Pomfrey bent over it to pour the sweet-smelling concoction into his mouth. Cocoa, probably. Harry was being attended to, at any rate.

He crouched in front of Lupin and picked up his wrist, taking his pulse.

"Are you nauseous?" he asked. "Has Pomfrey given you anything?"

"No," Remus answered. "She knows I'm on the Wolfsbane."

"Dizzy?"

"Not anymore."

"Any strange tastes in your mouth?"

"Embarrassment, Severus, that's all. This hadn't anything to do with the potion."

Severus, confident that his pulse was even and steady, let his hand drop.

"Did he hit his head?" he asked, standing and turning to look at Dumbledore.

"He was sitting down," Black replied. "Hagrid said he just went over sideways. Fuck," he added firmly.

"You were -- seeing to Harry," Remus said haltingly. "Right where you should have been."
"You'll keep him for observation?" Severus asked, turning to Pomfrey.

"I think that would be best," she said, looking confusedly from Black to Dumbledore to Remus. Harry coughed against the cup held to his lips, and she took it away before he could choke. His eyes opened.

"Just lie still, there's a good lad," she said soothingly, putting a firm hand on Harry's shoulder. He nodded, but his eyes darted around the room.

"You had a fall," Black said, sitting on the other side of Harry. "You're in the castle now."

"Yeah..." Harry pushed himself up onto his elbows, despite Pomfrey's hand. "How bad was it?"


"I -- " Harry stopped. Severus actually saw his pupils dilate in panic. "Peter," he breathed.

"What?" Remus asked, lifting his head.

"I saw him," Harry said, voice trembling. "Peter Pettigrew. I saw him. He was at the game. He was fighting with someone -- "

"That's the Dementors," Pomfrey said soothingly. "They can make people see things."

"No, before that," Harry insisted. "That's why I didn't see them coming -- "

His whole body went rigid.

"Harry, you're safe here -- " Black began, but Harry was looking past him, as if he could look straight through the castle walls. Severus felt a nauseous wave of fear and longing break over him, and threw up his mental walls quickly. Harry was terrified and agitated, and not over some mere Dementor-dream.

"I saw them," he said. "They were there, and then there was screaming..."

"I think perhaps Harry had better rest," Pomfrey said. Severus saw her hold the cup below the edge of the bed and break a capsule into the remains of the drink. She held it to Harry's lips and he drank, though he'd been opening his mouth to say something else. Even before he was finished, his eyelids were drooping. Black caught his head and eased it back onto the pillow.

"My study, I think," Dumbledore said, into the silence that followed. "Poppy?"

"I won't say a word," she said.

"Excellent. I believe we must take Professor Lupin with us, however. Mr. Black is qualified to judge his mental state. I'm sure," Dumbledore continued, and lifted one of Remus' arms around his shoulders without waiting for her to object. Remus stumbled for a few steps, then straightened.

"I can walk," he said, sounding less annoyed now.

Severus followed them out and along the hallway, feeling suddenly tired. He heard Dora gasp.

"I almost forgot," she said, reaching into the pocket of her robes. She handed a small envelope to Black. "It's something Remus asked for -- the files he wanted. Tap it twice and it'll expand."

Black shoved the envelope into his own pocket and nodded. They continued in silence until they
reached the high, safe, and warm comfort of Dumbledore's study. Remus eased himself into a chair. Black leaned on the arm.

"That was a brilliant patronus," Dora said to him, in an undertone.

"Wasn't mine," Black replied. "I was going for Harry."

"The big dog?" she asked.

"Mine," Remus said. "I remember just before I went out."

"Who cast the hawk?" Black asked.

"Minerva's, I expect," Dumbledore answered, picking up a basket from his desk. "Toffee?"

They each took one, rather like children, though none of them unwrapped the sweet or ate it. Severus waved it off.

"Now then," Dumbledore said, seating himself at his desk. In the corner, Fawkes crooned reassuringly. "Let us see if we cannot make a coherent tale of this afternoon's adventure."

***

In the Gryffindor common room, all was chaos. The students, confused as to whether they should celebrate or not, talked loudly and animatedly about the game, while Lee Jordan and Hermione Granger pored over Quidditch rulebooks to see if the catch was fair.

Ginny sat at the windowseat, still in her muddy Quidditch things, her hair hanging in two limp, wet pigtails. The three Weasley boys were there as well, trying to cajole her into speaking, but she just stared at the little golden Snitch in her fingers.

Neville was worried about Harry, but he'd seen Sirius gather him up, and Sirius was a grownup -- he would make everything okay. He'd seen Padma in the hall, briefly, and knew she was all right too. She'd been with Draco at the game, and she wouldn't bolt on him, so he must be fine as well.

The other students, who knew Neville was one of the knot of interhouse friends who stood fast against all comers, including their own House if necessary, were giving him a wide berth. Even in his scarlet jumper, he was a temporary Slytherin in their midst.

Well, so be it then. He pushed through the crowd and walked up to where Ginny was sitting, daring the Weasley boys to say anything. One by one they picked up and left, until he was alone with Ginny. She looked up at him, smiled insincerely, and went back to studying the Snitch.

"It was a fair catch," he said. "You got it before Harry fell."

She shrugged.

"Tisn't how you want to win your first game, huh?" he asked.

"No," she said softly. "Harry okay?"

"Dunno. Reckon so, he's had worse."

Ginny nodded. Neville sat on the windowseat. He didn't know Ginny all that well, but he knew what Harry would say.
"Honourable thing to do would be to give it back," he began. "Call the game a draw and re-play it. That's what a Gryffindor would do. Don't you think?"

"Yes," she said, no doubt in her voice now.

"Think you couldn't have won against Harry Potter?"

She looked up sharply at him. He shrugged. "You caught the Snitch. If you think you couldn't win, you should call for a draw and re-play. Then you should quit. 'Cause it was a fair catch, and if you don't think you're as good a Seeker as he is, or Cho Chang or Ced Diggory, you should quit."

"I'm as good as them any day," she said, fire flashing in her eyes.

"Then you could have won fair against Harry?" he asked. "Where I sat it looked like he was halfway across the field from you."

"You really think so?" she asked.

"Who're you talking to? Only Harry's best friend," Neville said. "Harry won't say anything different."

"He won't be mad?"

"Nah. Games have rules," Neville said, repeating something Harry had once told him. "If you don't learn to play by the rules, when you're out in the real world you won't know how to play by those rules, which you can't break, and then you'll just lose. Got to play by the rules. Rules say it was a fair catch."

"Hermione thinks -- "

"Oh seriously, Hermione?" Neville asked. "She's a brain and I like her, but she's hardly a Quidditch expert, is she?"

Ginny gave him the first real smile he'd seen since the game ended.

"Now go wash your hair and put on decent clothes, you look like a drowned rat," he added. To his shock, she threw her arms around his neck, hugged him tightly, and bolted for the stairs.

***

One of the greatest regrets of Draco's childhood was that nobody ever saw the Leap.

He hadn't done it for attention or to show off, at the time, but all the same it would have been nice if someone had seen it. It was a glorious Leap, the bravest thing he felt he'd ever done, despite having faced down a Basilisk and survived thirteen years with his mother.

When Harry fell from his broomstick everyone shot to their feet, Draco included, but while he was worrying about Harry he also saw Harry's Nimbus shake free of its owner and go whipping away. Draco knew how much Harry loved the Nimbus, a gift from Sirius, and he knew that if it got free and into the forest Harry would be crushed.

Draco saw the broomstick go racing past the stands. Everyone else ran for the ladders or stared after Harry, but unthinkingly, instinctively, Draco leaned the other direction, over the edge of the railing, and Leaped.

For a long minute he knew what it was to fly, with his coat flapping out behind him and his shoes
dripping rainwater over pure empty space. It seemed to go on forever.

Then, with a testicle-crushing jolt that even the cushioning charms couldn't prevent, he landed on Harry's broomstick and hooked his arms around it, pressing his cheek to the pale wood. The broomstick dropped twenty feet at least, emerging from the back of the stands and shooting straight for the Whomping Willow.

Draco let out a warcry he didn't even know he had in him, half yelping pain and half ecstasy. The Nimbus rocked and jerked, spun and bucked, but Draco clung tightly and whooped again. He whipped it round to a halt and felt the brush of a leaf as the Whomping Willow reached out to club him and missed by a hair's breadth. The Nimbus jerked once, rebelliously, and then began to descend. Draco was damned if he'd drop down to the level of the swarming Dementors, even if they were what seemed like miles off by now. He jerked it up, firmly, and shot into the air above the forest.

"Yah!" he said daringly. "Take that!"

He was aware that he was wet and trembling, but he had Harry's broomstick, and that was what counted. Sirius would be proud, he was sure, and Harry would be pleased.

By the time he reached the Quidditch Pitch, however, he was worried. The stand and field were empty, echoingly empty. He hovered the broomstick over the field for a minute, feeling like an intruder, and then hurriedly flew back to the castle, looking over his shoulder for Dementors. It was a long journey, or at least it felt like much longer than usual, and when he arrived at the door there was nobody there, either. It was bolted shut. If the front door of Hogwarts was closed and locked, all of them would be.

He could go to the kitchens and bang on the windows for the elves to let him in, or he could probably knock on the window of a professor's office, but the idea filled him with dread. Hufflepuff dormitory was underground, no help there, and he didn't think he was brave enough to try Gryffindor or Ravenclaw, at the tops of the tall towers.

Harry would be in the hosptial wing though, wouldn't he? And if it came to the absolute worst he could try Remus' rooms. That would be mortifying in the extreme, but Remus wouldn't tell anyone, at least.

He lifted off again and rose slowly, still checking for Dementors. Past the first and second floors and up and up to the windows of the hospital wing. One of them was open and he studied it briefly before sliding inside, pulling the broom behind him.

It was empty and quiet here too, except for Harry, lying on the bed nearest the door. Over the fear and the weird loneliness of the empty grounds, Draco felt a twinge of pride as he set the broomstick by Harry's bed. He could sit on the bed next to him and dry off a bit, then he would go down to Hufflepuff.

He leaned back on the bed, boots dangling off the edge, and stared up at the ceiling. Eventually, without meaning to at all, he drifted off to sleep.

***

Two men stand in the forest, watching the castle and the empty grounds. One is tall and gaunt, but he wears the most expensive clothing it is possible to steal from Hogsmeade. The other is shortish, roundish, with a pointy ratty face. He is ranting, nearly raving.
"I have told you time and again that we will fetch the boy when the time is right, and not before!" he says, quiet but intense. "You've already cost us access to the castle with your stunt!"

"We will take him when we take Potter," the tall man says dully. "When will that be?"

"When we have a safe place to keep him and when he is alone. When he won't be missed. The men watching him aren't fools!"

"Shut up," says the tall man, and the smaller man obeys, looking surprised.

"Lucius," he snivels, after a moment, "There are things yet to be prepared and -- "

"He is my son," Lucius says proudly. Behind him, the smaller man rolls his eyes.

"Lucius, we have to be careful."

Lucius is lucid for the moment, though he slips in and out.

"Did you see him jump from the high places?" he asks distantly. "Like Astyanax?"

"Who?"

"He leapt and did not fall."

"Come away, Lucius," says the small man, and Lucius smiles proudly.

"Yes, Peter," he replies.

***

Draco woke, several hours later, to a hoarse cry.

"FOUND HIM! HOSPITAL WING!"

The cry echoed weirdly around the room, as if it were passing through the walls. Draco sat up, startled, and nearly banged his head against Severus Snape's beaky nose.

"What are you doing here?" the man demanded.

"Um?" Draco said.

"Malfoy, what the ten kinds of hell are you doing here?"

Draco swallowed. "Brought Harry his broomstick," he said thickly.

"And decided to take a nap?" Snape asked.

"No...I just fell asleep..."

"While we searched the entire castle? Merlin, you are the world's own fool. Did you not hear me order everyone to their common rooms?"

Draco rubbed his eyes. He was not prepared to wake to an interrogation by his most feared professor.

"The door was locked when I came up," he said.
"Where were you before we locked it?"

"Getting Harry's broomstick," Draco said in a small voice. He looked up as Sirius skidded through the door at the same time Madam Pomfrey came out of her office to see what the hullabaloo was.

"Is he okay?" Sirius demanded.

"He won't be when I'm through with him," Professor Snape answered. "Pomfrey! Did you know Malfoy was here?"

"You didn't send him up?" she asked, perplexed. "I assumed he was sent up to keep Harry company."

"We've been searching the castle for him, woman! He was missed in the Hufflepuff headcount!"

"Well, you needn't take that tone," she retorted. "Nobody told me."

Draco slid to his feet and found himself suddenly engulfed in the smell of leather and wet dog. Sirius had wrapped him in a tight embrace.

"We thought your father had got you," he said, releasing a stunned and confused Draco. "We've been looking for hours -- there are Aurors all over the Forest."

And then he said the most dreaded words of Draco's existence.

"We've called your Mum, for Merlin's sake."
Chapter 8

There could now be no doubt in Dumbledore's mind that Lucius and Peter were together, and that they were in the forest.

Harry's testimony might have been befuddled by his encounter with the Dementors, but he was very clear on some things: he had seen Peter Pettigrew's goat-eyed stare. He had seen him struggling with a tall man that had to be Lucius Malfoy. A picture began to emerge of what had happened earlier that day on the Pitch -- Lucius and Peter had come, possibly to harm Harry, likely to harm Draco. The Dementors had been drawn by the high emotions of the game and had fixed on Lucius Malfoy when they were close enough; they surged across the grounds and Pettigrew and Malfoy had fled.

Harry, caught in backlash as the Dementors went past, had fallen from his broomstick. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Remus, and Snape had cast charms at about the same time, Tonks shortly after. Dumbledore had slowed Harry's fall enough for Sirius to reach him. Remus remembered only the urge to cast a Patronus; he had cast it sitting down, his wand half-caught in his sleeve, and had fallen over shortly after.

Padma had assumed Draco was with Neville, and Neville thought he was with Padma, so neither missed him. When Draco finally turned up missing during a headcount in Hufflepuff Dormitory, the alarm was raised and the castle searched. Nobody thought to look in the Hospital Wing, assuming that Pomfrey would have sent him down to his dormitory if he came to visit Harry.

Magical Law Enforcement were summoned and sent into the Forbidden Forest, though Dumbledore made no mention of Lucius Malfoy. Others searched the building with the help of the professors until the child turned up perfectly fine and a little sleepy in the bed one over from Harry. Kingsley Shacklebolt, called to lead the search, shook his head in disgust.

Narcissa Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks were also summoned, Narcissa because she was his mother and Andromeda because only Andromeda could have handled Narcissa without someone getting slapped. As it was, Draco came close. Narcissa was furious that her Hufflepuff of a son had caused her to be called away from a manicure, one hand spiked with long red nails and the other hand's nails still pale and short. If Andromeda had not been there, Draco would have suffered his mother's wrath longer and much more painfully; if Sirius had been there -- and he had demanded it at first -- Narcissa's pretty red nails would have been broken, and probably a few fingers too.

And still nothing was said of Lucius Malfoy.

It was not until that evening, after Narcissa had gone back to her manicure and the MLE agents had left, that Dumbledore called Shacklebolt into his study to dine with him privately. Harry had been woken for dinner and spent a long time speaking to Dumbledore; now Kingsley listened to what Harry had said, nodded gravely, and steepled his long fingers against his lips.

During the writing of this chapter I have used dialogue or description from canon. In this instance, text pertaining to the Marauder's Map as well as highly recognisable quotes from HBP have been used.
"You have two options, Headmaster," he said cautiously. "Neither of them good ones."

"Endanger a boy or endanger a school," Dumbledore sighed.

"If you formally report a witness account of Lucius Malfoy on your grounds, you can request Auror guards to protect the lad. He clearly needs it," he added sternly.

"Impetuous youth," Dumbledore replied.

"Yes, too impetuous. If Lucius is reported, however, we must insist on allowing the Dementors into the castle. I don't like them any more than you do, but those are my orders. I don't have the political power to disobey or countermand the Minister for Magic."

"And I cannot reason with him, much as I have tried."

"You have wards against Malfoy and Pettigrew encircling the castle. If you choose not to report his presence, what you've told me goes no further than this room. But you won't get guards, and you can't possibly hope to keep every child forever in the castle."

"I don't even propose to try," Dumbledore said.

"You said Lupin could protect him. I asked you to consider Moody."

"If the Dementors were not here, there would have been no need to protect him," Dumbledore said pointedly.

"Dementors or not, Pettigrew and Malfoy would have come up from the forest. And the Dementors did drive them back." Shacklebolt held up his hands appeasingly. "I know, and I agree -- but I speak as a representative of the Aurors in this case. This is what they will say."

"I will not allow them in the castle."

"Then you will have to ensure his safety yourself."

Dumbledore nodded. "And what becomes of Malfoy the Elder?"

"Now that I have a confirmed presence in the forest, I'm prepared to take a risk," Shacklebolt answered. "I have five or six very loyal, very discreet men and women who can search. Nymphadora among them. If they are caught, you will no longer have a say in the matter. But they will do this for me."

Dumbledore offered his hand, and Shacklebolt shook it.

"What will you do? You still have another search to carry out," he observed as he showed Shacklebolt to the door.

"The decoy search is not entirely useless. We have good intelligence from the continent, and some of our people are tracking where Pettigrew and Malfoy went once they left Azkaban."

"When you have the time, come up to the castle again. There are people I should like you to speak to."

"From the war?"

"Just so. Lupin, Black, Snape --"
Shacklebolt stopped on the threshold and turned to face him.

"Dumbledore, when Voldemort was in power, these men were eighteen, nineteen years old. I've met them briefly and they seem capable, but then they were inexperienced, and it showed. You nearly lost. Is it wise to depend on them now?"

"Minerva McGonagall was neither young nor inexperienced. Alastor Moody was in his prime. My brother and I were not without some little knowledge. We had no-one else but young volunteers upon whom to depend; the Ministry would not support us then, as it will not now. And these young, inexperienced men survived direct battles with Death Eaters and with Voldemort himself. They are now older and wiser, and have more reason to fight."

Shacklebolt gave him a measuring look, then nodded. "James trusted Lupin and Black, but James sometimes misplaced his trust, and I never knew them; it was not my war. I look forward to the meeting. Good evening, Headmaster."

"Good evening, Auror Shacklebolt."

***

At the same time that Shacklebolt was questioning Dumbledore about his chosen sons, Remus was setting a tray of food on Harry's bed and seating himself in a chair that Madam Pomfrey provided. She had fond memories of Remus from his boyhood, when he had been an earnest young man who spent too much time in the infirmary for a problem far beyond his control.

"How's Sirius?" Harry asked, picking up the cup of warm soup and sipping it slowly.

"He's fine. All this fuss and worry tired him out; he's sleeping in my rooms."

"Didn't tire you out?"

"I was told to sit still for most of it. I'm all right."

Harry nodded. Remus took one of the plates on the heavily-laden tray and cut open his baked potato, spreading butter on the inside.

"I know you've told Dumbledore a lot about what you saw," he said. "But I think there's also more, Harry, and there are things I need to tell you, too. Peter didn't knock you from your broom; that was something the Dementors did."

Harry swallowed. "I heard screaming."

"Did you recognise the voice?"

"Not -- not really," he answered. "But I think I know who it was."

"Oh?"

"I think it was my mum."

Remus froze, a chunk of potato halfway to his mouth.

"I heard a woman asking someone not to kill -- Harry, to kill me," Harry continued. "And someone laughing. Then the screams."

"Laughing?"
"High, shrill --"

"Like a pain in your head," Remus finished. Harry blinked at him.

"How did you know?"

"I've heard it."

"When?"

Remus set the plate down. "Harry, you must understand...you were born in very desperate days. Nearly every day someone was killed, sometimes whole families together. It was our job to try to stop it. There wasn't much more we could do than that. We had no way of attacking directly. The Dark Lord was much too powerful for that, and he moved fast. Often he sent underlings to do his dirty work, but not always."

Harry stared into his soup.

"One night we heard that someone was going to try and kill a woman named Dorcas Meadowes, a friend of ours and a powerful witch in the fight. We didn't know who, but we got there as fast as we could -- your father and Caradoc Dearborn and I. We weren't in time, and I don't know why we even survived. Voldemort was there, you see. Killed her personally." Remus shuddered. "We saw him standing there over her body and he laughed."

Harry looked at him, pale and tired, enormous dark smudges under his eyes.

"James went for him, but by then he'd already vanished. I think all three of us heard that laugh for days."

"What happened to C -- Car --"

"Caradoc? He disappeared, eventually. Died, we assumed. We never found a body. These are heavy things, Harry, and I'm sorry I can't protect you from them. Better you have a name to put with it, though. What you heard was your mother dying, at the hands of the man she died to protect you from. If you can call him a man."

He reached out and brushed Harry's hair off his scar, stroking it with his thumb.

"You know that sometimes I see things, things that never happened," he continued. "Things I hope will never happen. Today one of them did, and there will be more, I think. So I need to ask you something I have never asked you before."

Harry nodded.

"Sirius and I have always allowed you to question us and our decisions, even when we knew better, and have allowed you a great deal of leeway, because that is how children discover the world. For now, however, I need to know that you will obey us. Without question and without hesitation. If I tell you to do something, however foolish or unnecessary it may seem, I need to know that you will do it at once. Do you understand why?"

"Sometimes there's no time," Harry whispered.

"Yes. I promise I won't abuse the power," Remus added with a smile. Harry smiled back, hesitantly. "Now -- eat your dinner."
It seemed as though something must break, something must happen next, but as the days passed things returned almost to normal. Remus was well enough to teach on Monday, and by then Harry had been sent back to the Slytherins. He was not in good odor with the masses, having lost them the game, but Towler and Ackerly put down the most vehement protestors and Harry was capable of dealing with the rest. There was bad blood between Slytherin and Gryffindor, of that there could be no doubt, but the professors kept a close eye on them and eventually it died away. November passed in a blur of lectures and homework, even if they were restricted from going out on the grounds without a professor along. By the end of it, the seventh-years were already swotting for NEWTs and everyone else was preparing for end-of-term exams.

Sirius returned to the house in Hogsmeade, still unnamed. With Dobby's help, he painted and papered, tore things out and installed other things in their place, and built a shed onto the side of the house for his motorbike. By the end of the month he was running out of things to do. More and more, Padfoot could be seen heeling at Remus' side or lazing under a student's desk, usually Harry or Draco but also Padma and Neville on occasion.

Remus moved slowly for a few days after the game, but soon he began to walk more quickly, smile more readily, and joke more openly with the students. Yes, the castle was under what amounted to a two-man siege, but even adults have short memories for danger and as days turned into weeks they all relaxed by fractions.

Draco, on the other hand, became progressively more nervous as his first Quidditch match approached. Hufflepuff was playing Ravenclaw on the last Saturday in November, and it would be his first real test as a Beater. It helped not at all that Snape continued to heap scorn on him in Potions, and that the other students each had two carefully-supervised weekends in Hogsmeade while he had none. He might have tolerated it better if he could have sought out Remus again, but Remus had to go along to chaperone, and Draco had many yards of parchment to write for his extra Transfiguration tutoring.

Harry was civil to the twins, but had still not forgiven them. He bided and waited, and thought a great deal. His classwork never slipped, but he was quiet and watchful, and Sirius fretted over him. Remus, who saw him every day and had once been a watchful thirteen-year-old himself, did not worry so much.

On the morning of the match, Draco picked at his food, and all Harry's assurances that he hadn't eaten before his first match either fell on deaf ears. Draco knew that; he'd been there. Half of it was the sinking sensation that he was in far over his head and would never live up to the really pretty meager expectations Cedric Diggory had of him; the other half was the overwhelming terror of his mother finding out.

"Least it's not raining," Diggory said, as the Hufflepuff team changed into its flying robes. Draco double-checked his broomstick; he'd borrowed Harry's Nimbus and wanted to make sure everything was just-so. "Some small mercy, eh?" Diggory continued.

"Good flying weather," added Hawkins, the other Beater. He was a solid and dependable fourth-year, and next to him Draco looked like he was made of sticks.

"Be a good game. All right everyone, form up," Cedric added, and the rest of the team gathered in a circle just inside the changing-room doors. "Come on, Malfoy."

Draco, confused, joined the circle between Hawkins and Cedric. To his surprise, both boys took his hands. All around the circle, the teammates were joining hands and looking at one another
"There is no game without players," Cedric said.

"Gamesmanship," the others replied.

"There is no team without people," Cedric continued.

"Loyalty," they said.

"There is no win without sacrifice."

"Humanity."

"There is no failure if we try."

"Triumph," everyone said, and after a collective breath they all chanted together, "Gamesmanship, Loyalty, Humanity, Triumph!"

Draco found it all a little weird.

"What was that?" he asked Hawkins in an undertone as they headed for the field.

"The Catechism of Diggory," Hawkins said with a grin. "We do it before every game. Old Hufflepuff tradition. Boyle used to do it when he was Captain too."

"Oh," Draco said, and suddenly they were there.

Cedric stepped forward and shook hands with Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Captain. Draco tried to breathe, failed, took another deep breath, and was caught with a lungful of air and nowhere to put it as the balls rose in the air and he jerked upwards with the rest of the team.

***

Below, not in the stands but beneath and behind them, a small knot of Aurors heard the cheers as the game began. Shacklebolt, in the centre, crossed his arms.

"Let me take a moment to remind everyone that we are not here to watch the game. That's Tonks' job. She'll signal if anything in-game goes wrong. Keep your eyes on the forest and the bounds of the stands. Your job is not over until every student is safely back in the castle."

"Yessir," they chorused quietly.

"If you see Pettigrew or Malfoy, do not engage. Call for backup and track their movements. If they're going for the children, you are personally authorised by me to use Avada Kedavra, and I will stand responsible for your actions. Don't get yourselves killed."

They scattered efficiently, covering the ground assigned to them without overlap into anyone else's territory. From the stands above came a cheer; Shacklebolt looked up briefly, but from here all he saw were the sides of the seating areas.

He had not fought in the last war, at least not at Dumbledore's side; he had been a raw recruit in the MLE, his Auror's badge still shiny and new. He had fought as Aurors could fight. He sensed that Moody had sounded him out about another kind of war and at the time found him wanting -- as a young man he had been too upstanding, too moral, too unable to get round the regulations that the Aurors imposed on their officers to keep them from becoming unregulated killers. He hadn't
learned Auror cunning until after the war, during the cleanup, when the older officers took the younger ones under their wings and showed them what was good and what was not good to do. In its own way, chasing after the last remnants of the Death Eaters was more dangerous -- they were desperate then, without the arrogance that made them easier to catch (or evade, depending).

It was only after the war that Mad-Eye Moody had recommended him to Dumbledore, and he had begun to piece together from Moody and Dumbledore and from others he met what must have gone on while he was busy learning his trade.

He heard Lee Jordan call out a score for Ravenclaw, and Kingsley, former Ravenclaw Prefect, smiled a little. It sounded as though young Draco Malfoy was faring well; good, let him. Kingsley had heard enough of his father, and in truth enough of his half-mad mother as well, to wish the boy no ill.

There were two more scores, one by Ravenclaw and one by Hufflepuff, while Kingsley watched and waited. The bait should have been irresistible. Lucius Malfoy, he felt certain, would want to see his son play. On the other hand, Lucius was a madman, and who could predict what madmen would do?

Kingsley turned his head slightly; there was shouting in the match.

"Cho Chang is diving -- this may be the Snitch -- it is! Ravenclaw in hot pursuit with Hufflepuff right behind -- OH!"

The crowds of students cried out; Kingsley turned back to the forest, scanning intently. Wind ruffled the grass.

"Draco Malfoy blocks the Ravenclaw Seeker with a well-timed Bludger -- Malfoy, a new player this -- HUFFLEPUFF! HUFFLEPUFF HAS THE SNITCH! GAME TO HUFFLEPUFF!"

Kingsley let out a resigned sigh and lifted his wand. A bright blue streak shot up from it, and corresponding streaks of colour appeared on the grounds and along the edge of the Forest. Game over; time to come in and make sure the students got safely back.

He hated biding his time and waiting and playing defence; Kingsley was a cautious and patient man, but his instincts told him to fight, if only he could find his target.

The grass rippled and waved as he gathered his people together again and the students began to head back to the castle, crowding around the Quidditch players and shouting in triumph or booing at the triumphant, as the mood took them.

***

"HEY MALFOY!"

Draco, who was already sore and suspected he may have pulled a muscle swatting that last Bludger, turned at the shout just in time to see Harry, Neville, and Padma bearing down on him. Harry punched him in the arm and Neville pounded on his back; he feared Padma might slap him or something, but she grinned and punched his other arm.

"Ow!" he said, rubbing the sore muscle. "Hey, leave off!"

"Great game!" Neville cried, miming a very inexpert swing with an imaginary Beater's bat. Harry took Draco's from him and held it up like a baton, marching proudly in front. The other Hufflepuffs grinned good-naturally and smacked him on the back of the head or gave him a thumbs-up as they
passed. Cedric Diggory fell into step with the four of them, beaming.

"I've got to run and tell everyone good game and handshake and everything," he said. "Brilliant match, Malfoy. Hey Potter, you scout for my team any time you feel like it, okay?"

"Just wait till I get on the pitch with you," Harry replied, and Cedric ran on. Draco was warm down to his fingertips, though he felt as though he'd been used as a punching-bag.

"That was brilliant, Draco, really," Padma said.

"Malfoy, you and me, cricket!" Towler shouted as he ran past with a horde of Slytherins.

"I declare myself king of the pitch," Draco announced, strutting just a little. Then he stopped, because strutting made his arm hurt worse. He unstrapped his Quidditch glove and rubbed it ruefully.

"Better have Pomfrey see to that," Neville said.

"Wounds of battle. Wrap it up in some bandages and show off," Harry suggested.

"Let's go rob the kitchen," Padma said.

"Got to get changed first," Draco grunted. "And there's bound to be a party in the common room."

"Now, aren't you glad we made you try out?" Harry asked.

"All right, all right, you were right," Draco admitted, but it was a sort of triumphant apology. It was ruined, only slightly, by a guilty twinge. Even while he was playing, he hadn't quite forgotten that his mum didn't know. His mum, who wouldn't even let owls in the house because they were unhygienic, his mum who had forbidden him to run in the house (or anywhere else) -- she didn't know that today he had been a hundred feet up in the air, swinging a bat at Bludgers, dodging other children on broomsticks and spraining muscles he didn't even know he had. And if she found out...

He forced himself not to think about that. He'd earned his place, after all. He might be a Malfoy but he was a Black too. Blacks were proud and loud and never afraid of their mothers.

The locker room was filled with the boisterous laughter of normally quiet boys and girls who secretly, in their heart of hearts, were never sure that playing well was its own reward. Lockers slammed, buckles clinked, water roared, bats and broomsticks clattered. Draco felt suddenly shy, and he put away his things carefully and quietly, though he joined in the good-natured banter with a happy heart.

Most of the team were still in towels, or just doing up the buttons on their robes, when there was a rap on the locker room door. Cedric, in worn trousers with a towel slung around his neck, cracked it open to see who it was. Draco was startled to see him fling the door open after a second and step back to allow Cho Chang to enter the locker room. The Hufflepuff team made loud smacking noises and giggled.

Cho held out her hand with a grin, and Cedric took it with a bigger grin; in half a second he'd pulled her forward and wrapped his arms around her waist. Someone blew a raspberry.

Cedric kissed Cho and then hugged her tightly before letting go just enough to preserve the image of decency. Draco felt as if he'd intruded, though clearly this was a common post-game ritual for them. It was odd, really -- he saw the older students holding hands in the halls sometimes and always thought it was sort of show-offy and a little gross, but looking at Cedric and Cho, he felt his
stomach tighten unaccountably. It wasn't jealousy, Draco knew what jealousy felt like. It was almost like -- like he was a part of what they were doing, or could feel a part of it. The skin along his shoulders tingled. He wondered, for the first time, if he'd be in that situation one day.

He shook his head, reminding himself that it was creepy to stare.

The rest of the team shoved carelessly past the pair, who were clearly lost to the world, but Draco sidled around them as he left. Still, his shoulder brushed the back of Cho's shirt, and his face flushed.

He ran all the way to the Hufflepuff entrance, confusion replaced with an almost insane exuberance once he was out in the air again. The common room was filled with Hufflepuffs who, in their own way, were celebrating a clean win for the House and a really fun game, too. Draco didn't particularly want to celebrate -- too many people shouting too many questions, too much noise -- but he did his best and was finally allowed to retire to his dormitory. There was a gift on his bed from the House-Elves: a chocolate cupcake topped with three marzipan broomsticks. He ate it ravenously.

He didn't think he'd be able to sleep, but once he got into bed, even with the other boys chattering loudly about the game, he felt his eyes closing of their own accord. He lifted one sleepy eyelid as a plain white card appeared on the table next to his bed. He recognised Remus' handwriting.

_Congratulations, Draco. Fame already crowns your sandy head. RL._

And below that, in slightly different ink and very different handwriting, _Sirius Black._

Draco smiled, closed his eyes, and slept.

***

The Quidditch match was on the twenty-seventh of November, and at that point Remus was still well enough to attend. On the twenty-eighth he came down to breakfast but soon after begged off all invitations to come outside with the students or take tea with the professors, and by the twenty-ninth he was in bed not just awaiting the full moon that night but also with a bad head cold. Snape was annoyed; it was hard to gather accurate data on the potion when the subject was sick. Remus was just grateful he'd prepared his notes ahead of time, so that Tonks could take over his classes with a minimum of fuss.

All the students were glad to have "Professor" Tonks back again, and were suitably exuberant during their lessons. Remus was already a beloved teacher, but his style was very quiet and he demanded good discipline. Tonks was a bit more lax, the sort of professor who doesn't mind the occasional note being passed or joke being made as long as it isn't too disruptive. Indeed, in her second lesson she tripped on her own robe, went flying into the desk, and came up laughing so hard that everyone else laughed for at least five minutes, and giggled quietly for the rest of class.

It was Tonks, giving a lesson in how to distract a dueling opponent, who gave Harry his Great Idea. It deserved the capital letters; it was quite the most complicated prank he'd ever thought of. He scribbled down a brief play-by-play, Quidditch style, before class ended.

"Now," Tonks said, as the clock ticked towards the end, "Are there any questions today?"

Theo Nott raised his hand, a sly look on his face. Harry braced. He'd learned that Theo loved to stir up trouble for the pure joy of it, which was not necessarily a bad thing but was misapplied in the clever young Slytherin.
"All right, Nott?" she asked.

"Are you and Professor Snape going to get married?" he asked. The class snickered.

"Ten points from Slytherin for being a nosey-parker," she replied easily, and dismissed the class.

Outside, in the corridor, Harry collared Padma on her way to another lesson.

"I've got something," he said.

"Well, there are creams for that -- " she began mischievously, but he interrupted her.

"A use for your Time-Turner," he whispered, taking her by the arm and pulling her closer so that the others wouldn't hear. There was a sudden tension in her body, and he glanced at her face; she looked oddly embarrassed, but she gave no sign in her voice.

"Something really devious?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Oh yes," he grinned. "I'll tell you all about it at breakfast tomorrow."

***

"Married!" Severus Snape said, looking truly astonished for only the second or third time in all the years Dora had known him. "What on earth put that idea into their heads?"

"Well, you don't need to sound so skeptical about it," Dora teased gently. They were sitting by the fire in the professors' common room, which was empty except for McGonagall, who was marking papers, and Dumbledore, who was serenely reading Jane Austen, both at the far end of the room. "It is a possibility, one of these days."

"A poss -- it's only been five months!" he said.

"A little more than six," she replied. "I'm not demanding a proposal, Severus, I thought you'd be amused, that's all. No need to be frightened."

"I suppose children will talk," he grumbled.

"They will do," she agreed with a smile.

"I am too old for you," he pointed out. "And I can't ever aspire to the kind of wealth your parents have; it would be an entirely unequal match."

"You're very old," she agreed. He scowled. "But the bride's family is supposed to pay for everything anyway, and it's their money, not mine. It's not even all mine in potentiality -- half'll go to Neville, at least. Besides, they're young yet, they might spend it all."

"Children gossiping -- this is what comes of professors living at the school," he muttered. She leaned across the little tea-laden table between them and rubbed his arm.

"Why don't we just keep on, and see where we end up. I'm not in any hurry," she said quietly. Severus covered her hand in his. And he did smile, a little. "Besides, if you really believed that trash about being too old and poor, you'd already have broken it off. I just can't allow that; I insist on being the one to break up with my boyfriends."

"Headstrong tart."
"Mouldering relic."

They were interrupted, before things could escalate to the heights of passion, by shrieks and laughter in the hallway. Severus, who distrusted laughter on general principle, stood and walked quickly to the door, leaning out to inquire what the noise was about.

Dora sat back in her chair and studied him: the long line of his body as he leaned through the door, the robes brushing the tips of his shoes, the way his close-cropped hair never quite got smoothed down properly in the back. She could hear his voice, though not what he was saying, and ten years ago would have cringed away from it. But ten years ago he'd been charged with teaching her, and since then she'd grown to enjoy the sound.

She wished now that she hadn't told him. Severus was a solitary man, always had been from what she could judge, and it had been an adjustment for him, learning to consider another person's thoughts and feelings, learning to allow someone else to sleep in his bed and to be comfortable with her presence at hours when normally he would be alone. The idea of marriage -- of having her present every morning and evening, of sharing his bed every single night, of his having to consider her before he made decisions -- was plainly frightening.

Still, fear was never got over by not talking about it, and she had planted the idea in his head. And, if it came to all that, in a month or two she could propose to him. Besides, the emotional advantage was not entirely on her side. He was older, much more well-read in some areas, and, though he was not terribly experienced sexually, he was far moreso than she was.

Wealth didn't concern her a bit; she earned a wage that paid her rent and had no need of her inheritance, which she would gladly and with a sisterly heart split with Neville. She'd heard her parents discussing it once and been thrilled to know that Neville would be considered a full, blood-related brother by their legal will. There had even been some talk of adoption, though it seemed Ted and Andromeda were waiting until Neville was older, perhaps old enough to understand better how to cope with loving the Tonkses and not feeling that it betrayed his living parents to do so.

She looked at Dumbledore and McGonagall, sitting across the room. Dumbledore smiled, winked at her, and exchanged a significant look with the deputy headmistress. McGonagall glanced at Tonks, favoured her with a rare warm and unrestrained smile, and nodded slightly.

Well, good to know that the faculty approved.

***

It took no less than three days and two timetables to plot out the intricacies of the Great Monster Caper.

The two timetables were necessary because of the Time Turner, and because Neville and Draco needed a chart in order to understand it all. Harry was reminded of a Rube Goldberg device, something he'd read about in one of Sirius' books: what do you get when you combine a Time Turner, an invisibility cloak, some stolen Hogwarts robes, an applied knowledge of physics, a handful of booby-trap charms, and two taxidermied animal heads borrowed from a storage room in the Dungeons?

Neville was instrumental as their native collaborator. His was the hardest part, because he would deal not only with Harry and Padma as they were, but Harry and Padma having traveled in time. Draco's job was simply to be present and accounted for, so that he would have an alibi, and to improvisationally distort the twins if need be. Draco preferred to think of himself as the Trojan Horse. And so, in a sense, he was, though the Gryffindors were more indifferent than the Trojans
and Harry and Padma more subtle than the Spartans.

Months later, when they tried to set down the story for posterity, they ran across confusion right from the start, in how much to reveal and how much to keep hidden until the end. They all agreed that one had to start with Draco getting into Gryffindor, but what then?

At any rate, Draco did get into Gryffindor's common room, with the aid of Neville, the inside collaborator. Once he'd seen Neville's sign from the Gryffindor window that the twins were in the common room, he came banging on the Gryffindor Portrait's frame (very upsetting to the Pink Lady, who denounced him loudly) and convinced Neville to open the door. Neville left the door open after Draco was well inside.

"Come on," Draco said, agitation evident in his face. "Someone's hexed the Christmas Tree in the Great Hall!"

"So?" Neville asked.

"So it's spitting balls at everyone and loads of people are stuck there! Harry and Padma too! Come on, we've all got to go help get it under control!"

That was more than enough for the twins and, if truth be told, the rest of Gryffindor House as well. The students raced down the stairs, clattering and crashing and drawing others into their orbit as they went. A herd of students stampeded into the Great Hall, Draco and Neville conspicuous as leaders, and then stopped dead as the giant Christmas tree flung tinsel at them in torrents. Most of the students backed away, shielding their faces, and Neville was hit in the head with a fake candy cane.

"OW!" he shouted, diving for cover. Fred and George had already overturned a table and were using it like a shield to advance slowly. Nearby, Padma and Harry were trapped under another table.

"TURN THEM OVER!" Fred shouted.

"YOU CAN'T GET CLOSE ENOUGH!" Padma shouted back. "WE TRIED!"

She pointed to an overturned table very near the tree as proof. She and Harry seemed to confer for a moment, while the twins and a few other hearty souls fired freezing charms and anti-hexes at the rogue evergreen. As one, they lifted the table like a turtle's shell and ran for it, sliding down again once they'd reached the twins. The tables now formed an impenetrable fort, one blocking them from the front and the other blocking anything the tree might lob over the top.

A steady barrage of tiny Baby Jesus ornaments rained down on them as they advanced. On their left flank, Neville and Cricket Creevey were moving forward with serving platters in front of their faces, while Draco used a sturdy angel treetopper as a Beating bat, defending against the flying ornaments. The twins began to advance their position, firing through the cracks between tables.

"Just get out!" Hermione Granger called from the doorway, where she, Ron Weasley, and Parvati were trying to draw fire.

"NO SURRENDER!" chorused the twins.

They had nearly reached the tree and were defending against another onslaught of tinsel when McGonagall arrived, pushing through the children in the doorway and putting an end to the chaos with a swift and powerful "Finite incantatem!"
A few final brightly-coloured balls fell to the ground and shattered. Draco, his hair covered in tinsel, looked sheepishly at the Deputy Headmistress.

"What on earth has happened here?" she demanded.

"Rogue tree," Fred Weasley answered. "We were just trying to help. Padma and Harry got trapped."

"Wasn't us, we've got alibis," George added.

McGonagall studied the hall, which was covered in broken glass and Christmas ornaments. Draco carefully set the angel down on the ground. One wing was missing.

"I think you had all better go about your business," she said carefully. Her lips just barely twitched. "I am certain we will locate the perpetrator in due time."

The students left the battleground triumphantly, if carefully, and Neville was very keen to be visible to Fred and George all the way up to the Gryffindor tower. Draco went with them as far as the library, where he was seen entering by at least ten students, and Harry was with them all the way to the doorway, where he and Padma broke off.

"I'll walk her back to Ravenclaw," he told Neville, who grinned and nodded. Harry and Padma ambled off in the opposite direction from Gryffindor, under full view of most of the House.

When they were alone in the corridor, they pulled up short and ducked into a doorway for what cover it could give them. Harry took out his invisibility cloak, unbuckled the clasp, and threw it over both of them while Padma dug the Time Turner out of her shirt.

"How many turns?" Harry asked.

"Two ought to do it," Padma replied in a whisper. "Wasn't it clever of me to hex the tree?"

"Utterly brilliant. When it started raining mangers I was hard put not to laugh," Harry answered. Padma placed part of the Time-Turner's chain around Harry's neck and they huddled close. She held one of the little dial-knobs delicately between two fingers and turned the hourglass in the gold rings.

The corridor around them began to dissolve. Harry felt as though he were flying backwards very fast, a blur of colour and noise and wind rushing past him. He had not been expecting it to be so -- so intense, so real. By the time he was drawing breath to shout, however, it was over and everything was settling back into focus.

"That was -- " he began, and then didn't know how to finish. Padma hushed him.

"We've just got to wait for Draco now," she whispered. As if on cue, they heard pounding footsteps somewhere far down the corridor.

"All right, let's go," Harry said, but Padma put a hand on his arm.

"I'll lead," she said. "You go behind me."

"Why?" Harry asked, confused. Padma's ears turned red.

"Just because," she ordered, and shoved in front of him to lead the way.

Draco was running towards Gryffindor, white-blond hair disordered and eyes wild with glee. He skidded to a stop in front of Gryffindor and cast about wildly.
"We're here," Padma whispered.

"Neville gave the sign," Draco whispered back, then dashed to the portrait and began pounding on it. When it swung open, he leapt inside and Padma and Harry followed, immediately dodging around Oliver and a couple other sixth-years and nipping into the gap created by two bookcases that didn't quite reach each other.

"Come on," Draco said. "Someone's hexed the Christmas Tree in the Great Hall!"

"He's a very good actor," Padma whispered to Harry, who nodded. The common room began to empty out, and soon they were the sole occupants, triumphant intruders with one thing on their minds.

They went first to the third-year dormitory, to get the things stowed in Neville's trunk. Then they dragged them up to the fifth years' room and made sure nobody was there before hauling them over to Fred and George's beds.

The robes and taxidermied animal heads were affixed together to create terrifying, if not particularly convincing, monsters that lay reasonably flat under the blankets. Once completed, they would have to hurriedly set the booby-trap charms that would make the monsters leap up at the twins if they got too close. Then Harry and Padma could get out the same way they'd come in -- all with the knowledge that downstairs, they were their own alibis for this particular prank.

Harry was just putting the finishing touches on his monster when he dropped a handful of bells he was going to hang from the animal's ears for sound effects. They rolled away under the bed, and he got down on his knees. He definitely was not going to go rummaging around under George Weasley's bed without looking first -- that was a good way to lose a few fingers.

The bells had rolled to a stop against a bit of folded parchment, and he used the parchment to roll them back out before crumpling it up and tossing it over his shoulder into the middle of the room. He saw something black scuttle across it as it went flying off, and thought it might be a spider; he had the notion of catching it and putting it in the bed too, which was the only reason he ran across the room to recover it.

"Harry, hurry up!" Padma hissed.

"Just a mo -- " Harry picked up the parchment and smoothed it out. It wasn't a spider at all; it was a word.

*Ouch,* it said. *There's no need to be careless.*

Harry's eyes grew wide.

"Stop what you're doing," he said.

"But Harry -- "

"No, I mean it. I've found something," he replied. Padma stopped in the middle of a complicated charm and leaned over his shoulder.

"What do you suppose it is?" Harry asked.

*Master Padfoot begs to inform the messy-haired bearer that it is none of his business.*

Harry dropped it as if he'd been burned. They both stared down at it.
"Padma," Harry began, then paused. Padma was stiff with tension behind him, and he remembered belatedly that she'd had certain...dealings with paper that talked back. "I think we'd better clear out. And take the monsters with us."

"Burn it," Padma whispered.

"It's not like the diary," Harry said. "Go on, get the things."

"Harry --"

"Do it!" Harry said sharply. He gathered up the parchment, shoved it in his pocket, and quickly dismantled the monster in George's bed. Padma had already taken her monster to pieces and was waiting for him with the invisibility cloak.

They heard a crashing noise downstairs as the Gryffindors poured back into the common room.

"Buggery and bollocks," Harry said feelingly. "What should we do?"

"We can't hide up here, they're bound to trip over us," Padma replied. "We've got to chance the stairs."

"There are landings for the other years -- we can stop there if we have to," Harry agreed. "I say we chuck the monsters out the window."

Padma was already at the window, watching the Hogwarts robe billow out around the plummeting deer's head. Harry threw his over and it likewise tumbled down, bouncing off rooftops as it went.

"Let's hope nobody's looking out the window," he said as they shrouded themselves in the invisibility cloak again.

The descent from the fifth-year dormitory was, they later agreed, the longest stairwell they'd ever encountered. Three times they had to rush back up the stairs to a landing as unknowing Gryffindors went up to their bedrooms. When they finally got to the common room, it took nearly fifteen minutes to get Neville's attention and get him to let them out again. He had to excuse himself and claim he was going to the library.

"Now I'll miss everything!" he said to them, when they were safely down the corridor. "I wanted to see their faces!"

"We didn't do it," Harry said, shedding the cloak.

"You what?"

"We didn't do it. We stole this instead," he said, holding it out. Padma made a small gagging noise in her throat.

"Parchment?" Neville asked skeptically. Harry put it in his hands.

"Say something," he said. Neville blinked.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

*Master Moony believes he may be as clueless as he looks.*
"Moony...that's -- " Neville looked at Harry, astounded.

"Padfoot and Moony are nicknames," Harry said to Padma. "Remus and Sirius used them."

"I think we'd better go find Draco," Neville said.

***

At their table in the library -- the one Pince couldn't see from her desk -- Harry spread the parchment out and all four of them examined it. It was larger than the usual composition-parchment, perfectly square and rather well-worn around the edges. At the moment it was blank.

"Why would Fred and George Weasley have something with Remus and Sirius' names on it?" Draco asked, tilting his head to one side.

"You used to know the Weasleys when you were little, didn't you?" Neville asked Harry. "Might be a present they gave them. A bit of parchment that makes rude insults when you ask it questions."

"Dunno," Harry said. "Maybe they nicked it or something."

"Parchment, what are you?" Draco demanded, touching his wand to the center of the page. All four of them watched as words formed on the blank surface.

*Master Prongs and Master Wormtail beg leave to insult his noseyness.*

*Master Padfoot insists that you keep your pointy face out of our business.*

"That doesn't sound like Sirius," Draco said. His face was screwed up in a dubious scowl, and did look rather pointy.

"Wormtail -- isn't that what they called Peter Pettigrew at school?" Neville asked.

"Let me try," Harry said, replacing Draco's wand with his own. "My name is Harry Potter! What are you?"

Ink welled up.

*My name is Harry Potter, it said mockingly. Nyah, nyah, nyah.*

Harry took a deep breath.

"James Potter is my father," he added. The ink burst apart.

*James Potter's son*, it said, shrinking and fading slowly. *James Potter's Son James Potter's Son James Potter's Son*

"You broke it," Neville said, disappointed. "It's going to tell you it has an out-of-cheese error next."

"Hush, it's doing something," Harry said. New words replaced the old.

*Operation Manual and Lifetime Warranty For The Marauder's Map Courtesy Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs*
To Close The Map:
Tap once with wand and say "Mischief Managed".

To Open The Map:
Touch wand to parchment and say "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Harry glanced at the others. Draco was still looking sulky, Neville intrigued, and Padma --

Padma was biting her lip, her fingers tightly knotted together on the table.

"Sirius wouldn't make anything that would hurt us," Harry said.

"If that's really Sirius," she replied.

"Only one way to find out," Neville said. Before Harry or anyone else could stop him, he touched
his wand to the page and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Thin ink lines began to spread across the page like a spider's web, all originating from the point
where Neville's wand touched. They joined each other and darted away again, filling the
parchment from edge to edge as words began to blossom here and there. Across the top, an
enormous banner was unrolling with giant curly green words on it:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs
Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers
are proud to present
THE MARAUDER'S MAP

"It's Hogwarts," Padma said, forgetting all caution for a moment. It was indeed the general shape
of Hogwarts, and showed the floor they happened to be on, complete with four small dots in the
library, each labeled with their own names. As they watched, another dot labeled Pince circled
around her desk and started off in the opposite direction from their table, on her hourly rounds.

"Harry, do you see what I see?" Neville asked, eyes traveling over the page.

"I see at least two hidden doorways..." Harry touched one of them and it glowed brightly for a
second. The ink seemed to rearrange itself, blurring for a moment, and suddenly they were looking
at a map of the floor below the one they were on.

"I definitely see that," Padma said, pointing to a statue in one of the hallways. Harry, somewhere
outside of his confusion and glee at this new discovery, realised that the text was all in Remus' neat
handwriting. Next to the statue were the words, Cellar of Honeydukes.

"We'd better hide this somewhere really good," Draco whispered. "Fred and George'll know it was
us, even if you didn't prank them. They'll know."

"We have alibis," Harry said.

"They'll know!"

"Well, all right, we should hide it," Padma agreed.
"And soon," Neville said. He'd somehow figured out how to get up a level again, and was studying the corridor beyond the library. "Fred and George are coming this way."

Harry cleared the map with a quick "Mischief Managed!" and folded it up, tucking it in his pocket again. He threw the cloak around his shoulders and Draco buckled it for him even as he disappeared from view.

Neville vanished silently into the stacks, tossing Padma a book, and she and Draco bent over it casually. She even had the presence of mind to make sure it was the right way up.

"I'm going to the Dungeons," Harry whispered as he ran out the door. He passed silently by Fred and George, who didn't appear to have noticed the theft yet, and ran onwards, down the stairs. When he reached the Slytherin entrance he slipped in behind Pansy and bolted through the common room so fast that Theo swore he felt a draft.

Up in the dormitory, Harry shed his cloak and wrapped it around the map, shoving both of them down to the bottom of his trunk and triple-locking it. Then, heart pounding, he flopped back onto the bed.

Snake, who had been drowsing in the canopy, dropped down via the bedpost and slithered across the pillow, tickling Harry's cheek with his tongue. Harry grinned and reached up to stroke his head.

_Sleeping well?_ Harry asked.

_Very well_, Snake answered. _You taste funny._

_I imagine so. I've been having adventures._

_Boring_, said Snake. _Is it naptime now?_

Harry laughed.

_After the day I've had, it might well be._
It seemed to behoove Harry and his friends to lie low for a bit, which they had learned to do with astounding nerve. Fred and George went about scowling, but they could not pin the theft of their map on anyone and didn't even seem to suspect that it might have been Harry. He did, after all, have an alibi. While he had not managed to publicly humiliate them, Harry felt that his own brand of justice was served, and lived with a lighter heart.

Though the term officially ended on the nineteenth, the last class was on the Friday previous. That weekend was a Hogsmeade weekend, with many students planning to meet their parents and travel home with them instead of on the Hogwarts Express. Word had got round about the Dementors on the train, and most parents didn't want to trust that if a Dementor decided to chase down their child, Remus Lupin would happen to be nearby.

Draco was not going home.

He was not even going off to Spain or France or India with his mother, as he might otherwise have done. He was staying at Hogwarts, dismal empty Hogwarts, for the entirety of the holiday. Neville and Padma were going home, though they promised to write; Harry did one better and promised to visit, since he was staying in Hogsmeade and their floo went directly through to Professor Lupin's office. Still, Draco was the only third-year staying, one of only ten students total who would not be going home for the holiday. His mother had announced it would be best for him to stay, and while he couldn't really argue with the logic, he was still bitter and unhappy.

Harry, casting about for a way to cheer him up, had brought the map along to breakfast early on Saturday morning. Even on a Hogsmeade weekend the twins wouldn't be up before nine, and it was only just turning seven when Harry put his finger down on the statue of the witch and looked at Draco.

"There's a passage to Honeyduke's from here," he said. "I don't know how to get into it, but the map says it's there."

"Are you ever going to ask Remus about it?" Draco asked.

"Don't reckon so. He'd have to take it away -- I mean, even if it were allowed, which I'm sure it's not, it belongs to the twins now. Remus can be a spoilsport about things like that."

"What, theft and prankery?" Draco asked. Harry grinned.

"Hey, I tell you what -- you still haven't seen Hogsmeade," Harry said. "Why don't you take my cloak and see if you can get into the secret passage, and we'll meet you there today? Then if that works out, you can come round all you like during the holiday."
Draco looked dubious. "If I'm caught it'll be my skin, you know."

"How many skins can you have? You're always so worried about getting caught," Harry said scornfully.

"Well, it's different for me, you're not liable to get yelled at," Draco retorted.

"It's just yelling. Come on, don't you want to see Honeyduke's and the Owl Post Office and all the shops? Buy you a bag of fizzing whizbees," Harry tempted.

"Well, we'll see if the passage still works, even. Sirius might've sealed it up," Draco said.

"But if he hasn't?"

"If he hasn't I'll meet you in Honeyduke's before eleven, but if I don't show you'd better just go on without me," Draco said.

"Who's going on without you?" Neville asked, appearing in the doorway with Padma. "Merlin, put that thing away!"

Harry was already folding up the map and passing it to Draco, who tucked it inside his shirt.

"We've got a plot to meet in Hogsmeade," Harry said. "I'll run down after breakfast -- DENBIGH!" he called, reminded. With a pop, the head Kitchen Elf appeared.

"Good morning, Masters and Mistress!" Denbigh said cheerily. "How is Masters and Mistress on this morning?"

"Grand, Denbigh, thanks," Harry said. "Breakfast all round? Bacon rolls and some fried egg."

"And some toast, please," Draco added. Denbigh sketched a salute, nearly taking his own ear off, and disappeared again.

"I'll run down after breakfast and give Draco my cloak, and then we're to meet him by eleven in Honeyduke's," Harry finished. "He's got the map and the cloak so if he gets caught we have to kill him, right?"

Draco laughed. "Right, Harry."

***

Draco was not quite laughing a few hours later, as he wandered in the damp darkness below the Forbidden Forest.

With the aid of Harry's cloak he'd had plenty of time to examine the statue of the humpbacked witch that was supposedly guarding the entrance to the secret passage, but he hadn't figured out how to get in until he consulted the map and found it providing instructions. The little ink in the map tapped the witch with his wand and said "Dissendium" in a speech bubble, so Draco did likewise. The witch's hump had opened and he had just managed to squeeze through.

Unfortunately, behind the hump was a long stone slide, and at the bottom of the slide was an even longer tunnel. Draco had the little bit of light that a lumos provided, but that was really just enough for him to see the giant earthworms and other bugs that crawled in and out of the dirt walls as he passed. He thought too about the basilisk, and the tunnel it had used to get into the Forbidden Forest. Was this one of the basilisk's tunnels? Or worse, the tunnel of something that was still
alive?

He thought that by now Harry and the others had probably gotten tired of waiting and gone on, which was all right; that was the point of the journey, to test how long it would take and whether it would even work at all.

He nearly stubbed his toes on the stairway when he finally reached the end of the dirt corridor, and with a huge sigh of relief began to climb. The steps seemed to go up and up unceasingly, but eventually he reached the top of the stairwell and found a trapdoor above his head. Carefully, he eased it upwards.

Never had a cellar looked so inviting. It was warm and dry, full of boxes and barrels, and he could hear distant noise from the floor above it.

He climbed quickly out of the hole and closed the trapdoor behind him, noticing how it blended perfectly with the stones around it. Emerging into the light of the sweet shop made him wince, but at least it was light and sound, and there were no giant beetles or earthworms.

A glance at the clock on the wall told him it was well past the time he ought to meet Harry and the others, but he didn't want to go back down just yet. Truth be told, he didn't want to go back down at all; if he could, he would follow the others back to Hogwarts by the high road past the Forbidden Forest.

There are only so many diversions available to an invisible boy, but he managed to nick a package of chocolates and get out the door without much trouble. It was coming on time for lunch; perhaps the others were meeting Sirius at the Three Broomsticks. This seemed to be confirmed when he actually saw Sirius and Professor Lupin walking together down the street towards the pub, stopping here and there to greet people. Draco took up a post near the door and waited for them to arrive. He noticed there was a sign on the door warning people of the Dementors, and also of a curfew.

Neville, Padma, and Harry were nowhere in sight, but Sirius and Remus were definitely headed for the Three Broomsticks. They stopped at the doorway to greet Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, who were accompanied by Mr. Shacklebolt, the tall, bald-headed man who had led the search for him after Harry's Quidditch game.

Draco, intrigued now, followed them through the doorway and up the stairs, while Sirius stopped at the bar to flirt outrageously with Rosmerta. The others entered a private dining room on the upper floor, where a fire was roaring and a lunch of sandwiches and hot soup was already laid out.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Dumbledore said, gesturing to the chairs. Remus elected a seat near the fire -- it was about ten days to the full moon, Draco recalled -- and McGonagall sat at the table, ladling out a bowl of soup for herself. Draco had to scurry quickly out of the way as Sirius arrived with a tray of drinks and passed them around: cocoa for Remus, firewhiskey tonic for Mr. Shacklebolt, and buttered rum for the rest. Draco eyed the cocoa longingly.

"This is not, perforce, a full meeting of the Order of the Phoenix," Dumbledore said, while Draco tried to find an unobtrusive spot to hide. The door was shut, and so now he was trapped here.

"However, we are welcoming Mr. Shacklebolt into our ranks and I believe it is imperative he have certain information from your own mouths and no other."

"You want to hear about the night James and Lily were killed," Remus said, sipping his cocoa.

"Among other things," Mr. Shacklebolt replied. Remus and Sirius exchanged looks. It seemed like
they were silently arguing about who ought to go first, until finally Remus drew a breath.

"In nineteen-eighty-one we got word that Voldemort was going to be coming after James and Lily, as he'd done for a few people before then. Personally, you understand," he said. "At the time, for several reasons we don't really need to go into, I was suspected of being a spy, which ruled me out as their secret-keeper when they went under Fidelius in Godric's Hollow. Sirius, at the last moment, decided he shouldn't be either -- he knew Voldemort would suspect him and that he could act as a decoy. So he swapped in Peter Pettigrew for himself, and Peter of course went straight to Voldemort with the information."

"We didn't know how soon he'd strike, so we weren't prepared -- we thought James and Lily and Harry were all safe," Sirius said, taking up the tale. "The night it happened, this would be Hallowe'en of eighty-one, the first I heard was a Muggle news report about a possible bomb blast in Godric's Hollow."

"At this time," Dumbledore put in, "I had been notified of what had occurred, or rather I had been notified that the Fidelius was broken and Voldemort had attacked the Potters, with only Harry surviving. At the same time Sirius was traveling to Godric's Hollow, I had...appropriated his motorcycle from storage in Hogsmeade and sent Hagrid to fetch young Harry."

"We arrived about the same time," Sirius said, nodding. "I told Hagrid to give Harry to me, but he had his orders, so all I could do was send him off on the bike again."

"I was there by then," Remus put in. "They were arguing about who should have Harry when I got there. I'd been monitoring the floo broadcasts for the Order -- hadn't much else to do, I was waiting to leave the country as soon as my travel money arrived."

"We took a broomstick and started looking. We had a wrong turn -- somewhere..." Sirius trailed off. "I never could figure out, was it over Parliament or somewhere along Charing Cross Road?"

"I'm not sure," Remus said, looking embarrassed. "My fault, I had the map upside down for a while."

Draco glanced at Shacklebolt, who had raised one eyebrow.

"The upshot was, we were checking his favourite places to go in London, thinking maybe he'd gone to ground in one of them," Sirius said. "We saw a huge flash of light off in the northeast and by the time we got there Lucius Malfoy had gotten to Peter and Peter had faked his own death."

It took Draco a minute to realise that they were speaking of his father, and what his father had done.

"It wasn't pretty," Remus said, hunching over his cocoa. "There was a crater in the middle of the street, the sewer cracked -- that's how Peter got away, I think -- and dead people everywhere. We still don't know if the deaths were Lucius or Peter. Probably some combination of the two."

Bile rose in the back of Draco's throat.

"He thought Peter had double-crossed them," Sirius said. "Sent Voldemort into a trap."

"Why would he be willing to work with Pettigrew now?" Shacklebolt asked.

"Well, presumably Peter had the time to explain himself while he was helping him escape," Sirius drawled. "Add in that Malfoy is stark, bollocking mad, and not just in the crazy Death-Eater sort of way -- "
"Yes, I've read his case file," Shacklebolt said coolly.

"Well." Sirius spread his hands. "What else do you want to know?"

"I'll need to speak to Severus Snape, I think, for the rest. Snape was your mole within the Death Eaters?"

"Not at first -- " Dumbledore began, then glanced at Sirius to quiet the angry growl he was making. "He was swept up into the Death Eaters much as others were, and as with some others," he said significantly, still looking at Sirius, "found that he had chosen very wrong. He has taken his own share of the blame, but there is also some to be placed on Malfoy's shoulders. A man such as Lucius Malfoy could have held a great deal of sway over a young, impressionable boy like Severus."

At that point Rosmerta appeared in the doorway with another round of drinks, and Draco saw his chance; he darted past her and through the closing door, nearly tumbling down the stairs in his haste. He didn't want to hear any more offhanded talk about his father's insanity or the Muggles he'd killed or the inarguable fact that his father had been the servant of the man who killed Harry's parents. Friends with the people who had tortured Neville's parents and killed his gran.

As a child he had dreamed that his father might be innocent and might one day escape from Azkaban and come take him away from his mother. It was an infantile dream but he had never fully stopped believing in it until this moment, when it became obvious that it was a terrible untruth.

Lucius Malfoy was not just some bogeyman who might one day try to steal Draco from Hogwarts. He was a lunatic, an escaped convict, and if he kidnapped Draco it might be because he wanted to kill him. He had already killed others.

Draco barely remembered the headlong flight down the stairs from the Honeydukes cellar or the long winding tunnel-road back to the castle. When he was finally really aware of his surroundings again, he found that he'd fled to the Music Room, where he had tucked himself up in the window-seat and was shivering uncontrollably. After he got the chattering of his teeth under control, he took the cloak off and crept out again, hurrying to Hufflepuff and avoiding the main corridors, not wanting to encounter any other students or -- or Professor Snape.

He crawled straight into bed and hid under the covers, hoping the other students would think his bed was simply rumpled. After a minute or two, he poked his head out.

"Dobby?" he called hesitantly. "Dobby, can you come here please?"

There was a pause, and then a pop. Dobby looked around inquiringly, then beamed at Draco.

"Master Malfoy!" he squeaked. "Is Master Malfoy sick?"

Draco sighed. "A little. Can you tell Harry and Neville and Padma something for me?"

"Dobby is happy to -- "

"Good," Draco said, cutting off the house-elf's effusions. "Tell them I was late, I'm sorry, and I'm sick now so I won't be there for dinner, okay?"

"Does Master Malfoy want soup and -- "

"No, just -- just tell them, okay?"
Dobby frowned at Draco, but finally he nodded and disappeared. Draco put his head back under the blankets and lay there a long time, until the racing of his heart slowed and he could breath easier again.

***

It was winter in London and snowing in Diagon Alley, and Harry Potter was impatient.

He had decided to pretend to be patient as a Christmas present for Sirius, because clearly this was very important to Sirius, who had apparently lost his mind. Harry felt, as Sirius' godson, he was qualified to judge this.

Sirius wanted a portrait of Harry, not a photograph (not even a formal photograph) but a portrait, painted by Helena Broosh, who had done the painting of Sirius and Remus that hung on their bedroom wall. Harry understood that painted portraits generally did not contain subjects who were wearing jeans and Remus' cast-off sweatshirts, so he would have happily worn formal robes. But formal robes were out, and he felt that getting up in all his Quidditch gear was a bit above-and-beyond.

"Well, it's very...pureblood," Remus had said doubtfully, when Sirius was out of the room. "I mean, it's very old-family, being painted in sporting gear. If we were Muggles you'd be in your Cricket things or on a horse or something, no doubt."

Harry wanted Sirius to have a nice portrait. He wanted Sirius to be happy. But there was only so much patience a young man of thirteen could fake.

"I'm hot," Harry said, trying to hold very still.

"Sorry, Harry," Helena Broosh replied, working at a prodigious rate. "I'll be done with the study soon, I promise. Here," she added, and wafted a cooling charm across the room. Harry felt the sweat on his forehead turn clammy. He sighed. "At least it isn't a really complicated one like I did for your godfather. This'll just be two sittings -- this one to get the general idea and the next one to do colour and a few touch-ups."

"All right," Harry said. His arm itched under his Quidditch glove.

"We could try taking your mind off it. Tell me about Hogwarts -- have you got a girlfriend there?" Helena asked.

"No!" Harry said, half-amused, half-scornful. "I'm too young."

"Of course, of course. What are your -- um -- fathers off doing today?" Helena asked. Harry grinned, then quickly reschooled his features into the faint smile he was supposed to have in the portrait.

"Sirius is Christmas shopping with Neville."

"Last-minute shopper, eh?"

"Yeah, Remus is visiting Andromeda and Ted. He's, uh, friends with some people staying with them," Harry said.

"It sounds like a pleasant holiday. You're staying up in Hogsmeade, aren't you? I read in the newspaper that Sirius bought a house there."
"Yeah, he's been redoing everything," Harry said. "It's nice to be close to Hogwarts, my mate Draco has to stay for the holidays."

"That's a shame," Helena said absently, her hand still working with the charcoal. "Will you get to visit with him much?"

Harry felt a twinge. Draco had said he thought the secret passage was really unpleasant, so Harry's daydreams about being able to spend every day sneaking around Hogsmeade with him had gone up in smoke. Still, Draco promised to come visit at least once before Christmas, and Harry was going to be staying at the castle for the full-moon on the twenty-eighth, so at least they'd see something of each other. For the last two days of term, Draco had been quiet and moody, and Harry almost wondered if he'd done something to annoy the other boy. Generally, as a rule, Harry's ego was much too indestructible for that, but occasionally the old insecurity -- a childish fear that Harry wasn't even conscious he'd picked up in those first seven years with the Dursleys -- crept in.

"All right," Helena said, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Want to come see?"

Harry jumped off the stool he'd been sitting on and began shedding his gear as he walked over to the easel. On it, a detailed charcoal drawing of himself fidgeted and grinned and winked, occasionally checking a strap on his gloves or reaching up to grasp something out of the air.

"I'll put in a Snitch before I'm done," Helena said, pointing to the empty place where the charcoal-Harry was reaching. "It'll be an excellent portrait, I think. Is your godfather coming to get you?"

"HARRY?" someone called from the front, and then a boyish voice. "Harry, come on! It's still snowing!"

Helena laughed. "Sounds like," she said. "Run along and get changed -- we'll keep your things here for the next sitting."

***

Harry, Neville, and Sirius emerged from the green door of Broosh & Chackle Studios into a world of sparkling white. The snow was still falling, but there was no wind; it tumbled gently down and piled up in powdery drifts, perfect for making snowballs. Remus had said he would be all afternoon with Andromeda and Ted, so there was no reason to rush back; they strolled and snowball-fought their way up the street. Sirius, in the middle of turning Harry upside-down with the threat of burying him headfirst in the snowbank, even managed to smile graciously for a Prophet photographer who wanted a society-page picture of the dapper Mr. Black and his handsome young godson.

They finally arrived back, damp and red-cheeked, to find Andromeda, Ted, and two young men in the middle of rearranging the furniture.

"What's going on in here?" Sirius asked, leaning over the heads of Harry and Neville as Ted and one of the men grappled with the leg of the dining-room table which, against logic, was in the middle of the living-room.

"Too many people!" Andromeda said, giggling as Ted swore. "There's Ted, myself, Dora, Severus --"

"I can't escape," Sirius sighed.

"Be nice. Neville, Harry, you, Remus, Anne, Tobias, Michael, Marie, and Julian. That's far too many to cram around one tiny table for dinner, so we're blowing it up and putting it in here."
"How do you do it normally?" Sirius asked. Remus, who had sensibly hidden from hard labour in the kitchen, put his head around the doorframe.

"Oh, well, we're rarely all together at one time, and our tenants have their place upstairs," Andromeda said. "Though they know they're always welcome down here for a meal," she added, smiling at one of the young men. He smiled back hesitantly. Sirius saw the same shy, affection-hungry look he'd seen in Remus when they'd been boys.

"I've been making more acquaintances," Remus said, emerging from the kitchen now that the table had been settled and Ted was busily enlarging it. "Tobias!"

"Yessir?" said the young man with the heartbreaking smile.

"Come over here, I want you to meet Sirius. Tobias wants to study magical engineering, I've told him about your work for Madame Schaeffer," Remus said. Tobias shook Sirius' hand. "I'm going to introduce him to her a bit later in the year, once he's found his feet."

"Just moved down from Glasgow," Tobias explained. "Couldn't find work there. Tonkses're putting me up."

"And this is Julian, Tobias' roommate, he's interested in history," Remus said, gesturing to another young man who, like Remus, had premature streaks of grey in his dark hair. Julian, busy helping Ted, gave him a perfunctory nod. "He's -- erm, new to...all this. He was a Ravenclaw, left Hogwarts three years ago."

"Pleasure," Sirius said. He noticed, with a sort of sad amusement, that Remus had made himself at home amongst the werewolves almost immediately. He also noticed that Julian walked with a pronounced limp, and wondered if his bite-wound was like Remus and Anne's -- high on the thigh, the width of a man's hand from thumb to pinky, with one crooked tooth.

"Anne's upstairs," Remus added, as if he could hear the drift of Sirius' thoughts. By now, given the number of years they'd spent as friends-and-more, perhaps he could. "And you'll meet Michael and Marie at dinner, probably, they're married. Marie's a werewolf, Michael's not; they have their own place up north. They own a dairy, but he's taking a course in rudimentary potions and salves at St. Mungo's so -- since the inns and hotels won't take them..."

"Stiff upper lip," said a middle-aged gentleman, descending the stairs. "Their loss in missed fees. How's the roast, Tonks?"

"You could check on it," Ted said. The table had enlarged itself, but it had also grown three feet in height, far too tall to sit at. He and Tobias were underneath it now, tinkering with the charm.

"Are you going to block the stairs all bloody day, Black, or would you deign to shift yourself forward so that others may pass?"

Sirius twisted around and found himself looking down at Severus Snape, who was holding three baguettes in a sack in one hand and two bottles of wine in the other.

"Andromeda making you do the shopping now?" he asked.

"Move aside, or I shall move you forcibly," Snape replied. Sirius felt Harry poke him, and he rolled his eyes and moved so that Snape could come through. Remus, meanwhile, had moved away from the kitchen and was standing on the stairs up to what once had been their flat and was now the joint property of four werewolves and one werewolf-by-marriage. Sirius craned his neck around and saw the young girl Anne standing on the stair above him, their faces about even. Remus was speaking
in a low voice, his face solemn but friendly, and the girl was listening with a sullen look.

He watched, somewhat entranced, as Remus smiled and clearly made a joke; a reluctant grin spread across the girl's face, followed by a badly-suppressed laugh. She continued to smile as she came past him down the stairs and was immediately conscripted into setting the table.

"How is she?" he asked Remus, keeping his voice low as the others came in and out of the room, carrying cutlery and crockery, baskets of bread and bowls of sauce.

"Well, she didn't hurt herself as badly this past moon, and she's optimistic about the coming one, which is good. It's worse when you try to fight it, you know. I've told her so, but..." Remus shrugged. "She was raised to believe that werewolves are dangerous, evil creatures. Even if she's now learning that they can be human, she still hates the werewolf that made her what she is, and that hatred isn't the kind that stays confined."

"No new information on who did it?"

Remus sighed. "I have the report Tonks smuggled out to me, but with school and the moons I've hardly had time to look at it. Nothing leaps out, and she can't help at all. Perhaps after New Year's and before classes start -- I'll work on it a bit. Thinking that whoever did this to us...I don't like to consider it."

"Then don't, tonight," Sirius said, fingers brushing lightly up Remus' arm. "Let's have a nice dinner and go back to Hogsmeade and I promise I'll put all thought out of your head for a little while."

Remus smiled at him. "You're a bad influence."

"Well, you've known that for twenty years, you'd think you expected me to change," Sirius replied. He grinned and shoved Remus towards the table, where people were beginning to sit down. Anne, he noticed, sat directly across from Remus. And Tobias, he also noticed, quickly sat next to Anne.

He winked at Tobias, and the young man shot him a sly look in return. Perhaps Andromeda's big scheme to help the Werewolf Support Network had come with a significant amount of peril, but it clearly had come with its benefits, too. After all, in what other house could he sit down to dinner with two Hogwarts students, an Auror, a Potions Master, a newly-minted Apprentice Healer, two successful clothiers, and five werewolves?

Or, he thought, not five werewolves, even -- a Hogwarts Professor, a historian, a would-be engineer, an extremely teenaged young woman, and a dairy farmer.

_I wish people could see what I saw_, he thought to himself, looking around the table.

***

Christmas in Hogsmeade was a very communal affair.

It was a small town, whose business was mainly predicated on tourists who came to see the last full Wizarding settlement in Great Britain. Though what Hogsmeade mainly exported was hospitality, there was still a sentiment of disdain about tourists. Sirius, by dint of owning property and keeping house on the edge of the village, was deemed a part of the village and welcomed into its ranks more warmly than he ever had been as a student, all his charm notwithstanding. It reminded him of Betwys Beddau; it was a small town, and Sirius liked small towns.

On Christmas eve there was a jolly party in the pub, with singing and egg-nog and a raffle for ridiculous gifts; he and Harry attended as godfather and heir, while Remus ostensibly came with
the professors -- though it was only natural that two old friends should have a drink together, or perhaps two or three.

Still, with Town and Gown intermingling, the professors were required to maintain a certain amount of dignity, and Remus was quite nearly sober by the time he left the pub with Sirius (who was not, though still respectably coherent) and Harry, who had been allowed a nip of someone's buttered rum and didn't enjoy it at all.

The tree they'd decorated that afternoon glittered in the window of the little house that Sirius had worked so hard on. It was a welcoming sight, and Harry ran inside once Sirius had unlocked the door. He threw a handful of floo powder on the crackling log in the fireplace and requested the Wizarding Broadcast Network's Christmas show; it was less obnoxious than the others, and even occasionally played Muggle songs. At the moment, someone was singing about Quidditch players to the tune of *Angels We Have Heard On High*.

The tree was adorned with NuBurn Candles ("Guaranteed to stay upright and not to drip, sputter, or ignite clothing, trees, and buildings!") and Harry lit a match from the box above the fireplace, stretching to reach the ones on the top of the tree first.

Remus and Sirius had been banging around in the kitchen, preparing a bit of tea before bed, but as Harry lit the last of the candles he realised the only noise now was coming from the fireplace, where the almost mournful strains of *O Holy Night* were emerging.

He crept across the living room, back towards the front door, and past it to the hall that led to the kitchen; now he could hear the burble of the teakettle working its way towards boiling, a reassuring noise. He peered around the kitchen door and then quickly drew his head back into the shadows.

Remus and Sirius had been months hiding from him, back when he was a kid; he didn't really know how long they'd been together, maybe even since before they took him from the Dursleys. He did know by the time they'd settled into Betwys Beddau that the men raising him weren't like Vernon Dursley or any of the other fathers, at least not the ones Harry had encountered. He remembered being blunt enough about it to shock Sirius, who had a delicate ego about such things, and after that --

Well, they hadn't exactly hidden it, but Remus just wasn't physically affectionate by nature, and Sirius always took his cues from Remus, whether he knew he did or not. Once in a while Harry saw them kiss, and sometimes in the evenings he'd seen them sit closer together than men generally sat, but aside from the shared bedroom and the occasional innuendo, they kept their affection private, even from him.

He peered through the doorway, feeling not so much as if he were intruding but as if he were being allowed to witness something special. Sirius had one arm around Remus' waist and the other on his shoulder, almost careless; Remus' arms were around Sirius' neck, wrists crossed between his shoulderblades, and their foreheads were touching. They were moving to the music, though it was an aimless sort of not-quite-dancing, more an excuse to touch than anything else.

Harry couldn't remember when he'd seen Remus smile so widely. There was something wonderful and -- and solemn about it, like the music. Something important that Harry didn't have a name for yet.

The kettle began to whistle, and they kissed quite naturally and let each other go. Harry made sure he crashed a bit as he came into the kitchen. Remus would be embarrassed if he knew they'd been seen, and Harry didn't want anything to ruin it before he could tuck it up in his memories so that he
could study it in more detail later.

"So," said Sirius, once they'd poured the tea and settled into the comfortable sofa and chairs of the living room, "Hogwarts tomorrow, yeah? Tomorrow morning, bright and oh-god early?"

"So we can take Draco his stocking," Harry said nodding. "And then tomorrow night for the feast, right? You promised."

"It means I don't have to cook," Sirius said. "I'm all for it."

"Or else we'd be having spaghetti for Christmas dinner," Remus murmured, teasingly. Harry noticed, though he pretended not to see, that Remus' fingers were twined in Sirius' hair at the back of his head. He found himself wondering -- and then horrified that he'd wondered -- if they were going to Have Sex later that night. He knew about Sex, in theory, and he was pretty sure you weren't supposed to wonder about your nearest and dearest Having it.

"Got your present for Draco all wrapped up?" Remus asked, tilting his head at Harry.

"Yup. And I gave Neville his before we left London and he's giving Padma my present for her when he sees her on Boxing Day, so that's all right," Harry said, covering for his insanely inappropriate thoughts with innocent chatter. They were his parents!

"Well done. And Sirius has got things for Draco since it's bad form for professors to give their students presents," Remus said. "Though I imagine Severus has something for Neville, since someday Neville will be big enough to flatten him if he mistreats Dora."

"Professor Snape wouldn't do that to Dora," Harry said.

"Yes, well, if he knows what's good for him, he won't. I don't suppose you got Draco a broom finally, did you?" he asked Sirius, who shook his head.

"I asked, he said he wanted to buy his own. Besides, he uses Harry's for games, and Harry has a fine broomstick," Sirius said. "Did get him a professional-grade Beating bat, though. Those school bats are all cracked and badly weighted. You use those, sooner or later you'll break your wrist."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it. And, I think it's time for bed," Remus added, setting down his empty teacup and standing, stretching slowly. The moon was not that far away; he'd had Wolfsbane before they went out to the pub. His joints cracked.

Harry went up to his room, the room Sirius had decorated with posters of astronomy charts and famous Quidditch players. It was at the opposite end of the upper floor from the other bedroom, but Harry paused in the dark doorway and glanced back as Remus and Sirius stumbled sleepily towards their bed. Just before the door closed, he saw Sirius gently slide a hand down Remus’ spine and kiss the nape of his neck from behind.

Harry went to bed very glad that there was a long hallway and a few thick walls between his bedroom and theirs.

***

Draco was awoken that morning first by the sound of Sirius Black shouting "HALLOOOOOO AND HAPPY CHRISTMAS!" through the halls of Hufflepuff dormitory, and second by the crash of Harry Potter landing on his bed.

"How'd you get in?" he asked, rubbing his eyes in the dim morning light filtering through the high
"Remus has the passwords," Harry replied. "Professor, you know."

"Right, right -- " Draco tried to smooth his hair down, aware it always stood up in a cowlick in the morning. Sirius and Remus arrived rather more sedately than Harry had and a pile of gaily wrapped gifts landed on Draco's bed, along with an enormous stocking crammed full of sweets. Harry picked up one of the gifts and held it out. "Mine first!"

Draco had gotten a package from his mother the night before, containing a pair of new pyjamas and a new cauldron for Potions class. While the pyjamas were welcome (in a sense; they had cavorting crups on them) the cauldron was the most boring possible gift Draco could imagine.

Even if Sirius had gotten him a cauldron, however, Draco would have been delighted; and Sirius had not gotten him a cauldron, but a real professional-quality Beater's Bat, numbered by Quality Quidditch Supplies and guaranteed for ten years of hard use. Remus -- though the tag said "Sirius" -- had spoken quickly and quietly with McGonagall, and gotten Draco the Animorum, a hefty volume on the transfigurative arts. He had marked certain pages with little metal clips, much to Draco's delight.

Harry had gotten him a shaving kit; Draco didn't shave yet, but the kit had the kind of hair sleeker he liked, and real cologne, and it looked very grownup sitting on his bedside table.

There were gifts to be given, too; Draco had done all his shopping by mail-order (well, he'd had to) and though the giftwrap was professional and didn't have quite as much character, the presents were all well-received. He hoped Padma and Neville were enjoying theirs, too.

By the time all the gifts were unwrapped there were beginning to be distinct rumblings in Harry and Draco's stomachs, and they went out to the Great Hall to find a feast laid on by the Kitchen Elves: bacon, sausage, ham, eggs of all styles, french toast, waffles, oatmeal, crepes with fruit and chocolate, fried potatoes -- even steak, when Sirius jokingly told Denbigh that he wanted a real breakfast.

They couldn't go out on the grounds and couldn't very well take Draco back to Hogsmeade with them, but they rambled around the castle for hours, finally ending up in the music room where Harry and Draco demonstrated their not incompetent grasp of the "naughty limerick" poetic form.

The feast in the Great Hall that afternoon was a friendly affair, with a couple of tables pushed up against each other so that professors and students dined together. Remus, who had begun to look more and more tired, had begged off and gone back to his rooms to lie down, but Sirius stayed with the boys and was perfectly at home as surrogate professor. Snape might glare and grumble at the noise, but the other students seemed pleased to have Mr. Black at the table, and he was always game to pull a cracker and don a silly hat.

Harry was just helping himself to some roast potatoes when the doors of the Great Hall swung open. Everyone looked up, Harry half-expecting a Dementor to float through --

But it was just Professor Trelawney, gliding towards them dreamily. Harry and Draco exchanged a sardonic look.

"Sibyll, this is a pleasant surprise," said Dumbledore, standing to greet her.

"I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, "and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary meal and coming to join you."
Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate?"

Harry heard Sirius snort into his drink.

"I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness...."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Let me draw you up a chair -- "

Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

"I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!"

"Oh, that's all right," Sirius said. "We'll just make Professor Snape get up first."


"We will risk it, Sibyll," McGonagall said, waving to the open seat on the end of the bench, next to Sirius. Sirius glared at her. Madam Hooch, sitting next to her, laughed quietly.

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself onto the bench carefully.

"And where is Professor Lupin today?" she asked, after no great chasms opened up to swallow the table whole.

"Bit under the weather," Sirius replied, then looked as though he wished he'd let someone else speak.

"Surely you knew that, however," McGonagall said. From where Harry sat, it looked as though Hooch kicked her under the table.

"I often ask such questions so as not to make people uneasy," Trelawney replied. "My own Inner Eye has informed me much of Professor Lupin...such a dear man, and sadly, not long for this world, I fear..."

"Oh, I shouldn't worry too much," Sirius said. "Lupin's the sort to always make the best of a bad situation. I reckon if he dies he'll probably just be relieved that he won't have to finish marking his sixth-years' papers."

Trelawney looked scandalised, but Sirius winked at Harry and kept going.

"Now look here, professor," he said, "Christmas is a very traditional time for fortune telling and I want my future read. Can you tell me about any grand romances coming my way?"

Trelawney looked delighted, but McGonagall coughed. Harry, watching her watch Sirius, realised that she knew about Remus and Sirius, and moreover, so did Madam Hooch.

The Divinations professor clearly did not, however, and she launched into a long and complicated process of measuring the lines on Sirius' hands, the shape of his remaining dinner on his plate, the position of the stars, and the auspicious symbolism of his name. Finally, she took out her tarot deck, counted carefully through it, and drew out a card, face down. She flipped it over and declared, triumphantly, "The queen of staves!"

Sirius went off into silent paroxysms of ill-concealed laughter. Trelawney looked much put upon, until Sirius wiped his eyes and shook his head.

Trelawney gave him a suspicious look, but continued. "A strong but gentle woman, dark of hair and eye. Look for her in a public place. You should sleep with one shoe under your pillow, to dream of your true love," she added.

"I will certainly take that into consideration," Sirius said gravely, and the dinner began to break up.

Sirius and Harry were walking Draco back to the Hufflepuff common room when it happened -- when the two enormous owls sailed down the corridor, dropped a heavy package into Draco's instinctively-outstretched hands, and soared off without a word. Draco stared dumbly at the oblong package, which could only really be one thing, and then tore the paper off it hastily.

"Oooooh," Harry said, as the light from the corridor windows caught the glittering polish on the broomstick.

"Is that a Firebolt?" Sirius asked, sounding about ten years old. Draco turned the broomstick over in his hands, studying the registration number stamped on the top of the handle. "Merlin, it is."

Draco let go of the broomstick and it hovered in midair, just at the perfect height to mount it. The smooth birch twigs at the tail trembled eagerly.

Draco looked up at Sirius, his grey eyes wide.

"Did you get me this?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Me? You mean you don't know who gave it to you?" Sirius asked. "I said I'd get you one if you wanted, but you said you didn't -- you didn't buy this yourself?"

Draco shook his head, bewildered. Harry touched the tip of the broomstick. It was smooth and cool, marred only by the registration stamp and the Firebolt logo on one side.

"No card," Sirius murmured, examining the wrapping.

"Might've been Dumbledore," Harry said. "He wouldn't send a card if he were going to give a present to a student."

"It's not his style, though," Sirius said, rubbing the back of his head.

"Wait till Cedric sees," Harry said. "He'll swallow his tongue trying to keep from being envious. Oliver too. Hey, once you've had a ride, can I try it out?"

"Nobody's riding this broomstick just yet," Sirius said sharply. Both boys looked at him.

"Well, not in here -- " Harry began, but Sirius shook his head and reached out, grasping the broomstick firmly.

"Anyone we know would have sent a card," he said. "Andi or Ted -- Neville, Padma -- even Dumbledore would have sent an anonymous note. And I know the House Elves love you, Draco, but they definitely don't have this kind of money. Think who that leaves."

Draco stiffened. "My father," he said hoarsely, looking at the broomstick with renewed confusion.

"Yes -- or an enemy who wanted to get to your father through you," Sirius agreed. "Nobody's riding this broomstick, Draco, until we've looked over every inch of it for hexes and curses."
"But Sirius -- it's a _Firebolt!_" Harry said.

"Yes, and no son of mine or any of his friends are going to ride a Firebolt -- _especially_ a Firebolt -- that's cursed," Sirius said. Harry subsided, but his eyes still traveled covetously over the broomstick. "Remus can check it for curses. That's practically his job. It won't take long, I'm sure."

"Famous last words," Harry muttered, but out of respect he didn't say them loud enough for Sirius to hear.

***

The broomstick did cause a commotion, and Remus at once put it through several strenuous magical tests, though his abilities were limited by the impending full moon and his own anguished desire not to damage such a perfect piece of craftsmanship as the Firebolt. Remus might not have been the biggest Quidditch fan in the world, but he knew art when he saw it.

He was well enough by the thirty-first not only to resume his testing of the broom but to attend the small New Year's reception in the common room. Sirius was solicitously at his side, dancing attendance and bringing him ridiculous amounts of tea, but eventually he was prevailed upon to sit down before he did someone a harm. Remus told Dora that it was nice to sit among the professors and listen to them talk, especially about the Firebolt; he was picking up plenty of information that would go into the continued testing. He was fond of quiet parties, and while New Year's was a big deal in Scotland, in the little Hogwarts enclave it was enough to count down by Sinistra's precision instruments and warmly wish each other a good new year.

Dora noticed Remus winking at her as Severus kissed her chastely on the cheek, but didn't think any more about it until she saw Severus slip quietly out of the room. He was gone for several minutes, and she was about to go in search of him when Dumbledore ostentatiously checked the clock and held up his hands for attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "There is one last ritual to be performed before we retire..."

"First footing!" Dora cried. "I forgot! Is it Severus this year?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "If you will all follow me..."

"What's going on?" Sirius asked, as the professors filed out into the hallway, following Dumbledore towards the front of the castle like so many ducklings.

"You're such a city boy," Dora heard Remus reply. "First-footing, it's where someone purposefully leaves so that they can be the first person across the door in the new year. It's supposed to be a man, dark-haired for preference, and carrying alcohol. Or coal."

"Is this some daft northern idea?" Sirius asked.

"It's a very old tradition!" Remus replied.

"Right, daft northerners it is. Why wasn't I asked to do it? I'm a dark-haired man, and I love carrying alcohol around!"

Remus grinned at Dora and continued to soothe Sirius' bruised ego as they walked.

They assembled before the enormous oak door, locked tightly against the night outside, Dora cheerful and vibrant with excitement, though over what she couldn't quite say.
Dumbledore checked a pocketwatch hidden in one of the many folds of his robes. He snapped it shut with a nod and there was a loud banging noise, as of a fist being pounded on the door. It echoed up the tall beams and shook dust from the highest crossbars.

Dumbledore took out a delicate key, turned it in the lock, and stepped back as several bars and iron fittings slid apart. The doors opened and Severus appeared on the front steps, holding a coal scuttle in one hand and a bottle of firewhiskey in the other.

He stepped across the threshold and gravely presented the alcohol to Dumbledore, who accepted it just as gravely. The coal was offered to McGonagall, who smiled at him as she took it.

"Very well done, Severus," Dumbledore said, as a dozen small champagne glasses appeared. He didn't open the bottle, however. "Now, I believe there is one more point of business before the year is truly rung in..."

The professors all looked at each other, perplexed. This was outside the usual ritual. Severus, however, was reaching into his pocket.

A hushed murmur circled around the faculty as he drew out a small box and moved closer to Dora. She realised what was happening about a split second before he spoke, and was never so grateful in all her life for Severus Snape's decidedly unromantic streak.

"I shan't get down on one knee for anyone," he said. "So don't go thinking I shall."

"Wouldn't dream of it," she replied weakly. One of his fingers flicked the latch up and the box opened smoothly to reveal a small gold ring with a sapphire -- the traditional Wizarding engagement stone -- set atop it.

She wasn't sure she was capable of doing anything other than stare at it. Dumbledore, somewhere in the distant background, chuckled. Dora realised her hair had turned bright gold -- not blond but metallic, sparkling gold.

"You needn't say yes now," Severus said, and she looked up to see sudden uncertainty in his eyes.

"You haven't asked her anything!" Remus hissed. Severus glanced at him, frowned, and turned back to Dora.

"Well, if you want to answer now, I can ask," he suggested. "Nymphadora, will you marry me?"

She managed a smile, and her hands only shook a little -- about as much as his were -- when she lifted the little ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger. It sized itself to fit snugly just behind the second knuckle.

The professors burst into applause and laughter. Severus gave her a rather skeptical smile.

"Are you certain?" he asked, stepping close to be heard above the noise.

"Don't tell me you're insecure!" she replied, and laughed and threw her arms around his neck. Remus grinned and offered Severus his hand, and Sirius ruffled Dora's hair affectionately. Someone thrust a small glass of whiskey into her hands, and the sapphire sparkled on her finger as she sipped it. Severus looked as though he could use some alcohol lest he fall over in a faint. Fortunately, Dumbledore provided.

"How long were you planning this?" she asked, once the noise had died down a little bit. They fell into step behind the other professors, some going back to the common room and others to their
quarters. "Not since before Theo's impertinence, I hope. I'd hate it if Theo were right to ask."

He gave her a reserved smile. "No. Though it did give me cause to consider matters."

"Staking your claim?" she teased.

"Nymphadora..." he grasped her arm and stopped her, letting the others wander on before he spoke again. "Please take it as no insult that I do not believe any other woman would have the -- the character to see past my flaws -- "

"Severus, are you implying I'm the only taker?" she asked, grinning.

"That is precisely what I do not wish to imply!"

"It's all right, I was only teasing," she said, and kissed him affectionately to prove it.

"I was faced with the awkward conviction that if I did not believe myself capable of marrying you I would do much better to end the thing swiftly, for both our sakes. And if I did believe that we could -- tolerate each other -- "

"Such strong language!"

"Quiet, wench," he ordered. "If I did believe that it was possible to share a highly solitary life, there being no question that I -- love you...why wait?"

Dora stroked his short hair affectionately, her other hand resting over his heart.

"Just when I think I've got you all figured out, you say something like that," she said.
Chapter 10

When school came back into session, early on the third of January, there was no end to the gossip that circulated amongst the students. Those who had stayed over the holiday could talk all about Draco Malfoy's mysterious broomstick and Sirius Black's dark-haired, dark-eyed woman that Professor Trelawney had predicted. Harry, who had news straight from Remus (or rather, from overhearing Remus) could and did tell all about Professor Snape proposing to Ex-Professor Tonks.

Neville, who was woken early on the first of January by excited shouts about weddings, wandered out sleepily to find his sister engaged to his professor, walked straight up to Severus and for the first time in many years of association, shook his hand. Even Anne joined in the celebration and shyly accepted when Tonks demanded that she accompany her and Andromeda when they went gown-shopping. Severus took the idea of gowns and formal robes and an actual wedding-date with thinly-disguised horror.

Snape immediately became a romantic object amongst the students, much to his disgust, and all mention of love or marriage were quashed with severe punishments.

At school Draco was nearly as tragic as Snape was romantic, having had the ownership of a Firebolt for a few precious moments before it was snatched away from him. He shrugged; he was used to his mum taking things from him. The school brooms were adequate for training, and besides he didn't want to ride a broomstick that might kill him. It would have surprised many to know how proud Draco Malfoy really was, but it was a peculiar sort of pride that would brook no charity nor spectacle. Andromeda observed quietly to Ted one morning that Draco was really more like Severus than either would be comfortable with.

January passed in a dull sort of rush, highlighted only by the Slytherin-Ravenclaw game, which Slytherin won by a narrow margin. It looked as though they would be the team to beat for the Cup, their loss in the last term notwithstanding. Harry, checking the game schedule, realised that Slytherin would not play against Hufflepuff until April. It was a long way off, but it did make the situation more real: he would be playing against Draco, possibly defeating (or being defeated by) Draco's team. He supposed he would have to reckon with that sometime, as he had with Oliver.

In the meantime, however, he had other concerns -- not only his classes, but the great mystery of who would be teaching during the January full moon.

Remus himself he did not worry about any more than ever. After all, he had lived for years with Remus, not to mention now he was taking Wolfsbane. Remus refused to tell who was going to be his substitute, and Harry began to find out just how good Remus was at keeping a secret. He did seem as though he were bursting to tell, but he refrained with admirable restraint.

"Any new ideas? Last-minute bets?" Neville asked as they walked down the hall towards class. Harry had a cheerful letter from the bed-bound Remus in his bag, but it said nothing about his substitute.

"Nope. He seems so excited though, it ought to be fun," he said. Neville paused with his hand on the door, so Harry shouldered it open and walked inside confidently. If he was going to have to kick some arse, he might as well start early.

A knot of students had been waiting outside the classroom, but they followed him inside with Neville. The room was brightly lit and the man at the desk was hard to miss -- lanky, with a lion's mane of white hair that still had a few hints of sandy brown here and there. He stood leaning
against the professor's desk, as Remus often did, arms across his chest. When the door opened, he looked up quickly and gave them a ready grin.

"Come in, sit down," he said, gesturing at the desks. "Your professor didn't leave a seating chart so you may as well sit where you please; I won't know the difference."

Harry hesitantly took a seat in the second row, and Neville slid in next to him. Hermione Granger plonked down in front of the boys. Most of the Slytherins moved towards the back.

"Are we all here?" the man asked, when the door finally swung shut again. The students looked around and nodded. Harry could feel the room warming to the man already. He had a pleasant smile that looked somehow familiar.

"Splendid, I'll just hex any latecomers," the man said, and the class snickered obediently. "Now. You are...third year, Gryffindor and Slytherin double, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered.

"Thank you. You are...?"

"Hermione Granger," she said.

"What a pretty name. Your parents are Shakespeare fans?"

Hermione nodded shyly.

"If powers divine behold our human actions, as they do, I doubt not then but innocence shall make false accusation blush, and tyranny tremble at patience," the man said, and his deep voice settled the class into absolute silence. "Shakespeare, from The Winter's Tale, as your name is. Now, let me see...yes. I've forgotten to introduce myself, haven't I. Did Professor Lupin warn you who was coming?"

Headshakes.

"Very well. My name is Ellis Graveworthy. I've been asked by Professor Lupin to lecture in his place, today and tomorrow, while he is away on business. I'm not a teacher by trade; I write novels."

Harry elbowed Neville and grinned widely. The rest of the class was muttering to each other in excited undertones.

"I don't know if any of you are quite old enough yet to know them -- who here has heard of the book Two Kneazles?" Graveworthy continued. Almost the entire class raised their hands. "Well, that's flattering. And how many of you have read it?"

Half the hands dropped. The rest looked eagerly at him.

"Your honesty is appreciated," he said with a smile. "I -- hallo, who's that?"

All the heads turned to the doorway, where the door was just closing, though nothing was visible except a long, shaggy black tail.

"Padfoot!" Harry cried, along with five or six other students.

"Hullo Padfoot," Graveworthy said courteously, as the dog came down one aisle. "School mascot?"
"He belongs to Professor Lupin," Harry said. Padfoot settled at his feet, ears alert, tail wagging gently. "He must have gotten out."

"He won't make any trouble, will he?" Graveworthy inquired. Harry glanced down at the enormous black dog, who was sitting placidly next to his chair.

"No, Mr. Graveworthy," he said.

"That's fine then -- where was I?"

"Two Kneazles," Neville said eagerly.

"Yes! Right, thank you -- " Graveworthy paused. "You're Neville Longbottom, aren't you?"

Neville blinked.

"I knew your parents, you're Frank's spit and image -- sorry, sorry, lecture," he said to the class at large. "You may be able to tell I'm not much one for public speaking."

"Draco'll be over the moon," Harry whispered to Neville.

Graveworthy rubbed his hands briskly. "I'm not very good at Defence and never had much interest in the Dark Arts at school, but what I have done is written a book about the history of Hogwarts. More accurately, its Founders, as seen through the eyes of two kneazle kits adopted by Salazar Slytherin. Now, there's no evidence that Slytherin kept Kneazles, but there isn't any evidence he didn't, either. That's what history is about, you see -- weighing what's there against what isn't. At any rate, while I was researching this book, I learned a lot about Hogwarts, more than I ever did at school. That's what I'm here to talk to you about today: the history of the Dark Arts at Hogwarts."

There was a loud, busy rustle as parchment was unrolled and inkpots were set out. He waited until it had died down before continuing.

"So. Let's start by having you tell me what you know about the history of Hogwarts," Graveworthy began, gesturing idly at a bit of chalk. It rose up into the air and held itself poised over the board. "Four Founders, four Houses, one very drafty castle, and a British institution is born. Yes, your name is?"

"Theo Nott, Professor Graveworthy," Theo said. Graveworthy laughed.

"Just Mr. Graveworthy, I think. What were you going to tell me?"

Harry listened and took notes as Graveworthy began to paint a picture of life at Hogwarts nearly a thousand years ago -- the long drafty dormitories, the half-destroyed castle on the hill, the illiterate students who had to be taught to read by patient Helga Hufflepuff, and the devastating intellect of Rowena Ravenclaw. Also Godric Gryffindor, a lion of a warlock with tangled brown hair...

"And dear wee Salazar Slytherin," Graveworthy said, putting one hand over his heart. "A small man, dwarfed by Gryffindor, mostly Roman blood according to documents. Quick and nimble and quite wicked. He brought the Dark Arts to Hogwarts, which was taught as a class in itself until about 1550. Now thereby hangs a tale in itself..."

The class sat rapt, parchment forgotten on their desks, as Graveworthy unrolled a story for them about scandal and dark doings in the sixteenth century. From there he leapt backwards again to Slytherin and the Dark Arts as practiced five hundred years before, some of which Harry knew all too well from his encounter with a basilisk the previous year. At Ron Weasley's prompting,
Graveworthy guided them up through the end of the Founding, the year that the last Founder died - - Rowena Ravenclaw, whose last words were apparently, "No, you've got the wrong end of the stick entirely!" -- and into what he called the Building Years when the castle was rebuilt and hexed round thrice with protective charms. He wandered off into a story about the perils of blood magic and then the deep, dark necromantic societies of senior students in days gone past until a little bell on the table chimed.

"And that's class! Thank Merlin for alarms, or I'd have kept you all until dinner," Graveworthy said. "Off you go."

They gathered their things reluctantly, already talking about the class, and most of them were gone when he suddenly spoke again.

"Harry Potter," he called, and Harry turned against the tide of chattering students. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

Harry fought his way back out of the crowd and came down the aisle slowly. He'd only whispered to Neville once...

"Don't worry, I don't bite," Graveworthy said, and bared his teeth in a wide smile. Harry smiled back, stopping in front of the suddenly shy-looking man. Graveworthy held out his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, sir," Harry heard himself say, and then blurted, "I like your books an awful lot."

Graveworthy's smile turned genuine. "Thank you. I'm glad."

"So does Professor Lupin -- and -- and my friend Draco," Harry continued, even as part of him was shouting not to be a huge idiot in front of Ellis Graveworthy. "He's in my year but in Hufflepuff, if you could even just say hi to him specially -- "

"Certainly. Did you enjoy the lecture today?"

Harry nodded.

"Good. I hoped it wouldn't be boring. I'm ridiculously anxious in front of crowds. I've been asked to dinner with your Godfather tonight, I don't know if he told you. Professor Lupin, as well, at Black's house in Hogsmeade."

"You know Sirius?" Harry asked, surprised.

"In passing. I'm acquainted with him through the Ord -- " Graveworthy caught himself. "Well, let's say through mutual friends. It's been years, but Sirius Black makes quite the impression."

Harry found himself laughing. "Yes sir. He does that."

"He seems to have raised you well. Otherwise I wouldn't ask this, but I -- I was wondering if I might look at your scar. I know, I know, you probably hate it when people ask that..." Graveworthy began, but Harry had already raised his hand and brushed his hair back from his forehead.

"I don't mind," he said carelessly. Graveworthy's eyes met his, first, and then drifted upwards.

"So that's it," Graveworthy murmured. "The famous scar. I remember..."

He seemed to check himself again. Harry wondered if Ellis Graveworthy had known his parents,
but Graveworthy's mind seemed to shift.

"You're carrying a part of history with you, Harry," he said, instead of whatever else he was going to say. "I don't suppose anyone lets you forget it, but that's not to the bad. You of all people understand that we are the result of what comes before, for good or ill."

Harry had not really considered this before, but he didn't say so.

"What a peculiar life for a young boy," Graveworthy mused. "I've often thought your story would make an excellent novel -- though you get rather enough attention as it is, I'm sure."

"It's not all that interesting," Harry protested, letting his hair fall down again. "Mostly school."

"To be sure. And I've kept you long enough. Off you go. If you're late, tell them it's my fault. And Harry," he said, as Harry turned to go.

"Yes, sir?"

"If you ever did want to get your story in print -- I can't resist asking -- I'm at your service," said Ellis Graveworthy, the famous novelist of the wizarding world.

"Thank you, sir," replied Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. "Maybe one day I will."

***

The house in Hogsmeade was quite transformed since Sirius had purchased it, though the view from the rear windows hadn't altered at all. It still gazed down on the ruined stones of Creadonagh valley, deep in twilight by the time Ellis Graveworthy arrived for dinner. He came bearing a bottle of good wine and a ready smile, thought Sirius saw that he was still, as he had been years ago, a little shy of strangers. They had known each other in the Order, but only slightly, and they might as well have only just met.

"Dinner's almost ready," Sirius said, leading him through to the dining room, which overlooked the valley from the back of the house. "How did your lessons turn out?"

"Oh! Fine, I suppose. As well as substitute lessons ever do. It seems as though the children in these years are quieter than when I was at school," Ellis replied. He drifted towards the window, where the stars were visible low on the horizon. "I made the acquaintance of your godson."

"I hope he didn't misbehave."

"Quite the contrary, he seems like a very apt student. I understand he's close to Neville Longbottom? I suppose his parents are still at St. Mungo's."

"Nor likely to change," Sirius said. "Neville's a good lad, though; my cousin Andromeda's taken him in as her own, so he has parents of a sort, at least."

"For ex-nobility, you're quite the Communists, you know," Ellis observed with a grin. "Not that I disapprove; I believe people ought to look after one another."

"Well, family is important to purebloods, too," Sirius said, twisting his smile into a sneer on the word pureblood. "Listen, make yourself at home, I'm going to fetch Remus. Won't be a moment."

The older man listened with interest as Sirius padded to the foot of the stairs, climbed halfway up, and shouted. "DINNER! GRAVEWORTHY'S HERE!"
"Right down!" came the faint reply.

"Now, I was told Mr. Lupin was away on business," Ellis said, when Sirius returned.

"Well, of a sort. His health isn't as good as he could wish. He's been in hospital all day," Sirius answered -- a little too smoothly, in fact. "Nothing life-threatening, but it does rather wear him out."

"Quite a shame. Still, it gives the children a bit of variety, and I enjoyed myself once I got past the terror of public speaking," he said. There was a thudding noise on the stairs, and Remus Lupin appeared.

Ellis remembered Remus less than Sirius, who was boisterously outspoken and young enough to be brash even about war. He recalled James Potter and Sirius Black, of course, and then a skinny brown-haired shadow lurking in the background and a pudgy, slightly annoying boy who seemed always to be in the way without ever trying to be. It was difficult to fathom that of all four, Peter Pettigrew would be the dangerous one.

It was just as difficult, however, to fathom that the man in the doorway was the beige-coloured shadow whom Ellis had been almost unable to put a name to. He looked older than Sirius by at least five years, though they must have been roughly the same age to leave school together. His face was pale and a little drawn, but the grey touching his temples gave him an air of authority the younger Remus had not had (or not shown, at any rate). He wore a tailored suit with the same quiet self-possession that Sirius Black wore his jeans and motorcycle boots and Muggle t-shirt. And his smile was less childish, but far more open than the boy's had been.

"Graveworthy, it's a pleasure," he said, offering his hand. "I hope the classes behaved for you today."

"Oh, yes. Pleasure's all mine," Ellis answered. "I'm El, if that's all right. No need to stand on formality."

"Remus," the other man replied. "I was pleased to have your letter saying you'd come teach. I'm sure it was a real treat for the students."

"Your young Harry seemed to think so, at least I hope he did," Ellis said easily. Remus sat in one of the chairs and turned it slightly so that it faced Ellis and the window. Sirius, Ellis noticed, slipped back into the kitchen.

"I'm certain he did; he and his friends are very fond of your work. Though Sirius isn't letting him read Asarotos Oechus until he's a bit older."

"Well, it's not really a children's book. I'll admit that," Ellis laughed. "Probably wise. Sirius tells me you've been at St. Mungo's all day -- nothing too terrible, I hope?"

"Chronic ill-health. It comes and goes," Remus answered. "One doesn't like to tell the students."

"Certainly, certainly." Ellis rubbed his chin, and a phrase crossed his mind, something about sick-wards -- it might do for a sonnet, if he remembered it later.

"And here we are," Sirius announced, carrying a pot of bubbling stew to the table. Behind him, a bowl of bread and three glasses of wine floated in the air. The wine-bottle and a butter dish followed.

"This looks wonderful," Ellis said, as Sirius ladled out portions into the bowls.
"Lamb stew -- easy enough to make, or we'd be eating take-away," Sirius replied.

"Believe me, I appreciate the effort." Ellis smiled to himself as he took some bread and spread a bit of butter on it. "I'm sorry, if I can ask a personal question -- professional nosiness, as it were, the whole of humanity being my profession when I'm writing..."

Sirius glanced at Remus, who nodded cautiously.

"Without any implication of disapproval -- may I ask how long you two have been together? I recall a newspaper article of a few years ago, but it seemed to intimate that you were Harry's tutor..."

Both men had gone pale -- Remus a shade paler, if possible -- and were looking uneasily at one another.

"Believe me, I keep enough secrets that I have no need to share yours with anyone," Ellis said hastily. "Silent as the grave, as it were. It was only curiosity; you needn't answer if you don't want to."

"I -- don't believe I've ever heard it put that directly," Remus said slowly. One hand twisted in the napkin at the side of his plate. "Are we so obvious?"

Ellis smiled.

"Only to someone trained to watch," he replied. "And someone familiar with the way men live together. As I said, I can be discreet."

"How old was Harry?" Sirius asked Remus, swallowing a bite of stew. "Eight?"

"No, just turned nine," Remus said absently, still staring at Ellis. "Four years, give or take a few months. Harry's aware of it, of course. As are a few close friends."

"It's -- I find it quite intriguing, as a writer," Ellis said. "But then all day I've felt as though I were standing half-in a story that wasn't of my own devising."

Sirius smiled. Ellis saw what he had been trying to convey was getting across, at least to one of the men: he meant what he said. This was not his secret to tell, nor did he even think it very valuable information. It was simply what was. He was no danger to them.

"It would be very hard on Harry, you understand," Remus said, and the napkin was given another twist. "Sirius doesn't care and I don't really -- I mean, I would, but I'd get past it. But Harry..."

"Of course. Parents' lives are always hard on their children, and we live in an imperfect world," Ellis said. He saw Sirius calmly rest his hand on Remus' wrist, and Remus released the poor napkin from its torments. His tightened jaw relaxed as well, and the hunted look left his eyes. Good. Clearly Sirius Black had grown up as well, even if he didn't show it outwardly so much as Remus did.

"Never mind; my curiosity is satisfied," Ellis continued. "I meant to ask, by the way -- when I was at school, the Gryffindor ghost was only Nearly Headless Nick. I understand he's been upgraded to Completely Headless Nick now. Have you any idea how the thing happened?"

***

The week after Ellis Graveworthy left, when Remus was fully steady on his feet again, he took
Harry aside after class. They walked through the high echoing hallways towards the Great Hall, Remus idling along with his hands in his pockets, Harry looking up at him curiously.

"I've been considering this for a while," Remus said, glancing out one of the narrow windows that looked onto the courtyard. "I'd like to make you an offer, Harry. More as your professor than anything else -- and certainly you're welcome to decline."

"Offer of what?" Harry asked.

"You've encountered Dementors twice now, and both times have been rather dire for you. That's not your fault, and I'm not saying it is, but it is something we must grapple with rather than ignore. It's dangerous to be so unarmed against them."

"Well, I don't go looking for them -- "

"I know! Believe me, I know that. But you never need to look for trouble, is the problem; it always seems to come to you," Remus said. "I want to protect you, Harry, but the wisest way of doing that right now is teaching you to protect yourself. There's a spell that can drive off a Dementor. It's difficult to learn and even more difficult to execute, but I think you're able enough to handle it."

"Extra tutoring?" Harry asked with a sigh.

"Well, I did say you can say no, but I think you ought to say yes," Remus said. "If it starts to interfere with your grades, we can always stop."

Harry thought about the Dementors, about the things he'd heard and the memories just on the edge of his thoughts, not quite complete, like seeing a half-visible film in a dim room.

He wasn't certain he wanted to be able to drive a Dementor off. He wanted to hear his mother's voice again.

"All right," he said, as they reached the doorway of the Great Hall. "When should we do it?"

"How does Thursday sound? You don't have practice that day. We can meet in the History of Magic classroom, that ought to be big enough."

"Okay," Harry replied. "I'll try it, but if I want to stop I can, right?"

"Right," Remus said. He affectionately ruffled the hair at the back of Harry's head, out of view of the students, before walking into the hall and taking his seat at the high table. Harry wondered if Sirius had put him up to it.

The week seemed to drag and fly at the same time -- whenever he thought of the Patronus lesson it seemed like it was too soon, only a few days away. On the other hand, time passed slowly during classes and sometimes all he wanted to do in the evenings was escape down to the dormitory and spend a few hours alone with a book, Snake in his box on the nightstand, the rest of the beds empty.

After dinner on Thursday Harry slipped away from Draco and Neville (Padma was already at the library) and went down to the dormitory, wondering what he should take with him to the lesson. Parchment and pens? Remus didn't often lecture. Chocolate, definitely; he had two chocolate frogs from the last time he'd gone to Hogsmeade, and he put those into his bag along with his Dark Arts textbook and, for no real reason he could think of, the Marauder's Map.

He dawdled along the hallway, not wanting to be early or late, and showed up with five minutes to
sparer. Remus wasn't there yet, but Harry lit the lamps with his wand and it wasn't five minutes before he showed up, lugging a large carpetbag with him.

"Boggart," he said briefly, tossing it in the corner. "Been chasing that bugger down all afternoon."

"What've you got a boggart for?" Harry asked.

"Practice. So! Ready to work?" Remus asked, clapping his hands together.

"Yeah..." Harry eyed the carpetbag. "I thought I was practicing on Dementors."

"You will be, sort of," Remus said, kicking the bag down the aisle. "How'd you like an impromptu fifth-year lesson in Boggarts, Harry?"

"Sure," Harry said, relieved that they weren't going to jump straight in.

"Half the Boggart's power lies in the psychological effect it has on people. If you know you're facing a Boggart then you're already thinking quite hard about what you're most afraid of, human nature being what it is. If you don't know it's a Boggart, that's almost worse; you realise that it can be anything and naturally you think of what's most dangerous to you, which amounts to the same thing. Take my meaning?"

"So if I think about Dementors...?"

"Well, you should be concentrating on other things. I'll make sure it's a Dementor; I've been working myself up about them since I caught it. Doesn't take much effort; they're quite horrible enough to begin with, don't you agree?"

"So you're fooling yourself into being afraid of Dementors?"

"Something like that. I imagine we're both nervous -- isn't that so?"

Harry nodded. Remus smiled.

"This is advanced magic, Harry," Remus said, undoing his cufflinks and rolling his sleeves up. "You may as well relax; I don't expect us to succeed in one lesson. It took me a long time to learn the Patronus, and I don't believe Nymphadora learned it until her third year of Auror training."

"Is it complicated to do?" Harry asked.

"No, though it does involve a little bit of thought. The Patronus is a kind of anti-dementor, a positive force. Theoretically, it is a single happy thought made physically manifest. Dementors feed on hope, happiness, the desire to survive, which is what the Patronus embodies. The difference is, a Patronus can't feel despair or depression, so the Dementor can't hurt it. Each Patronus is unique to its wizard. Nymphadora's, for example, is a peacock."

Harry grinned. "Kind of appropriate."

"I've always thought so."

"What about you? And Sirius?"

Remus frowned. "I've never seen his; he's never had a reason to cast one, at least not while I've been present."

"And yours?"
"Mine is Padfoot," Remus murmured. "Always was."

"You're a bit soppy sometimes," Harry said.

"You're a bit soppy sometimes, Professor Lupin," Remus corrected, smiling at him. "Now, the Patronus is conjured by an incantation, like so...Expecto Patronus!"

He didn't move or wave his wand as he said it, but he looked as if he were definitely trying to cast the charm. There was something odd in his face.

"But that's only part of it," he added to Harry, picking up his wand. "That's the word that makes the thought emerge as a physical being. The fiddly part is that as you say it you've got to be thinking about something else, and definitely you can't be panicking. You have to think about a really happy memory, a good thought. Something with a strong emotional connection. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, pondering. Remus waited patiently with his arms crossed, leaning on his desk. There were any number of happy memories he could call up -- playing cricket with Draco in Betwys Beddau, playing chess with Sirius, his first night at Hogwarts, or any of a dozen memories of Snake's comforting weight on one ear as the reptile peered out at the world from the screen of Harry's hair. Some of those were tinged with sadness, though; they were twined up with memories of his first Snake, who'd died to save him from Peter Pettigrew, or the fact that while Betwys Beddau was nice, it was also a summer prison.

He settled finally on the day he got his Hogwarts letter, and the way Remus and Sirius had looked when he opened it. That ought to be happy enough, oughtn't it?

"Got it?" Remus asked, and Harry nodded. "Right, then. Remember -- expecto patronum!"

He kicked open the latch of the carpetbag and black smoke billowed out, almost shaping itself into a glowing orb before reforming into the cowled, tattered shape of a Dementor. Remus' eyes were wide and dilated, and it caught Harry off-guard. By the time he'd remembered what he was supposed to be doing he'd forgotten his happy memory, and he clutched at the first thing he thought of -- ice cream in Betwys Beddau -- and stumbled over the incantation. White fog closed in and he was falling and someone screamed...

***

Sirius was sitting out in the back garden of the house in Hogsmeade, watching the sun go down over Creadonagh valley, when Hedwig fluttered down to his shoulder and dropped a letter in his lap.

"Ta, beautiful," he said, picking it up, noting Remus' handwriting on the front. He slit the sticking-charm curiously and unfolded it, then smiled and tucked it in his pocket.

"In with you," he said, shooing Hedwig in through one of the open windows. He closed the window, latched the back door, and stopped at the hallway mirror. His hair was getting shaggy and needed a cut, but he looked all right. He undid the top button of his shirt, straightened his shoulders, and walked to the floo.

"Lupin's Quarters, Hogwarts," he said, tossing a handful of powder in and following in short order. There was the familiar dizziness as he spun through the network, but then he was stepping out of the fire in Remus' warm bedroom at Hogwarts.

A pair of arms wrapped around him from behind and Remus kissed the side of his neck, nuzzling the soft hair under his ear. Sirius laughed and turned for a proper kiss and found Remus' mouth
tasted like butterbeer.

"Evening," he said, fingers already working at Remus' shirt.

"Want you," Remus replied, uncharacteristically direct. Sirius tugged his shirt free and fumbled with his belt.

"So I gathered," he answered. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," Remus replied. He reached around Sirius' arms and worked at his buttons, trying to get them undone and get his shirt off his shoulders without breaking contact.

"Didn't you -- mmm," Sirius broke off as Remus bit his shoulder. "Didn't you have lessons tonight with -- "

"They went badly," Remus answered, pushing his trousers down and off.

"Badly?" Sirius asked, hesitating. Remus kissed him again, intently.

"Harry's fine. I'm not," he said. "And I need you."

Sirius raised a hand to Remus' hair and ran his fingers through it, worried now. Remus leaned into the caress, closing his eyes.

"I want one thing in life that is simple," he said, as if it were an effort to form every word.

"You and me -- we're simple?" Sirius asked, hooking his fingers in Remus' belt.

"This is the only thing that's easy -- you -- " Remus pulled him close, his arm hot on Sirius' hip. "Please, I just need. I do."

"Shh, okay," Sirius said, kissing his ear. "It's okay, it'll be okay."

Remus nodded and held him close, breathing heavy and deep for a moment, then leaned back enough to kiss his throat. Sirius eased his trousers off over his hips -- still too thin -- and saved his questions for later. He was tugged towards the bed, shedding clothing as they went, and tumbled down on top of Remus, kissing his way down his chest. He nuzzled a hipbone and Remus pulled him up again, securing their hips together, arching his back. Sirius moaned.

"Moony," he breathed, bucking his hips, trying to keep up with the frantic pace the other man set, trying to cover Remus' body with his own. His mate, his partner -- Remus was hurting over something he couldn't articulate. It was making him silent, even in sex, his head thrown back, brown hair shot with grey but almost black in the dim room. Fingers tugging at his shoulders, raking down his back, Remus made no sound louder than a gasp, no movement that wasn't intended to bring their bodies as close as possible. Sirius couldn't remember the last time it had been so intense, the last time there had been so much need. They were comfortable with each other and yet --

Oh --

Moony --

Remus was still silent when he came, eyes closed, holding Sirius' head against his shoulder. Sirius inhaled against his skin and kissed it gently. He'd just been thinking about something, but the warmth spreading through his body and the slowing beat of Moony's heart under his ear was
drowning out thought.

He felt a hand stroke through his hair, then drift down to his shoulder, brushing lightly over scratched skin. He slid to the side and murmured a cleaning charm, wondering if he shouldn't throw in a sedative hex for good measure. Still, now that he'd had whatever release he needed, Remus' muscles were relaxed, head tipped to one side. Sirius watched.

He lay so still for so long that Sirius thought perhaps he'd fallen asleep, which might be best, but when he moved to fling at least one edge of the bed's big blanket over them both, Remus drew a shallow breath to speak. He let it out again, drew another.

"Harry hears James and Lily dying when the Dementors come," he said.

Sirius closed his eyes. Ah yes. That was what he'd been thinking about; what Harry could have done which would upset Remus this much.

"He hears their last words," Remus continued. "He hears them begging Voldemort to spare his life. And I can see that he's not going to try hard enough to make a real Patronus, because he wants to hear their voices again."

"Why would he want to hear them dying?" Sirius asked, horrified.

"He doesn't."

"So why...?"

"If that's all he can have that's all he'll take." Remus opened his eyes, closed them again. "I see it in the way he acts around them. The Dementors."

"Do you think he'd -- "

"Go looking for one? No. Small mercy."

Sirius had no idea what to say; he didn't know if Remus was jealous, or worried...

"You know he loves us," he tried.

"It's not about that. If all we could give him was a home and decent clothes and food, we'd be better than nothing, better than the Dursleys. And we give him more than that. It's just..."

Remus was silent. Sirius touched his chest, making circles with his fingers over his heart.

"I want to hear them too," he said miserably. "I miss James, Sirius. I still miss him. Both of them."

"Course you do. We do."

"I hate seeing Harry in pain, and it's like there's this wall -- because I'm his teacher, because I'm a grown-up, I don't know, but I can see him missing a man he didn't even ever get to know and there's nothing I can do."

"You're teaching him to be safe. That's what he needs," Sirius said. It was awkward to find himself in the position of the soother, the peacemaker -- this was usually Remus' job.

"I can't even do that right."

"You're tired and upset. Just close your eyes a bit. I'll be here. If it's really so bad in the morning,
we'll fix it together, like we always do."

Remus nodded, his body relaxing again slowly.

"Thank you, Sirius," he said. "If I didn't have you I think the world would fall apart."

"Well, I'm fantastic, it's true," Sirius replied, and Remus laughed a little. "Go to sleep. I'll stay."

***

Harry, exhausted, sleeps soundly even though he dreams. They are wonderful dreams, his dreams, and one is best of all.

If only he could remember it awake.

"Want to see some magic, Harry?"

The little boy nods eagerly. He does want to see magic; he's been sure all his life that if he believes hard enough in magic, it will be real.

"Scourgify," says the brown-haired man, and the dull green of the toy he is holding brightens to almost neon as soap bubbles appear from nowhere, scrubbing it clean.

"Reparo," the man continues, and the little boy watches in amazement as the ripped-up webfoot of the toy frog seems to close in on itself, stuffing snaking back between layers of fabric before it stitches itself shut. New patches of plush grow over the worn bits and the part where Dudley once gave Frog a haircut.

The brown-haired man shakes it a little, to make sure it's all fixed, and then gives it back to the little boy.

"Are you from Narnia?" the little boy asks, half-hoping he'll say no, because then the brown-haired magician and the big black dog and the nice other man can stay with him forever and never go away.

"No, Harry," he says, smiling. "I'm from Yorkshire."

Harry knows in that moment he will never see the Dursleys again and never have to sleep in a closet again and the world will be full of magic. It's almost more joy than one small body can contain.

It is his happiest memory, completely untinged by sorrow or apprehension or fear, a moment of pure awe and pleasure.

If only he could remember it awake.

***

"By the way," Sirius said, two days later, "I'm a bit miffed at you."

Remus was not surprised. He'd been waiting for this, in fact; waiting for two days for Sirius to pick a quiet moment and have a talk with him about how it was Not Okay to call him away from his comfortable back garden at the Hogsmeade house and use him sexually because Remus was upset. He hadn't brought it up because he thought there might be a row and Lupins Did Not Like Rows, but he knew Sirius would.
"Hey," Sirius said, elbowing him to get his attention. "Stop staring at the Quidditch pitch all maudlin. You're supposed to ask why I'm miffed at you."

"Why are you miffed at me?" Remus asked, not looking away from the pitch. Down below, the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff teams were assembling, Draco looking tiny and afraid.

"Well, I was going to say because you've had the audacity to keep testing Draco's new Firebolt when he has a game to play, but I think the joke's falling a little flat," Sirius said, and Remus did look up at him then.

"That's why you're annoyed?"

"I'm not actually annoyed, thickhead," Sirius said, smacking the back of his head and disordering his hair. Remus, heart rising, shoved him with an elbow. Sirius responded by tackling him backwards into the next row of bleachers, and things might have got really out of hand if McGonagall hadn't coughed politely.

"Boys," she said, lifting the hem of her robes to pass by them. "Don't make me sit between you."

"Yes, Professor." "Sorry, Professor."

"You might set a better example for your students," she added, giving Remus a dark look.

"Inexcusable. My fault," Sirius replied. "Won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't."

Sirius turned away from McGonagall, sitting next to the announcer's box, and raised his eyebrows questioningly at Remus, who shrugged.

"And the game is on!" Lee Jordan's voice announced, which whipped Sirius' attention back to the game with amusing speed.

Remus had to admit that he lost interest in live Quidditch fairly quickly. He wanted to be fascinated by the game and to be there for Harry and Draco when they played, but Quidditch as an objective event didn't interest him much. It had been particularly nice to listen to the game over the wizarding wireless at the toy shop in London, because he could do other things while keeping alert for Harry's name or any mention of Slytherin Seeker. Actually attending the games was of course a pleasure in the sense that he got to see the boys play, but it was all a little much sometimes.

He scanned the crowds instead, finding Neville in Gryffindor, cheering enthusiastically with Hermione Granger and Ron and Ginny Weasley. Padma and Harry had apparently defected to Hufflepuff and were sitting comfortably next to a knot of sixth-years with their faces charm-painted yellow and black. Severus was two rows down, in neutral black like himself, but Dora's head of wild flyaway hair was striped yellow-and-red next to him. The sun was out and there was a nice breeze, uncharacteristically good weather for February in Scotland.

And there, sitting in Slytherin in a glittering green blouse, was a woman that pinged Remus' radar faintly. At first he didn't recognise her, and he spent a good five minutes wracking his brain before touching Sirius' wrist to get his attention.

"Do we know that woman?" he asked, pointing at her. She'd moved from the back row down to the third, where Harry was, and was sitting about ten feet away, her head turned to study their son.

"She's not a woman," Sirius said, sneering. "She's a leech."
"Who is she? I can't place her."

"That's Rita Skeeter, from the Prophet. What the hell's she doing sitting in the Slytherin stands? I wouldn't think they'd let her come."

"She's covering the game, maybe?" Remus asked.

"She's a gossip columnist. I doubt she knows how the game's name is pronounced," Sirius replied.

"Oh Merlin! She's the one who does those horrible bits on you. Handsome Bachelor Sirius Black Entertains In Style At Diagon Alley, et cetera?" Remus asked, faintly amused now.

"If she goes near Harry, you didn't see me throw the hex," Sirius growled.

"Harry's a smart kid. He outfoxed Dolores Umbridge; a catty journalist isn't likely to give him pause."

"He doesn't need pestering. Oi! Headmaster!" Sirius called, as Dumbledore descended the stairs, carrying a sack of sugared almonds.

"Mr. Black, always a pleasure," the Headmaster answered, seating himself next to them and offering the nuts. Remus took one and crunched it up, eyes drifting back to the glittering woman in the Slytherin stands. "Gryffindor seems to be playing well. I can't help but feel nostalgic for teams of bygone eras, but memories of glory always increase with time, much like one's waistline."

"Who let Skeeter on the grounds?" Sirius asked bluntly, jerking his thumb at her.

"I understood the Prophet was sending a sports writer to report on the Quidditch game," Dumbledore said.

"See? Told you," Remus added.

"Rita Skeeter doesn't know a bludger from her own arse," Sirius retorted.

"Then her report should be particularly interesting," Dumbledore said serenely.

"She's after Harry."

"Quite possibly. He will have to come to grips with his fame sooner or later, however, and I have no qualms about his comporting himself with, if not dignity, then the very least resourcefulness," Dumbledore said. "Though of course it is rather strange that she chose to sit with the students. Professor Lupin is welcome to invite her into the faculty stands as his guest, if he pleases."

"She'd come after you, then," Remus said to Sirius.

"Better me than Harry. Want me to come along?"

"No thanks -- it'll be nice to stretch my legs."

Remus stood and shook out his robes, edging past Sirius and Dumbledore to the stairs; he was halfway up when something in Lee Jordan's voice made him turn, and the crowd fell suddenly hushed.

Two players were falling through the air, one of them entangled somehow in the others' broom. Yellow and red robes fluttered together as the Gryffindor -- Alicia? -- reached down to try and hook the other player's arm. They were still plummeting madly when Remus realised that the
Hufflepuff boy, head lolling unpleasantly, was Draco.

He started forward, down the stairs again, as most of the faculty in the stands leapt to their feet and a handful of figures appeared at the edge of the field -- Aurors, set on guard to ensure Peter Pettigrew and Lucius Malfoy didn't return. Remus saw Sirius reach for his wand to stop the deadly fall, but Alicia's broomstick jerked and Draco's head snapped around as she pulled him up by one arm. His broomstick fell to the grass with a thud Remus was sure everyone in the stands heard.

"Call a foul!" Severus yelled. "Stop the play, godsdamn you!"

"Is he hurt?" Sirius asked.

"No, he's moving -- oh, THREE CHEERS FOR DRACO MALFOY!" Nymphadora shouted, as Draco seemed to come to life again, hooking a leg around Alicia's broomstick. They saw him lean up and say a few words; with a laugh she dumped him off, close enough to the ground that he hardly stumbled, and took off again, rejoining play. Draco staggered to his broomstick, jumpstarted it, and lifted off again. Remus sighed with relief and rubbed his forehead. These children were going to kill him.

"Young Draco's a daredevil. How unexpected," said a voice at his ear, and he started. He looked up over his shoulder to see Rita Skeeter standing on the step behind him, smiling the kind of smile a mouse sees before he becomes a cat's supper.

"The children are very resilient," he said. "They bounce back from things that would lay me up for a week."

"Is that so?" she asked, as a QuickQuotes Quill scribbled on a sheet of parchment floating in the air nearby. "It's such an interesting game. I was thrilled to be allowed to cover it, and I'm certain Draco's fall will lose nothing in the telling."

"Excuse me," Remus said, skin crawling. "I should get back to my seat."

"With Mr. Black?" she asked, hooking a handful of sharp-nailed fingers into his robe.

"He's up from Hogsmeade to see the game."

"But Harry Potter isn't playing."

"Sirius likes Quidditch. Would you come sit with us? The view's grand," he managed, belatedly recalling his reasons for coming down in the first place.

"No, I think not," she said.

"Really, I insist -- "

"Thank you, Professor, but I'm quite satisfied where I am," she said firmly. Remus saw the look in her eye and retreated, trying not to turn his back too much.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Lucius Malfoy's age as relative to the Marauders in this chapter is often questioned. In this case I have consulted the HP Lexicon, which states that his first year was c. 1965, making him a fifth or possibly sixth year when the Marauders were firsties, depending on the dates of their attendance.

At one point in this chapter I have used dialogue or description taken from Prisoner of Azkaban. In this instance, text from Hermione's confrontation with Trelawney and Harry's discussion of Dementors with Remus have been lifted directly or slightly altered from canon.

Hufflepuffs, often faced with the fact that life was not entirely fair, were experts at taking the good and leaving the rest. They may have lost to Gryffindor in Quidditch but it had been an interesting game and Draco was much feted for his fast recovery on the field. It was moments like that, Cedric Diggory said, which made Quidditch really worthwhile, more than winning.

Draco did his best to believe this.

He went to bed that night feeling very proud of himself, if a little disappointed that he couldn't be proud of himself and a winner, too. Still, that disappointment was not enough to cause the fitful sleep he had, his dreams full of rushing wind and elusive, impossible-to-reach broomsticks. In the dreams, someone's hand was always just out of reach, and he always fell instead.

He started awake to the feeling of his hair still ruffled by the wind as he fell. Or -- no, perhaps not the wind...

Someone's hand was stroking his hair, smoothing the short bed-head spikes down against his scalp. He opened his eyes, thinking it might be his mother somehow, and maybe he really had fallen all the way and was in the hospital wing.

Instead he looked into darkness and saw a pale face, deep grey eyes burning in sunken cheeks, a sharp nose, a twisted smile, a bare scalp furrowed with scars.

"Hello, Draco," his father said. "What a brave young man we are."

Draco swore that he meant to scream but when he opened his mouth he only stuttered instead.

"F-f-father?" he asked. Lucius' eyes lit up.

"That's right! You recognise me," he murmured. "I knew you would." He continued stroking Draco's hair. "You are a good and dutiful son, like Astyanax."

On the inside of his arm Draco saw the faint shadow of a birthmark or a tattoo -- a skull, eating a snake, or possibly a snake emerging from a skull. He'd seen it somewhere before, but his terror-filled mind refused to co-operate. Lucius saw his gaze and smiled.
"I promise one day," he said, "you will have one of your own. Won't that be nice? You will sit at my side, like a favourite prince, and learn to rule."

"Rule who?" Draco asked, caught in his father's grey eyes.

"Everyone," Lucius said.

"W -- why are you here?"

"To see you, my heir, of course."

Draco licked his lips. "How'd you get in?"

"I'll teach you," his father whispered, leaning close. "My beautiful son..."

Draco did scream then. He saw his father's mouth open over rotting teeth and screamed and screamed as Lucius kissed his forehead.

There was a bang -- a door slammed -- and then a hiss and crash, confused voices shouting at each other as his father seemed to disappear. A hex, clearly aimed at Lucius, hit Draco's headboard instead and showered him in splinters. The other boys were sitting up and shouting and the Fat Friar was roaring for silence even as a familiar face appeared above the bed. It was not necessarily an improvement on his father's.

"Where did he go?" Severus Snape demanded. "He was here. Where did he go?"

"Shut up, Severus, you'll terrorise him," said another voice, and Remus was visible on the other side of his bed. "It must be a portkey. He's gone now, anyhow."

"Godsdammit, I will not see Malfoy with my own eyes and let him escape!"

"Draco, are you all right?" Remus asked, and Draco pushed himself up on his elbows, uncertain he could answer. "Are you hexed or cursed at all?"

Draco shook his head.

"Say something aloud so I'm sure."

"I'm fine," Draco said.

"What's going on?" one of the other boys asked, sitting up in bed and looking around.

"Everyone on your feet. Dress quietly and decently and form up. Two of you go together and fetch Diggory. Friar, fetch Pomona," Snape said. Unlike the other houses, Hufflepuffs didn't question authority when it came in the form of Professors, and before Draco could even get out of bed half the boys in the room were throwing on trousers and pulling their school robes over their pyjama shirts.

"It wasn't a dream, was it?" he asked Remus, who put a hand on his back and pushed him gently, guiding him out of the bed.

"No," Remus said. "I'm sorry, Draco."

***

In the Faculty Common Room later that morning there was ire and strife.
"I don't see how he could have got in," Pomona said, looking worried. "But if he hasn't been found then he must have got out again. You say he simply disappeared?"

"It didn't look like a portkey," Snape growled.

"No, it didn't, but I can't think what else it might have been. Even Lucius Malfoy can't Apparate within the bounds of the school," Remus added.

"Lucius Malfoy was not supposed to be able to get past the wards erected around the building, either," McGonagall put in tartly. "Have we explored the possibility that he is a ghost?"

"Ghosts don't leave bloody fingernails behind."

"Too right," Completely Headless Nick said firmly. Behind him, the Bloody Baron glowered.

"Pettigrew is powerful," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "He may be circumventing our wards, though I cannot imagine why he would do so for something so harmless."

"Harmless?" Snape asked. Dumbledore smiled tolerantly at his rage.

"Severus, a mass murderer and a Death Eater, both of whom have every reason to wish at least one of our students and two of our Professors dead, do not break the wards on Hogwarts School so that Lucius Malfoy may kiss his son goodnight. Malfoy is mad; this was a whim of his, nothing more. It worries me far more that he is able to enter on a whim."

"And he got into Hufflepuff," the Fat Friar reminded them.

"Indeed. That opens the possibility that a student is collaborating, voluntary or otherwise, with these men."

"If you mean Draco himself -- " Remus began, but Dumbledore held up a hand for silence.

"Draco Malfoy's life is difficult enough without playing double-agent for his psychotic father," he said. From inside his robes he took a red envelope, handling it carefully, and set it on the table. "Student post is monitored quite closely these days; Mr. Shacklebolt brought this to my attention."


"To Draco, from his mother."

"Oh, Narcissa." Remus sighed. "I am going to have to send Sirius after her, aren't I?"

"For the good it would do, I shouldn't bother," Dumbledore replied. "Friar, if you would?"

The Fat Friar put his head into the corridor and spoke a few words; after a second the door to the Common Room clicked and Draco entered, looking tired and drawn.

"Yes, sir?" he said to the Headmaster. His eyes fell on the Howler, and he sighed. "It's my mum sir, isn't it?"

"Your parents do seem to work in tandem, without intention I am sure," Dumbledore said kindly. "Can you think why she would send you this?"

"Who knows why she sends me anything."

The professors exchanged the uncomfortable looks of adults in the presence of a too-old child.
"I have called you here to prevent a certain amount of humiliation in the Great Hall this morning," Dumbledore continued. "Open it, if you please."

Draco put out a trembling hand and picked up the letter, slitting the seal. The envelope unfolded itself and immediately a loud screeching was heard. Snape tilted his head as if he were listening to a composition he was trying to catch the melody of; Remus frowned, and McGonagall put a hand to her ear, wincing.

It took everyone perhaps ten seconds to realise what it was, by which time Draco's hands had formed fists and his face had hardened into ruthlessness.

Then there was a short, sobbing break in the screeching and a high-pitched voice said two words.

"Mistress, no --"

The squealing began again, and this time it was suddenly, horrifically evident what the noise was. It lasted another ten or fifteen seconds and then died away into sobs.

"That was Mendy," Draco said, into the silence. "She's one of our family house-elves."

Snape sucked in a breath, sharply.

"Mum was torturing her," Draco added.

"Can you think why your mother would send you a Howler consisting entirely of a house-elf being tortured?" the Headmaster asked.

"Well, sir..."

Dumbledore laid a copy of the Daily Prophet on the table. The bottom of the front page had a large photograph of Draco and Alicia in free-fall together. The headline read "Daredevil Draco at Hogwarts" and the name underneath it was Rita Skeeter.

"Guess she saw the paper," Draco said, not without a trace of dry humour. "She's punishing me for lying to her."

"But your house-elf..." Pomona began.

"Mum knows how to put the knife in," Draco said sharply.

"I think I see," Snape said. "Yes...that is Narcissa to the letter."

"I'm afraid I've been left behind," Flitwick said from a corner.

"Draco has an...affinity for house-elves. I believe he's befriended several of ours," Dumbledore said slowly. "As punishments go, it is obscure but effective."

"I'd better quit the team," Draco said.

"I suggest, Draco, that you consult the house-elves first," Dumbledore said. "Denbigh will be able to send a message to your family's elves. In these things it is always best to be well-informed."

Most of the professors saw the perplexed expression on Draco's face but, like most of the students, he loved and trusted the Headmaster.

"Yes, sir," he said.
"Very good. You may go; I hear breakfast is about to begin," Dumbledore said, as student voices in the hallway became evident through the door. "You will be contacted when they are assembled."

When he was gone, there was silence in the room. Snape cleared his throat.

"We have not yet resolved the issue of Malfoy's presence in the school," he said.

"Hogwarts is not a democracy," Dumbledore replied. "And while I very rarely exercise the privilege of rank, I intend to do so in this case. You will not discuss the incident with your students or their parents. No -- " he said, as the professors began to protest. "I understand Lucius is a danger, but I suspect he is wiser in his madness than we comprehend. He is a danger only to us, and I think as grown women and men we may protect ourselves. The alternative is that word will get out, the Aurors will be summoned, and the Dementors will be released into the school."

Remus made a soft noise, half-fear, half-understanding. The others looked at him.

"Dementors in the school mean there will be deaths," he said quietly. "They're not rational. In a place like this, with all these children and their overwhelming emotions..."

"Quite so, Professor Lupin."

"...sooner or later they'll kill someone. They won't be able to help it; it's what they exist for. They'll turn Hogwarts into a second Azkaban."

"But the children know," McGonagall said.

"The children know that something occurred. I doubt that Draco has spoken to anyone; when he does it will likely be to children who know how to keep secrets. As for the rest, a night terror or a Lethifold, perhaps; something easily vanquished. Yes, I think a Lethifold is the thing," Dumbledore said.

"If it gets out -- this cover-up we're engaging in -- it'll be the end of Hogwarts," said McGonagall.

"Oh, I very much doubt that. The end of me, perhaps, but Hogwarts has been known to survive without my presence," Dumbledore said. "As has previously been stated, we are not a democracy. Any Professor who would prefer not to be a part of this is, of course, welcome to tender their resignation now."

Nobody moved.

"Settled, then. Thank you all; let us depart. I could just do with a nice fried egg," he said, and left for breakfast.

***

That evening, trailed by Harry, Padma, and Neville, Draco opened the door to the kitchens and walked inside.

Arranged on the hearth were more House-Elves than any of them had seen in one place; first a ring of the Malfoy elves, then beyond that the Hogwarts kitchen-elves. The kitchen was gleaming and clean, all evidence of the mad dinner preparations already put away, all the dishes washed. They were all silent, eerily so, and every head turned when the four children walked into the room.

"Elly is wishing good evening, Master Draco," one of them said.
"Good evening, Elly," Draco replied, leaving his friends and going to sit on the hearth in the center of the semicircle. The others hung back, watching. "I reckon you know why you're here. Mendy," he added, noticing the small, shivering elf with two bandaged hands and a wide towel wrapped around her head, "I hope Mum wasn't too hard on you."

"Mendy is playing worse for Mistress Malfoy," she answered. "Mendy is not so bad, Master Malfoy."

"Not so bad is still too bad," Draco said. "And I guess she did that 'cause she found out I'm playing Quidditch."

"It is being a very good picture in The Prophet," another said, and all of them nodded their heads in agreement. "Rita Skeeter is saying Master Draco is a daredevil. House-elves is very approving."

"Well, it's got to end, that's all," Draco replied. "I won't have Mum torturing you all on account of a game. I'm going to quit; it's only a game anyway."

At this, a torrent of shrieks and denials filled the air; Harry put his hands over his ears, and Padma and Neville gritted their teeth. Draco bore it calmly.

"No, you just don't understand," he said loudly, over the protests of the elves. "I've got to, 'cause I have to look after -- look after you -- quiet!"

Again the eerie silence. Draco looked annoyed. One of the Malfoy elves raised his hand. Padma giggled a little.

"Yes, Niffy."

"House-elves is agreed," the elf said. "House-elves is not wanting Master Draco to stop."

"But you're going to be tortured!"

"Mendy is not so bad," Mendy repeated. "House-elves has ways."

"Ways?" Draco asked.

"Mistress Malfoy cannot have pastries because Mendy is not well," Denbigh said, and the kitchen-elves nodded in agreement.

"I think I get it," Harry put in. Draco glanced at him. "They're her servants, and she can't get what she wants without them. She can't torture them forever."

"She can torture them for long enough!"

"But she'll give up eventually," Neville said. "That's their point."

"It's only a game!"

"Games is important," Mendy muttered.

"You're talking about...about martyrdom!" Draco burst out. "Quidditch isn't worth it."

"I think they're talking about standing up to your mum, actually," Neville said. "I think they think that's worth it. She can't stop you legally, the school doesn't allow it, and anyway Dumbledore wouldn't let her. And eventually she'll have to give up on the elves. So it won't be too long, will it? Especially if you pretend you're worse than you are," he added, addressing the elves. Several of
them smiled hesitantly at him. "So...it'll be bad for a bit and you'll get more Howlers, but in the end she's got to back down, is the important thing."

Draco looked at the elves. "That's what you think?"

They nodded.

"It'd make you happy if I kept going, even if it means she's going to hurt you?"

"House-elves is durable," Mendy said.

"House-elves remember," Elly added, and the tone of her voice combined with the silence of the other elves sent a chill down the spine of every human in the room. It was something older than the children and older than the Malfoy elves, and it had no good meaning for anyone who had ever raised a hand to one.

_House-elves remember._

Draco studied the assembly of elves before him, his mouth set in a tight line.

"Very well," he said, and they all began to cheer. He shook his head and they stopped; the others blinked. Nobody ever commanded that kind of instant obedience from a house-elf.

"I want to say something," he continued. "I want you to listen. So if you do remember all that well, keep this in mind."

Mendy squeaked. Elly put a thin green hand over the other elf's mouth.

"In four years I'll be a man and you'll all be my elves just as much as mum's. She can't do anything about that," he said. "When you're mine, things'll be different. Nobody's going to get beaten or have to punish themselves ever again. If you want to be freed I'll set you free and pay your wages or find someone else who wants a free elf."

Two or three glanced at Padma; they'd heard about Dobby's blissful summer with the Patils.

"I don't forget either," Draco said.

"Mistress Malfoy will be so angry," Niffy whispered.

"Well, when she is, I'll tell her who taught me about standing up to her," he replied. "Go on now, she'll miss you if you don't go soon."

One by one they vanished, leaving gaps here and there in the group of elves until only the Hogwarts kitchen-elves remained. Denbigh stood up and approached Draco quietly.

"Is Draco Malfoy wanting a marzipan frog?" he asked. Draco, looking pale and tired, burst out laughing.

"Very much, Denbigh," he said. "Thank you."

---

Around the same time that the children were attending a summit of House-elves, Severus Snape was paying a visit.

He walked into Remus' office, where the other man was marking fourth-year papers. He didn't
knock (the door was open) or say anything, simply sat in the armchair across from the desk and set a plate down. It had shortbread biscuits on it. As a concession to Remus, a few were dipped in chocolate.

Remus finished the paragraph he was on, made a notation in the margin, and looked up.

"Bringing me a snack?" he asked, amused. "One might almost think we were friends, Severus."

"I need to speak with you," Severus replied.

"I rather thought. Tea?"

"Yes."

Remus rose and poured a few spoonfuls of loose-leaf into a strainer basket, setting it on the opening of the teapot and heating the nearby kettle with a tap of his wand. As he poured, he nodded at the jars nearby. "Honey or sugar?"

"Sugar."

"You know, life might go a bit easier for you if you said 'hello' or 'please' occasionally," Remus added mildly, pouring the tea and adding sugar to one, lemon to the other. He passed a mug bearing the legend "Welshmen Do It In The Rain" to Snape, reserving "I Survived Hogsmeade Hogsfest '76" for himself.

"I'm interested to know," Snape said, "how you were aware that Lucius Malfoy was in the castle before I was. It was my night for corridor-watch, and I'll thank you to let me do my job."

"Ah," Remus said. "Well, I hadn't expected that question, but I suppose you deserve an answer."

"I rather think I do."

"If it's any consolation, I wasn't following you; I was fast asleep by the time you started patrolling. Believe it or not," Remus paused to sip his tea and take a piece of shortbread, "I trust you. Incidentally, which of these has the veritaserum on it?"

Snape sighed. "That one," he said, indicating the biscuit next to the one Remus had taken.

"Much obliged. It isn't necessary; I keep a lot of secrets, but you happen to know them all, so there's no point in lying, is there?"

"Do I?" Snape asked, sidetracked.

"Well, you know I'm a werewolf and a homosexual and you know where I live in the summers, which are the important three."

"Not to me."

"Not tonight, anyway, I suppose. So, How did I know about Lucius..." Remus leaned back, considering the biscuit as if it held the answers. "I'm going to sound a little bit mad. There's this...world. Like ours, but different. We all live in it -- well, some of us do. It's like there are two chessboards, sitting next to each other."

"Yes, that sounds mad."

"I did say. We're on one chessboard, moving about, having our little wars and triumphs, and at the
same time we're also on the other chessboard, but we're moving differently. Some things stay the
same, but somewhere, at some point, something went off."

"Very precise of you."

"I'm not an expert. On this other chessboard, things are different, that's the crux of it. For some
reason, when I dream I can see both. Not all the time, just once in a while. I see things that didn't
happen to me or Harry or -- anyone, but in that other place they're real. Sometimes I see you," he
added. Snape tilted his head.

"Me?"

"Yes. It's reassuring; you're such a constant, Severus. But in that other place there's no
Nymphadora, or rather she's not with you, as far as I can tell. I'm pretty sure you hate Harry, which
is sort of funny, and you still have that horrible long hair you used to have. And no scars."

Snape touched the three parallel scars on his face, following the lines with his fingers.

"But you're a lot less changed than some of us."

"How does this -- "

"I'm getting there, Severus." Remus leaned forward again. "Last night, I had a dream that a child
was being attacked. Ron Weasley, actually, by a man with a knife, an intruder in the castle. In the
other world Harry's in Gryffindor, I think, and he's friends with the Weasley boy."

"Poor taste."

"Yes, well. All it said to me was that a friend of Harry's was in danger, and so I got up. I thought I
might check on Neville, he's in Gryffindor, but the logical choice was -- "

"Draco. I see."

"Yes. Nothing more than that, and as you can see you were already there so I needn't have worried
so much. It's a relief to explain this to you, actually; I've been wondering how to tell you about the
other dream."

"And what's that?"

"These dreams don't always come in sequence. Sometimes they're about things that can't have
happened yet -- I know because Harry's much taller, or I've got more grey in my hair, clues like
that."

Snape's fingers twitched against the arm of the chair.

"There's a cataclysm coming. I don't know what it is. I know it happens here, at the school, and I
have a part to play in it. There's some...trust, some faith in me that I betray. I don't know why I
would do that, but I know it's coming. When it does I've got to leave the school, and a lot of
innocent people are going to get hurt. Sirius and Harry among them."

"Because of you?"

"Because of me. So I want you to...keep watch. Sirius won't stop me even if he sees it; he can't."

Snape sneered. "Black's been a fool about you since we were children."
"It's flattering, isn't it? But you can stop me, if you see it. So keep watch, Severus. And if you see what has to be done, I think I can trust you to do it."

Snape's sneer turned to a thoughtful frown, and then he nodded.

"So done," he said, offering his hand.

Remus, surprised, shook it.

***

It went without saying, of course, that the professors kept a close watch on Draco; rarely did he go anywhere without one of them watching, which did somewhat put a cramp in his ramblings around the castle with the others. On the other hand, all four of them were secretly glad of a break; Harry was exhausted from his continuing Patronus lessons with Remus, Padma was tired from all her extra classes, and Neville had always been one of those lucky children who can entertain themselves anywhere, at any time, with anything.

As the week passed the professors began to be less watchful, though Snape was still sharp-eyed whenever the young Hufflepuff was anywhere near. That weekend was a Hogsmeade weekend, which could not have been more ill-timed but could also not be cancelled without anyone being alerted that something was wrong. Draco, excusing himself from meeting his friends in Hogsmeade with the complaint that he was tired, spent the day in the library.

He hadn't spoken any further about his pact with the house-elves or the visit from his father, but the former was a weight on his soul and the latter a weight on his mind. Narcissa had sent a second Howler, which Dumbledore mercifully intercepted and allowed Draco to open in his own office. This time it was Niffy.

Worse than that (though he hated himself for thinking it) was the memory of his father, tall and arrogant even in his insanity, standing over his bed. He had been afraid, and he could manage that; it wouldn't be the first time Draco was afraid. What made it difficult was that he had been happy, too, in some small way. Happy to see his father's face, to see that they had the same eyes.

Happy because as a small child he had dreamed that his father would come and rescue him from his mother, and less than a week ago his father had called him my heir and promised to show him things, things Draco knew part of him wanted to learn. To be strong and brave like his father.

He sat in the alcove that Pince couldn't see from her desk, the one that belonged to him and Harry and Padma and Neville. Feet propped on the edge of the table, book spread on his knees, he might be studying or reading a novel, but he wasn't.

He was paging through an old year-book, from a year long before he was born. It was the usual wizarding jumble of text and image, filled with prize-winning essays (here was a composition of James Potter's, which had won some first-year paper competition), photographs, Quidditch scorecards, reprints of the school anthem, and other nostalgia. There was a photograph of Hufflepuff House, smiling and waving, with one sly-looking Ravenclaw girl in the back setting a hot-foot on a seventh-year. Draco didn't recognise Sirius in some of the photos until he found one that was captioned. Harry's father was easier to recognise, because he looked like Harry. Padma's father was in a few, too, a beaming, awkward third-year when Sirius and Remus and Harry's dad were all first years. Both of Neville's parents too -- Neville looked like his mum.

There was one photograph of Sirius and Remus, James Potter and the man Draco knew better as Wormtail: Peter Pettigrew. In the photo he looked small and tidy, no different from the other three.
Remus had his arm around Peter's neck and was resting his chin on Sirius' shoulder, while James had both arms on Remus and Peter's heads so that they supported him. They looked like boys. They looked, in fact, like Draco and his friends.

He turned the page, and there was what he had been looking for. His father, aristocratic even at fifteen, looked out at him from the year-book page. It was a casual portrait but Lucius Malfoy hardly moved; he was standing in a hallway of Hogwarts, Prefect badge on his collar, speaking to a pair of much younger students whose backs were turned to Draco.

His father, as he had been. And in his own mind, his father as he was now.

Draco sighed. If the professors had their way he'd never see his father again, and that was just as well. His father was evil, crazy, and dangerous, and Draco had other things he should be worrying about.

But before putting the book on the cart to be shelved again, he did tuck a bookmark into the page where his father's photograph was.

No point in having to look through the whole book for it again if he did want to find it.

***

January passed into February and then into March, snow turning to an unpleasant drizzle and the sun slowly beginning to peep through the clouds once more. There were no new attacks by Lucius Malfoy, but the professors did not relax their guard. Now they had more than just Lucius to worry about; they had to worry about the rest of Great Britain finding out as well.

The last weekend in February was a Hogsmeade weekend, miserable and chilly but brightened considerably by the warm fires and hot drinks to be had in the shops and pubs. Better still, from the students' perspective, they were chaperoned by Professor Sinistra, who primarily wanted to have a butterbeer and not be pestered, and Professor Lupin, who turned a kindly eye towards youthful high-spirits. Neville and Padma had run off with a handful of Gryffindors to go scare themselves at the Shrieking Shack, and Harry found himself walking with Remus down the muddy main street towards the Three Broomsticks. Harry had a small paper sack of humbugs, and Remus carried a rather larger bag of various sweets, including several bars of Honeyduke's finest chocolate.

"I think we'll put your Patronus lessons to rest for a week or two," he said, bag banging against his leg as they walked. "I don't like dealing with dangerous creatures so near after the full moon. How was Professor Snape, by the way?"

"Pretty good," Harry said. "Like he always is in Potions, just with Defence instead. Not as interesting as Ms. Umbridge," he added with a grin.

"Thank goodness."

"He talked a little about Dementors. Does he know you're tutoring me?"

"I haven't mentioned it, but Severus is sharp; he catches on. I'm sure he's proud of you, in his own way."

"Proud of a cloudy Patronus that doesn't do any good?" Harry asked.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. The Patronus charm is quite difficult. You're not passing out anymore, which is a relief to my nerves as well." A muscle in his jaw clenched. "Have you seen the papers today?"
"No, not yet, why?"

"There's been a decree by the Ministry. The Wizengamot convened last week to examine the sentences and paroles of several Azkaban prisoners. Some people will be going free soon."

"Now? With Malfoy on the loose?"

"Well, that's what most of Great Britain is saying, but there's more to the story. At the same time, they issued death warrants on Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew." He sighed. "The Dementors at Hogwarts have been given permission to execute them on sight. It bodes pretty ill for anyone caught out on the grounds. Dementors are not known for their powers of discernment. It's a pretty terrible death."

"What happens?"

"It's called the Dementor's Kiss."

"Great band name."

"Don't treat this lightly, Harry."

Harry looked up at Remus, who was staring straight ahead, eyes on the line of the Forbidden Forest in the distance.

"Nobody knows what's under a Dementor's hood, except that they have some kind of mouth, I suppose. They clamp their jaws on the mouth of the victim and -- well, as far as can be understood, they suck out their soul."

"Can you do that?"

"They can. The body goes on, because the brain and heart still work, but there's no memory, no sense of personality. And no chance of recovery. You just exist. As an empty shell. The soul is gone forever."

"Good," Harry said suddenly. Remus stopped and looked down at him. "I think they deserve it."

"Really? Do you think anyone deserves that?" Remus asked, but his tone was intentionally light -- as if he were making innocent conversation. Harry glanced past him and saw a familiar figure in the distance.

"For some things," he said, distracted. "Is that the woman who wrote about Draco in the Prophet?"

"Rita Skeeter? She's behind us?"

"Not for long," Harry said, as a claw-nailed hand clamped on Remus’ arm.

"Professor Lupin," Skeeter cooed, joining them in the street. "And Mr. Potter. It must be a Hogsmeade weekend."

"Ms. Skeeter," Harry said, scowling.

"Not a very nice day for a walk, is it?" she asked, smiling at Remus. "I hope you're going somewhere warm and dry."

"Yes," Remus said shortly.
"Good! I'll join you. Perhaps Harry can run along to his friends? I can't imagine he wants to spend the whole day with his Professor, as popular as you are," she said.

"No thanks," Harry said. "We're just going to meet my godfather."

"Mr. Black! How delightful. And I suppose it's good when students and teachers are such particular friends, isn't it?"

"One tries to form bonds with one's students," Remus replied, walking on. Skeeter, one hand still on his arm, followed along. Harry glanced at her sidelong, mistrustfully. "One tries to protect them from bad influences."

"Admirable traits."

"Unlike some people," Harry said pointedly.

"Oh? Like who?"

"People who get my friends in trouble. People who write things about them in the -- "

"-- bathrooms, for example," Remus interrupted, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder in warning. "Youth, eh? They will have their japes."

Skeeter narrowed her eyes at Harry.

"What brings you to Hogsmeade?" Remus continued. "I can't imagine there's much newsworthy action to be had here. It's usually quite peaceful."

"Well, I can't neglect my favourite sport, can I? There's a match next week at Hogwarts, I understand. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw?"

"That's right," Harry said.

"Who do you root for when your team isn't playing, Harry?"

"We flip a coin."

"We, my dear?"

"Harry has friends in other Houses," Remus said.

"Democratic of him. Especially for Slytherin, don't you think?"

"Why Slytherin in particular? They're all students."

"That's a very professional approach, Mr. Lupin."

Remus glanced at her. "That's Professor Lupin, Ms. Skeeter. So you're still covering school sport, hm? Shame, really."

"Oh?"

"Well, I would think while you're exiled to Hogsmeade, your colleagues are covering all the really interesting stories."

"I find Quidditch very interesting. Hogwarts itself, too. I'm thinking of doing a story -- human
interest, you know. The Secret Lives of Hogwarts Professors."

Remus laughed -- a very sincere laugh, entirely innocent, quite guileless. If Harry hadn't been raised by him, he'd fall for that laugh completely. As it was, he watched with interest. The grownups were playing a game, and it fascinated him.

"The Secret Lives! We're only schoolteachers. I daresay our extracurricular activities would bore you. And your readership."

"That sounds like a challenge."

"Nothing of the sort. I can give you your story in a dozen words. We mark papers, we have a pint down the pub, we drink tremendous amounts of tea, and we have faculty meetings. If you're really fascinated by where Albus Dumbledore gets his hair cut or Severus Snape buys his potions supplies, I suppose it'd be interesting, but on the whole we're a quiet lot."

He pushed open the door to the Three Broomsticks and held it for her, forcing her to let go of his arm and go first into the pub. Harry followed Remus just in time to see Sirius rise from his seat at the bar and unfold like winged fury.

"You," he said to Skeeter, his eyes taking in the reporter, the professor, and the student all at once. "Out."

"Mr. Black, the pleasure is -- "

"Get out," Sirius said.

"Calm down, Black," Remus began. Harry blinked. He'd never heard Remus use Sirius' surname when he was talking to him; he was confused for a second until it dawned that this too was part of the game. A secret-keeping game. "She's only come in for a quick drink..."

"You're a muckraking opportunist," Sirius said. "And I don't like you, Skeeter."

"One can't muckrake unless there's muck, you know," Skeeter replied composedly. "Fear of the free press is common in tyrants and those with something to hide."

"I'm not afraid of you," Sirius retorted.

"Good! Then I shall have a glass of the redcurrant wine," Skeeter said, seating herself boldly. Rosmerta looked from Sirius to the reporter, hesitantly. When Remus gave her a slight nod, she reached for a goblet and poured from a bottle behind the bar.

"I'm afraid we've been chattering too long," Remus said, jerking his head towards the door. "Go on, Black; Harry's been waiting all week to see you, and I have a few late appointments to see to. Enjoy your wine, Ms. Skeeter," he added, while Skeeter stared at him in consternation, neatly checkmated into staying and drinking while the other three left.

"I hate that harpy," Sirius said, when they were standing once more in the damp cold outside the pub. "You should have let me lay into her. I'd show her a thing or two about the free press."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Remus sighed. "She's chasing Harry around, or any Professor she can get her claws into. She'll cause trouble."

"Which is why I very kindly offered to throw her out. Now we're out in the wet."
"More flies with honey, Sirius."

"She's not a fly. She's less than a fly."

Remus grinned and ruffled Harry’s hair, looking for all the world like a professor taking his leave of his student. "Don't underestimate her. I'm going this way; I'll see you tonight for dinner. Harry, run on with Sirius. Enjoy yourselves."

They watched Remus hurry off through the rain, ducking into a bookshop nearby. Sirius crossed his arms.

"He's right, you know," he said to Harry. "That's the worst of it."

"Well, she's stuck in there and we're out here. You want to go to the joke shop? You can buy some pranks to play on her if you see her again."

Sirius grinned at him. "Yes, I rather do."

***

March 7
Clarendon Wizarding Hotel
Boston, Mass.

Dear Professor Lupin,

Please excuse my handwriting; I know the stationery says the Clarendon Hotel but I am enroute to Salem via the train, and finding myself with a few spare minutes I thought to write you before any more time passes.

While I sympathise with Skeeter's curiosity about your young charge, I sympathise more with the natural reticence of a well-reared child towards public attention, and your desire to protect him as well. I believe I understand the mission you have charged me with quite fully, and I am not at all loathe to carry it out. I shall see you for the match and I hope to see Mr. Black and young Harry as well.

I understand that you and Harry spend your summers outside of Great Britain, according to sources which may or may not be accurate. That being the case, I have a favour to ask in return. I am considering giving up my wandering ways for the summer and settling down to the quiet life; do you suppose that excellent house in Hogsmeade would be free to let to a single man of retired habits?

My duties to the faculty and to your family; I'm afraid I must now pay some attention to this lecture I am supposed to be preparing for the Salem Institute. I sense I would have a better audience in your third-years than in the nineteen-year-olds I am about to face. Morituri te salutant.

Regards,

E. S. Graveworthy

***

Spring would not arrive for several more weeks, but the day of the Gryffindor - Ravenclaw match dawned clear, just warm enough to cast off winter cloaks. It was a gala day, with dozens of parents and Hogsmeade locals coming up to Hogwarts for the match.
Even Nymphadora had managed to shake off her diplomatic duties on the continent and come up from London, bringing three of the Werewolf Support Network's people with her -- Anne, Tobias, and a new woman who had replaced Michael and Marie now that they'd returned home. Severus looked askance at the trio of werewolves in school colours, but he said nothing; nobody else thought twice about the brightly-dressed friends of ex-Professor Tonks.

Remus was nearly late getting to the pitch, as he'd been making sure none of the students straggled or wandered; when he arrived it was to find that the faculty stands were packed tightly.

"So this is what comes of inviting friends to Quidditch," he said with a smile, descending to where Sirius was sitting in the front row. "All the seats gone and my friends absconding with coppers and artists."

"Remus!" Dora said, standing up and leaning over a handful of people to give him a hug around the neck. "We were wondering if you'd be late."

"Not quite. Is there room to budge over, or will I have to sit on your lap?"

"That would never do," said the man sitting next to Sirius. He stood up and offered his hand, smiling. "Do take my seat. Good to see you again, Professor Lupin."

"Mr. Graveworthy," Remus said. "The pleasure's mine."

"I imagine it is," Ellis answered, leaning close. "Seen Skeeter about?"

"Lurking in the back."

"That's my call to duty -- ah, Rita," Ellis added, deftly sliding past Remus and elbowing him into the vacant seat. "I'd heard you were covering these matches! Mr. Black, Professor Lupin, Toby, charming girls...I'm afraid I must abandon you. We have so much to catch up on, Rita."

Rita Skeeter, confronted with the gangling, insistent man, blinked owlishly.

"I have half-a-dozen questions to ask you," Ellis continued, guiding her backwards to the steps once more. "Allow me to buy you a bag of roasted nuts."

"Really, Ellis -- "

"Come, we can talk and watch at the same time, can't we?" he said, giving her a gentle shove. "Professor Lupin won't miss us. Loathe her," he added, leaning back and hissing in Remus' ear.

"We'll get you drunk later," Remus replied. Ellis returned to his new charge, beaming.

"Now, I've spoken to your editor recently about a serialised novel, and I was wondering if you would lend an old man a hand," he said, voice fading into the distance as they climbed the steps. "Do you suppose a profile in the paper is in order? I hear Gilderoy Lockhart had one, and you know I can't bear to be upstaged..."

"That's why you never play chess with Remus," Sirius said conversationally to Anne, who was sitting next to him. "Just when you think he's about to fall asleep he destroys you utterly. Graveworthy told me about your plot to get Skeeter off Harry's back."

"For the moment, anyway," Remus said.

"Long enough -- AHA!" Sirius shouted suddenly, pointing to the pitch. The players were rising on
their broomsticks and the Quaffle was in play; Remus didn't think he'd get another serious word out of him until the game was over.

He glanced along the line of people seated in the row -- Sirius, then the werewolves up from London, and on the end...

He grinned. Dora, sapphire sparkling brightly on her hand, was curled against Severus, holding onto the sleeve of his robes in excitement. Severus looked past her, met his gaze, and gave him a long-suffering look. Then he glanced at Tobias, who had awkwardly settled his arm around Anne's shoulders.

All in order, then. Spring hadn't come yet, but there was the definite smell of it in the air; he hadn't dreamed in some time, and Rita Skeeter was being deftly deflected. For the first time in weeks, Remus felt his shoulders relax.

It was like being a student again, crammed into a crowded bench full of his friends, happily squeezed up against the object of his youthful adulation. And better still, because the boy he'd adored was now a man who had made him a place in the world and given him a son and someone to come home to at night.

"I love you," he said, leaning close to Sirius and whispering in his ear.

"EH WHAT?" Sirius asked, distracted by a near miss for the Gryffindor Chasers.

"I SAID I LOVE YOU," Remus shouted, words lost in the roar of the crowds. Shouted it, and nobody even looked twice. "AND WE'RE GETTING ELLIS DRUNK TONIGHT!"

"UP GRYFFINDOR! YOU TOO!" Sirius shouted back.

***

The sun was setting on Creadonagh Valley when the revelers returned to the house Sirius was so proud of. Dora and Severus had left them at the road to Hogsmeade, but Anne and Tobias and Denise, their new companion, were staying for dinner and Ellis would be staying with Sirius and Remus as honoured guest.

Sirius had put up a winter garden outside, complete with a copper fire bowl, and it was pleasant to sit around the fire, drinking and taking the game to bits to study it. Tobias had been a Gryffindor at school as well, and he and Sirius managed to draw Denise into the conversation. Ellis was sitting with Anne, not speaking much but listening intently, and Remus was warming his feet at the fire and studying the stars.

"I think we'd better gather ourselves up," Denise said eventually, finishing her drink. "I've got to have you two back in London by ten."

"Going by floo?" Sirius asked. "Use the one in the Three Broomsticks. The one in the little cafe is closer, but it's a bit dodgy sometimes."

"And look after yourselves," Remus added. "Don't go straying off. If you get lost, send up a flare, we'll see it from here."

"They'll be fine," Sirius said, as he shook hands with Tobias and allowed Denise to give him a kiss on the cheek. Anne smiled shyly and took Tobias' hand as they made their way to the road.

"Hahh," Sirius said, sitting down again and stretching out his arms. "Good day, eh?"
"Quite an excellent day," Ellis answered, shooing a moth off his sleeve. "Very edifying."

"Even two and a half hours spent distracting Skeeter?" Remus asked. "Speaking of which, let me top up your whiskey."

"Thank you. Oh yes; your young Anne just now made up for that entirely."

"Really? It looked like she was talking your ear off."

"I find other peoples' problems invariably fascinating. Such a very sad woman. I might do a novella on the Werewolf Problem, someday."

"It oughtn't to be a problem at all," Sirius said. He slapped at his neck and looked at his hand, frowning. "Fire does draw the bugs. She told you she was a werewolf?"

"I'm very good at listening."

"So is Skeeter," Sirius said. "But, vote of thanks to Ellis Graveworthy, we shan't have to worry about her hounding Harry again for a month or two."

"I don't know; there's plenty of research to be done outside of Hogwarts if she's motivated," Ellis said ruminatively. "I'd watch yourselves, if I were you. She's got it in for you, Black. And the two of you have a dilemma if she digs."

"I'm not going to live in fear of that one," Sirius declared. "Besides, anyone we care about knows, and we don't care about the rest."

"It must not be easy, living apart," Ellis mused.

"Well, we make do. I'm up at the school as often as I can be, and Remus gets down here quite a bit."

"Do you miss each other? No, I'm sorry," Ellis held up a hand. "That's impertinent and inappropriate. It's only that it's an interesting situation from my point of view -- two people very close together and yet quite far away."

"I don't mind answering," Remus said, looking to Sirius, who shook his head carelessly. "Having to live with someone takes time to adjust to, and it's hard to break those patterns when you live apart again."

"Hard to keep busy sometimes," Sirius said quietly.

"I tell him he could get a job."

"My job is to look out for you and Harry, and anyway the house still needs work."

"Hark at him," Remus said, grinning. Dobby appeared at the edge of the firelight, carrying a dishtowel.

"Is Mr. Black or Professor Lupin or Mr. Graveworthy wanting anything?" he asked. "Dobby can make toast, or bring sandwiches."

"Graveworthy? No? Right then, we're fine," Sirius said, tilting his head back. "You're free to run along to bed if you want, Dobby, we won't need anything more tonight that we can't get ourselves."
Dobby bowed, cleared away the empty glasses left by the others, and hopped up the garden path to the back door.

"I thought a lot about the past, on the way here," Graveworthy said, setting his drink down on the arm of his chair. "Remembering the last war, especially with those new edicts about Malfoy and Pettigrew. I know that for you it was a difficult loss, but with the rest of the Wizarding World I did breathe a sigh of relief when it was ended. Now one feels that old fear and urgency slowly creeping back..."

He looked at Sirius, studying him with half-lidded eyes.

"But in the meantime, we must build family as we find it, and store up happiness against the storm, mustn't we?" he said, smiling. "So, tonight...to the peace of home."

"The peace of home," Remus and Sirius echoed, lifting their glasses.

And it was good to toast to peace, because the next week all hell broke loose.

***

It started with, of all things, innocent and bookish Hermione Granger, constantly in competition with Padma for top of their year and something of a swot in Harry's opinion. Neville got on with her all right, and she had helped with the Umbridge Insurrection, but when all was said and done nobody expected her to cause the kind of trouble she did.

She had been growing visibly more impatient with Divinations as the term went on, and the other students did sometimes look to her for a sardonic eyeroll or a sharp retort to the professor. If Trelawney took any notice of these things, she didn't show it, but the students saw.

Still, plenty of students acted up in various classes, and nobody sensed what was coming. Especially not Trelawney.

Harry generally waited for Padma to arrive, so that they could go into class and find a seat together, since Padma was the odd Ravenclaw out and Trelawney never let him sit with Neville anyway. She arrived almost late, out of breath and with the Time-Turner still hanging outside her clothes.

"Sorry," she gasped, grabbing it and stuffing it inside her robes. "Didn't get the time right."

"It's fine," Harry said, as they entered together. Each table, which had formerly held teacups or cards, now held a large, foggy crystal ball. Harry glanced at Neville, who was looking annoyed.

"I thought we weren't starting crystal balls until next year," Padma whispered to him.

"Well, it's something new anyway," Harry said, sitting down at the first vacant table. "Let's study balls!"

"You're gross," she replied, but she did giggle a little.

"Now that all have arrived," Trelawney said, casting a misty eye on Harry and Padma, "We may begin. I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned; the fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice."

Hermione, one table over, snorted. "She sets the exam! She doesn't need the Fates to tell her that."
"Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art," Trelawney continued dreamily. "I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb's infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will See before the end of the class."

"What a waste," Padma sighed, as Trelawney began to lead a relaxation exercise. Hermione nodded. "I could be doing something useful..."

"We all could," Hermione replied in a whisper.

"Shh," Harry said, virtuously staring into the crystal ball. "I think I see something!"

"What?" Padma asked.

"There's going to be fog tonight!"

Padma and Hermione stifled their laughter, but not before it had drawn their Professor's attention.

"Please do not disturb the clairvoyant vibrations!" she called, gliding over to Harry and Padma's table. "Miss Patil, have you managed to discern a sign in the orb? Miss Granger?"

"I don't see anything," Hermione said contentiously.

"Allow me to provide you an example," Trelawney said, pushing her sleeves back to the accompanying crash of her bangled wrists. "Let us see what lies before Miss Granger on the path of life..."

She stroked the crystal ball affectionately, which made Harry want to snigger again.

"I didn't know we were supposed to stroke our balls," Seamus Finnegan said, nearly voicelessly, in Harry's ear.

"There is something here!" Trelawney declared, hunching so that she looked head-on at the orb. Harry saw her reflection in the glass, her nose huge and her face distorted. "Oh, my dear! If you continue on the path you have begun I fear...I fear..."

"What?" Neville asked, caught up in the moment.

"Oh my dear! Such failure and disgrace!"

Hermione sat back, crossing her arms.

"I'll chance it," she said.

"Mr. Potter, quickly, while the Sight is upon me..." Trelawney turned suddenly, making Harry start back, and gazed into the ball sitting in front of him. She let out a delicate shriek. "Peter Pettigrew!"

Silence fell on the classroom, the stony silence of children who know that someone has crossed a very firm line they should not have crossed.

"What did you say to him?" Hermione asked.

"Peter Pettigrew, drawing ever nearer -- " Trelawney said in a voice that wavered slightly. "Beware, Harry, beware!"

"Bollocks," Hermione announced loudly. Trelawney stiffened, then stood slowly, pivoting to face
"Miss Granger --"

"It's bollocks and you know it," Hermione said. "You're just trying to scare him and that was a very rude thing to say."

"I am sorry, my dear, that you do not possess the necessary skills or intellect for the noble art of Divination. Indeed, I don't remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane. However, you must not disrupt the rest of the class or cast aspersions upon abilities --"

"Which don't exist," Hermione replied furiously, standing and in the process bumping the table. The crystal ball teetered on the edge of its stand and then fell to the floor with an enormous thud, rolling a few feet away. "I live in the real world and I've had quite enough, thanks, of airy fantasies in a stuffy, stinky room."

She kicked the ball away and gathered up her bags, flouncing out. Harry had never seen such a pronounced flounce. The silence turned from offended to shocked.

"Well," Trelawney said, sniffing. "I did predict that one of us would leave this class forever --"

"Guess you were wrong then," said Padma suddenly. Harry looked at her, astounded. "Two are."

She picked up her bag as well, looked around, and followed Hermione out. Harry gaped after them until Ron Weasley spoke too.

"I was really never good at it anyway," he said apologetically, already at the door.

Oh balls, Harry thought with a sigh, standing up.

"I've been faking my homework most of the year," he announced, and was surprised to have Padma hand him his bag, hers already over her shoulder. They left together to a quiet chorus of giggles for his confession. Behind him, he heard Neville say, "Well, he's my best friend, you know. Come on, Parvati."

When they reached the hallway outside the stairs, Padma and Hermione collapsed, bursting into laughter. Neville, coming up behind them, snorted.

"Girls," he said, rolling his eyes at Parvati, who had followed breathlessly.

"We've just dropped out of class," Hermione giggled. "I've never dropped out of a class before!"

"The look on her face!" Padma gasped.

"I didn't even think you liked Hermione much," Parvati said.

"I don't!" Padma blurted, then started laughing again. "Sorry Hermione!"

"It's okay, I don't like you either!" Hermione giggled.

"But that was too brilliant not to join...in..." Padma collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Harry, why did you come?" Hermione asked.

"Told her I'd been faking my homework all year," Harry said. Both burst into fresh fits of laughter. Padma pushed herself up the wall and reached for Parvati, hugging her sister tightly.
"Oh god, we're in so much trouble," Hermione said. "What do we do now?"

Harry considered all possible options.

"We find Professor Lupin," he said.

"Why?" Ron asked.

"He told me he did the same thing when he was at Hogwarts."
Chapter 12

Remus, sitting at his desk, bent his head forward and laced his fingers across the back of his neck, closing his eyes. Harry knew he looked frustrated, but he could sense that part of the reason he was hiding his face was so that the children wouldn't see him smile.

"So we left Divination, and we didn't know where else to come, sir," Hermione said, wiping the tears of laughter off her face. "And Harry said you'd done it..."

"I, Miss Granger, didn't lead an entire insurrection when I left," Remus sighed. "Or announce that I'd been faking my homework all year."

"It was worth it," Harry answered complacently.

"I imagine so. I'm not sure what you expect me to do about it, though."

"Well, we had to go somewhere until class let out," Harry said. "Where d'you keep your tea?"

"Top shelf, I'll get it," Remus said, unbending and rising to reach into the cupboard for a tin of tea. "You're lucky I have Friday afternoon free."

"You really should have seen it."

"I'd better have a word with the Headmaster...and with Sybil as well," Remus continued, pouring a large portion of loose-leaf into a strainer and setting it over the top of his teapot. "Albus will sort out your classes; I don't think any of you need a replacement, do you? Neville?"

"I do, but Professor Sprout said I could do extra Herbology if I ever wanted to," Neville said.

Remus tapped his kettle with his wand, cocked his head to listen for the whistle that said it was done, and poured the water.

"Do you really have to go talk to Professor Trelawney?" Hermione asked.

"I think so. She doesn't deserve a termful of humiliation because you lost your patience. I don't pretend to want to be friends with her -- I'll thank you not to repeat that to anyone -- but she's a harmless woman and rather fragile, I think. Who wants sugar?"

He laid out several mugs and poured tea into each, setting a sugar bowl at the edge of his desk as the children took their drinks.

"I'll tell her that people who have no skills with the Inner Eye are often frightened of Divination, and that clearly you children are in awe of her power, and frustrated that you don't have it," he said. Padma opened her mouth to protest, and Remus cocked an eyebrow at her. She closed her mouth and nodded. "Your houses are most well-known for their individual virtues, but gentleness and compassion -- and discretion -- are qualities that everyone should strive for, don't you agree?"

They murmured affirmatives, drinking their tea while Remus walked to his bookshelf and began taking down several volumes from the lower racks.

"In the meantime, I think you'd better have some extracurricular reading to keep you out of trouble," he said.

"Too late," Ron said glumly.
"Ah, Mr. Weasley. Here you are," Remus handed him a softbound book with stains on the cover. "Auror's handbook. Never to early to think about your career, Gryffindor. Neville, something on Herbology for you," *Hazardous Magical Plants And Their Handling*, "and you two Boadecias will have to share this one."

He offered a copy of *Advanced Arithmantic Theory* to Hermione and Padma. Hermione took it and opened it immediately, Padma leaning over her shoulder.

"Parvati, you're falling behind in Defence," he said.

"Yes, Professor."

"Won't do; you're far too bright for that. Here we are," he said, shifting the books to place a copy of *The Joy of Hex* in her hands. "And, for Mr. Harry Potter..."

Harry got two books, even thinner than the others. One had a plain black cover, the other a spartan red one; *The Art of War* and *The Prince*. Remus winked at him.

"Off you go to the library. And if I were you, I'd keep quiet about this affair, lest the Headmaster devise a way to keep you quiet without your consent. You are treading a very thin line; this is twice now that some of you have defied Professors who were only doing their best, by their lights, to educate you. Ms. Umbridge and Professor Trelawney aren't villains; they're just misguided. Try to remember that before you stand up and call someone a liar again."

"Yes, Professor," they chorused as they left. Hermione, ahead of Harry, stopped at the doorway.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked, giving Remus a searching look that Harry didn't like one bit.

"Of course, Hermione. Just a little tired, that's all. Might be a touch of the flu."

"It'll be all right," Hermione said, and to Harry's shock, she hugged Remus around the waist, blushed, and fled. Remus looked after her thoughtfully.

"There's a full moon on Sunday," Harry said conversationally.

"So there is."

"Are you all right?"

Remus smiled reassuringly. "I am. I'll be down in Hogsmeade for it; you'll enjoy Monday's substitute. Go on."

***

On Monday morning, Sirius woke to insistent banging on his front door.

Remus was still asleep, worn out after the moon, and Sirius couldn't think of anyone who would need him this urgently on a Monday morning, but he threw on a dressing-gown and smoothed back his hair as he padded through the house to the front door.

Opening the door on three large, burly members of Magical Law Enforcement was a very thorough way of waking a man up, even better than coffee. Sirius blinked in the early-morning sunlight and cast about for something to say.

"Good morning," he managed.
"Mr. Sirius Black?" asked one of the men. The little silver badge on his robes sparkled.

"That's me -- is it Harry?" Sirius asked, fear leaping into his throat. "What's going on?"

"You're wanted in London, sir. There's been a bit of trouble with your cousin, Ms. Tonks."

"Andi?" The fear began to scratch at his insides, too. "What's happened?"

"Nothing serious, Mr. Black," another said. "Bit of a dust-up, that's all. Mr. Tonks is in St. Mungo's and Ms. Tonks sent us to fetch you. Favour to Auror Tonks, like."

"Is he all right?" Sirius asked, backing away so that the men could enter. "Was anyone else hurt?"

"He's recovering, no permanent damage done. Some vandalism to their home, no other injuries," the first man said, though he looked sidelong at the others as he spoke.

"I'll get dressed -- there's coffee things in the kitchen," Sirius said, bolting down the hallway. He burst into the bedroom and began pulling clothing out of his dresser. Remus pushed himself up on his elbows, shaking hair out of his eyes.

"Ted's been hurt," Sirius said. "Someone broke into the shop or something last night. Stay here -- I've got to go to St. Mungo's."

"Wha...?" Remus asked. Sirius pulled a shirt over his head.

"Stay here and sleep. Nobody else was hurt."

"But Ted -- "

"It'll be all right. Stay here. Floo up to Hogwarts and -- Christ, I'd better fetch Neville -- "

"No, go ahead. I'll call Albus and have someone bring Neville." Remus tottered out of bed and pulled on some pyjama bottoms.

"Then go back to sleep."

"Right-o, I won't mind that. Floo me?" Remus asked. Sirius, shoes in one hand, kissed him.

"Soon as I know anything," he said, leaving Remus to call the school. He stopped in the corridor to put his shoes on, picked up his wallet, and was handed a cup of fresh coffee as he emerged again into the kitchen.

"Ta," he said, sipping it. "I can Apparate -- "

"No need; we'll go by portkey," the apparent leader said, unsheathing a short, thick stick that had been clipped to his belt. The other officers grasped it, so Sirius did too; at a tap from his wand, the world began to spin.

Sirius stumbled and fetched up against a wall as they arrived, turning to find himself in the lobby of St. Mungo's. Andromeda, with a black eye and blood crusting around one corner of her mouth, was standing nearby.

"Oh, Andi," he said, as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "What in hell happened?"

"There were people," she said, shaking. "Outside the shop, in Diagon -- they broke all the windows -- "
"Shh, it's just glass. Is Ted okay? Are you okay? Where's Dora?"

"Home looking after things," she said, stepping back and wiping her eyes. "I'm fine, it looks worse than it is. Ted ran out to stop them and they kicked him..."

"Can we see him?"

Andromeda nodded, tugging him along down the hallway. Inside one of the rooms, Ted was lying on a hospital bed looking pale and drawn, one of the few times Sirius had ever seen the normally unflappable Ted Tonks upset.

"Merlin," he said. Ted's face was covered in small cuts, and one of his arms was a solid mass of swelling bruises.

"Sons of bitches," Ted replied. "Came after our people."

Sirius turned to Andi. "Wait..."

"It's because of the Werewolf Support Network," she said. "There was a little article about them in the paper yesterday, it wasn't anything really and they didn't mention us..."

"Mary got the worst of it," Ted said.

"Who the hell is Mary?"

"The woman who runs the Network," Andi said, taking her husband's hand and rubbing her thumb across his knuckles lovingly. "They broke into her office -- our address was in her notebook. I think they would have been satisfied just to break the windows, but we didn't know. Ted thought it was thieves..."

Ted laughed a little, then sighed. "I picked up that big cast-iron skillet from the kitchen and we went down to smash some heads in..."

"And got your face kicked about," Sirius finished. "Where are the werewolves?"

"Safe -- Dora's got Anne with her and the rest never come home until the afternoon," Andi said.

"All right, I'll handle things from here. You stay with Ted. Neville's coming, I had Remus call up to Hogwarts."

"Sirius --"

"What?" he asked, hesitating.

"Mary was hurt worse than we were. We can't find out anything. Find her?"

"Course," he said, and ran out of the room.

He nearly collided in the hallway with Severus Snape. For a second he almost snarled, but he saw Snape had one guiding hand on Neville's shoulder, and the boy was trembling visibly.

"They're in there," he said. "They're both fine. Go on, Neville."

Neville pushed the door open fearfully and ran inside. Sirius circled Snape warily.

"You handle the Healers," he said. "I'll take the MLE."
Snape nodded once, curtly, and followed Neville inside. Sirius paused again, looking down the hall, and then made for the Mediwitch's station. Two of the MLE men had disappeared; the third was talking to one of the mediwitches.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Officer Nick Molsen, Mr. Black," the man said. "I'm at your disposal until further notice."

"O-kay. I need to find the woman who was beat up, Mary, and -- "

"Sir, if I can..." the man hesitated. "There's a lot you don't know, Mr. Black."

"Then tell me," Sirius said impatiently.

"Auror Tonks is at the shop, and she said to inform you that workmen have been sent to board it up and not to worry about the...ah...other tenants," Molsen said. "Investigations are being pursued regarding the assailants -- "

"You haven't caught them?"

"We're very short-handed this morning, Mr. Black. There were targeted attacks all over London. Three in Glasgow as well. They all appear to be much the same as what happened to Mr. and Ms. Tonks -- vandalism that got out of hand. We've had to send more men to the more serious ones."

"More serious?" he asked.

"Two werewolves dead, sir. And one woman has been killed by a werewolf."

Sirius felt his legs starting to go and leaned heavily on the desk. "Three dead?"

"Yes, sir."

***

"Wonder where Neville is," Draco said, as they sat at breakfast that morning. Even Neville, not known for being a morning person, was usually there by the time Denbigh brought their food.

"Probably still sleeping," Padma said. "I'll go wake him up before class. I like it when his hair sticks out," she added, touching her hands to her head and splaying her fingers. "He looks like a dazed hedgehog."

"I don't see why that's attractive," Draco replied, looking annoyed.

"It's not attractive, it's funny," she said.

"Speaking of sleeping in," Harry said around a mouthful of toast. "Easter hol is coming. We all going home?"

"I am," Padma said. "Mum and Dad said they'd take us to the seaside but Dad's annoyed at Parvati and me about the Divs thing, so we might not go."


"Well, she left off torturing your elves, she's got to do something," Harry said.

"I'd rather be here anyway, even if it's boring."
"Won't be boring," Harry replied. "I'll be in Hogsmeade, we'll come up to see you. Sirius can teach us tricks on our broomsticks. "You'll need it," he added, poking Draco in the shoulder. "Hufflepuff's playing Slytherin in three weeks."

"Don't remind me," Draco moaned over his oatmeal. A few fellow students trickled in; Harry gave a quick nod to Hermione Granger, who waved in reply. Behind her, Ron ducked through the door and made a beeline for their table.

"You heard yet?" he asked, standing next to the bench.

"Heard what?" Harry asked. "Trelawney finally have a breakdown?"

"No, about Neville."

"What about him?" Padma asked, alarmed.

"Don't exactly know. Professor Snape came in this morning, right into our dormitory, and took him out. Dean says he heard him say something about London."

The trio of children exchanged looks, as if Ron had been nothing more than a messenger and now had ceased to exist.

"Well?" Ron asked. "Any idea why they'd need him in London?"

"Couple," Draco said guardedly. "Not many reasons why they'd send Snape to fetch him, though."

"Unless it's something to do with Andromeda and Ted," Harry added. "Professor Snape's marrying his sister, maybe it's some kind of..."

He hesitated, because saying "Snape" and "surprise vacation" in the same sentence didn't really go.

"Anyway, thanks," he said to Ron. "For telling us, I mean. I'll find out what's going on and let you know."

"Right, then," Ron said, looking awkward. "See you in Defence."

"We'd better split up," Harry announced, as more students began to pour into the Great Hall. "I'll see you -- "

"Harry, wait," Padma said, grabbing his sleeve. The Daily Prophet had just arrived, and she was holding it, her knuckles white. It looked odd somehow; there was a single blank-backed sheet of newspaper covering the front page. "You should see this."

She turned it around. Harry took the paper, Draco peering around his arm.

DAILY PROPHET UPDATE read the title, and below that a screaming headline: RIOTS ROCK LONDON.

Below that was an enormous photograph of Tonks & Tonks, with boarded-up windows. Dora stood in the foreground, speaking urgently to a pair of men. Harry strained, trying to read her lips.

"Harry," Draco said, pointing to the subheading.

Diagon Alley reels under violent onslaught of anti-werewolf protests.

"Guess we know where Neville went," Padma said, as Harry skimmed the article. Several hurt;
three deaths; Werewolf Support Network --

"Ah!" he said, finding what he was looking for. "Ted Tonks is listed in stable and improving condition after attempting to do battle with vandals attacking the storefront of popular clothier Tonks&Tonks. Nothing about Andromeda; she can't have been hurt too bad."

"What about Professor Lupin?" Draco asked in an undertone. Cold fear grabbed Harry and paralysed him; Remus and Sirius ran wild at the full moon, he knew that, and if someone had caught them -- if he had attacked someone, or been hurt...

There was a flash of white from above as Hedwig soared into the Great Hall, landing neatly on the table and dropping a letter from her beak. Harry released the newspaper and snatched up the letter, opening it almost feverishly; he nearly collapsed with relief when he read what it said.

In untidy handwriting unlike Remus' usually neat scribble, it read:

*We are all well here. Sirius has gone to London. Neville and Severus as well. Ted and Andromeda are fine. Do not fret.*

"Neville's gone to London to see Ted," he said, folding the letter up and shoving it into the very bottom of his book bag. Hedwig took flight, hooting cheerfully, and soared out again through the high windows of the Great Hall. "Sirius too. They'll probably send word when they know more."

"It's terrible," Padma said, now studying the article with Draco bent over one shoulder. "Why would anyone do something like this?"

"About time too," Harry heard a voice drawl nearby. He turned to see one of the Slytherin sevenths, an older cousin of Crabbe's named Eric, in conversation with several seventh-year girls. "It'll show them that they can't --"

Harry moved before he thought, which in retrospect was a stupid idea. He remembered only the feeling of his wand sliding out of his sleeve, a flash of purple light, and the comical expression of Eric Crabbe as he sprouted enormous yellow pustules all over his face and shoulders.

"MISTER POTTER!" roared a voice, and Harry found his ear held firmly by Professor McGonagall. The Slytherins were scrambling out of their seats, some arrowing towards Harry while others bolted for the door or hid under tables. Eric simply sat there, eyes wide, staring at Harry.

They were closest to the Hufflepuff table, and a cadre of large students with Hufflepuff badges stood slowly and with a remarkable amount of menace, stopping both the Slytherins' headlong attack on Harry and the Gryffindors, behind him, who were surging forward to see what the fun was.

McGonagall jerked him through the crowds, leaving a pair of just-arrived Prefects to get everyone back to their seats, and pulled him into the hallway.

"Hexing a fellow student! In the Great Hall!" she said, releasing him and walking quickly along the hallway. Harry ran to catch up. "What were you thinking?"

"He was talking about the riots," Harry said. "He said it was about time someone did it to werewolves."

"And that gave you the right to mete out punishment, did it?" McGonagall demanded. Harry lapsed into humiliated silence, partly because she was now climbing a staircase and he had to save his
breath just to keep up. She swept up the stairs as if they were nothing, while Harry began to pant and clutch a stitch in his side. When they finally reached her office, she gestured him into a chair and went to her desk, taking out a sheet of parchment and dipping her quill into the inkpot nearby.

"I am going to give you a quite unusual punishment, Harry," she said, speaking as she wrote. Harry watched in fascination; he wished he could do that. "In the absence of your own Head of House, who I am certain will agree with me, you fall under my authority. I am going to send you to Nymphadora, who is no doubt in need of a helping hand right now, and you are to do precisely as she says. You will remain with her until this evening, assisting her in any way possible. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said meekly.

McGonagall folded the letter, sealed it with wax, and came around the desk again, holding it out. Harry stood to accept it, but when he grasped the parchment she didn't immediately release it.

"Listen carefully to me," she said, her face no longer angry but very grave. "You are very much like James, Harry; he was clever and powerful and loyal to his friends, but he also had a temper and he could be arrogant when he wished."

Harry bit his tongue to kill the protest of this slander that was fighting its way out.

"Three times now, this year alone, you have acted in ways which, under other circumstances, would have called for a meeting with your godfather and the possibility of expulsion," she continued. "Far worse, they are actions which concern me because they assume a superiority over others which you do not in fact possess. Severus, who has a unique link to you, may feel it is best to be lenient; I disagree."

Harry stared at her, wondering how much worse this could possibly get.

"I want you to think before you act, Harry, and learn to control your temper. You're acting like a bully; be careful you don't become one."

"A bully!" Harry burst out, unable to contain himself any longer. "I'm not a bully!"

"Not yet. I'd like it to remain that way. But Harry, you cannot justify actions above the law with the excuse that your victim had it coming. You must learn subtlety, and to choose your battles. If your other teachers won't tell you this, I will."

Harry bowed his head. McGonagall released the letter, and he tucked it shamefaced into his pocket. He waited to be dismissed; when he looked up, she was studying him curiously.

"I often think of your father when I see you," she said. "I wonder very much what kind of Gryffindor you would have been."

"Probably a pretty shoddy one," he answered.

"I wonder. Well, in you go..."

Harry took down a pinch of floo powder from her mantelpiece and threw it into the fire. Stepping inside, he turned around and said "Tonks and Tonks, Diagon Alley!"

As the floo network began to spin him around, he caught one last glimpse of McGonagall's face. It was tired, careworn, and seemed much older than it had two minutes before; he felt a stab of regret, and also a stab of surprise for the realisation that Minerva McGonagall was human and fallible,
and very concerned about Harry.

***

When Sirius returned from St. Mungo's after a quick check-in with Dora to make sure everything was all right, he found a vat of stew bubbling on the stove and a note saying that Remus had gone upstairs to sleep. He greedily spooned an enormous portion into a bowl, noting that the dishes had even been washed, and took two butterbeers from the antique Muggle refrigerator he'd found and charmed to function normally again.

He climbed the stairs with a little trepidation; Remus must have worn himself out cooking, but at least it showed that he'd been able to get up and about. He wasn't sure if he ought to carry all his news and woes to him first thing.

The small bedroom at the top of the stairs, down the narrow hall from Harry's room, was well-lit and the window was open to let in the cool evening air. Remus lay in the bed, eyes shut, feathery hair drifting upwards occasionally in the breeze. Sirius sat on the edge of the bed, the butterbeer bottles clinking as he set them on the bedside table. He reached out and stroked his hair quickly, almost embarrassed at the show of affection, before taking a bite of the stew. It had been a long day, and the food was more than welcome. Remus yawned and stretched, one hand drifting out to touch Sirius’ back.

"All settled?" he asked, not opening his eyes.

"As much as they can be. You didn't have to cook."

"I wanted to. Knew you'd be hungry. You say Ted's okay?"

"Everyone's okay, more or less, though Ted'll be stiff for a few days, I reckon. Neville's back to Hogwarts. Andi's a bit worried about her guests, though. She asked if we thought we could keep one or two up here for a bit. And I gave Julian about fifty Galleons."

"Mmh? For what?"

"Well, he's working for Madam Schaeffer now, he had nearly enough saved up for a place of his own, and I thought it might be better. He'll pay it back."

"Don't care if he does. Good job."

"Ta. Once we got everyone sorted it was a bit boring, really. But Andi seemed to want me around, so I stayed. I had an idea, too," he added. Remus opened one eye and regarded him cautiously.

"That's so worrying," he replied, inching closer. Sirius offered him a piece of potato from the stew with his fingers and he sat up to eat it, leaning on Sirius' shoulder.

"I'll forget you said that," Sirius said. "Do you want to hear about it?"

"Of course."

"Magical refrigerator magnets."

Remus cocked his head to study him. "Magical what?"

"Charmed refrigerator magnets. You buy two sets, right, and you stick one on your fridge and your friend or whatnot sticks the other set on theirs. But when you rearrange yours, theirs rearranges
too. Instant messages."

"Ministry'd never stand for it," Remus mumbled.

"We'll charm them so that Muggles can't see them or something. That's details." Sirius waved a hand. "Think about it. If I had a set and Andi had a set, yesterday she could have just made a single word, like...I don't know, some codeword for trouble, and we wouldn't have had the MLE show up on our doorstep."

"This is what you've been thinking about."

"Keeps the mind off other things. Besides, I'm an inventor, aren't I? It's what I do. Invent things."

"You invent toys."

"This is a kind of toy. You could send all kinds of messages."

Remus yawned. "Well, my brilliant one, go to. As you say, it'll keep your mind off things."

"There's a few other things, too," Sirius said reluctantly, offering him a piece of stew beef. Remus licked his fingers playfully after accepting it.

"Like what?"

"Well, Harry saw the Prophet this morning, and Dora says he hexed some boy who said they had it coming. I've got a letter from McGonagall to Dora about it. Guess she didn't want to get him in hot water with me just yet."

"Why'd she write to Dora, then?"

"He did it in the middle of the Great Hall. Harry spent the day in London doing chores for Dora, I guess, as punishment."

Remus sighed against Sirius' shoulder. "That seems fair. He's gotten into quite a few pickles this year, hasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Are you worried?" Remus asked, as Sirius set down the nearly-empty bowl.

"McGonagall is. I guess I should be, but I remember what we were like at school. I'm more..."

He fell silent, trying to figure out how to articulate it. Harry was an amazing child and had done things men ten years older might have been afraid of; he'd thrown rocks at Peter Pettigrew when he had no other ammunition to hand, faced him down years later when he broke into Hogwarts, and helped to kill a Basilisk before it killed Padma. He'd taken a chance on little Draco Malfoy when nobody else wanted to. He'd faced down seventh-years when they bullied Neville and thoroughly routed that horrible Umbridge woman. He was a brave, strong boy.

But still in Sirius' heart of hearts, Harry was the little baby he'd held the day he was born, one of the few times he'd ever seen James cry. Harry was the big-eyed, hollow-cheeked child he'd saved from the Dursleys when he was eight, who had clutched his cheap little stuffed frog as Sirius carried him away.

"Come back," Remus said gently.
"Sorry," he answered. "What kind of world is this for Harry? Really? Andi was just trying to make things a little better, she just wants to take in strays and make them happy. Peter's still out there, Draco's father is hunting him like prey, and these stupid little people with their stupid little ideas think firebombing my family home is the way to change the world."

Remus was quiet, his face pressed into Sirius' shoulder, his body a warm presence against his back.

"When we were young men," Remus said finally, "we were fighting for the world we have now. Dumbledore never promised us it would be perfect. But it's better now than it was twelve years ago. It's better now than it was a year ago, just because of what Andi and Ted are doing. We fought, Sirius. We won because of Harry, but we fought for years just to make sure that Harry had a chance to grow up happy."

"Is he?"

"Reasonably," Remus replied. "I think so. He has friends, he plays games, he skives off on his homework. I'm sure he's not the happiest of children tonight, but I bet you he's not gnashing his teeth over the way the world is."

Sirius smiled. "Is that a subtle hint that I'm moping?"

"Just a little."

"What do you suppose he's up to?"

"Probably plotting something with the others. Don't worry about it." Remus kissed the side of his throat. "You've had a long day. Rest a bit before you decide to start cleaning up the world for our son."

***

Harry returned to Hogwarts that evening aching in every muscle, his fingers rubbed raw from scouring and his clothes smelling of cleaning agent and sweat. When he sat down, the Slytherins nearby pulled away slightly.

"Wow, you reek," Cricket Creevey said, wrinkling his nose. "Where were you all day?"

"Cleaning," Harry said tiredly, breaking a dinner roll into tiny pieces and dipping them in the gravy on his plate. "Professor McGonagall sent me to help out in London as my punishment."

"Doesn't sound like much of a punishment to me," Goyle said.

"I spent the whole day scrubbing out the display windows they tried to set on fire," Harry replied. The food didn't taste like much in his mouth; he was too exhausted to really enjoy it.

"By the way, I'm not talking to you," Crabbe said.

"You just did," Harry answered. Crabbe's face formed into a comical look of intense concentration. "Fine, don't talk to me then."

"You missed Defence class," Theo said. He sipped from a cup of pumpkin juice, then continued. "Substitute again. I guess Professor Lupin gets sick an awful lot. Doesn't seem like he would, does it?"

"Who was lecturing?" Harry asked. The other boys sniggered. "What? What'd I miss? It wasn't
Umbridge again, was it?"

"Better," Theo said, leering.

"So who was it? I know it wasn't Professor Tonks."

"Well," Goyle said. "There was this woman, right..."

He stopped and burst into chuckles again.

"I swear to Merlin, Goyle, if you don't tell me what happened I'll pull your guts out through your throat," Harry said.

"Yeah, well, if you do that I'll blow your arse up into your stomach," Goyle replied amiably.

"Theo, you tell him."

"Sex education!" Crabbe burst out, overcoming his declaration that he was Not Talking to Harry.

"Crabbe!" Theo kicked him under the table.

"Sex education?" Harry asked.

"It wasn't supposed to be," Theo said, glaring at the other two. Goyle was making obscene in-out gestures with the porkchop on his plate. "The woman who came to class said that some Auror named Shackleton was supposed to be teaching but on account of the riots he couldn't, so she came from the Ministry for Magical Health instead."

"I'm here to talk to you today about in-ti-mate relations and the human boooooldddy," Goyle said in a pinched, lilting voice.

"Every time she said body she did that," Theo related, gleefully. "Boooooooooody."

"Ron Weasley on a dare got up and asked a question about whether our boooooooodies could go wrong and grow horns or something, it was brilliant," Crabbe said. "She didn't even notice."

"Really, you should have been there," Theo said. "Besides, now YOU don't know anything about having sex."

"I do so, my godfather told me all that ages ago," Harry retorted.

"I bet Longbottom doesn't."

"You just shut your fat mouth about Neville," Harry said angrily. "I bet he knows more'n you about girls."

"Bet he doesn't. Anyway, she was dead interesting and funny. Don't think she meant to be funny. I'm going to ask Pansy if she'll help me study the human boooooldddy, see if I don't," Theo looked wicked.

"Oi, Pansy!" Harry called. Theo flushed scarlet. "Theo's got a crush on you!"

"He just wants to know more about the human boooooldddy!" Pansy called back. The third-years Slytherins and the nearby Hufflepuff table rocked with amusement. Harry winked at Draco, who looked as though sexual education had been the shock of his young life. "Want me to share my notes, Harry?"
"Is that what they're calling it now?" a fourth-year, who had seen it all and was weary of the constant sex jokes, asked tiredly.

"Settle down, you lot," Flint said, leaning over to be heard down the length of the table. "Potter, I hope you bloody well suffered. Eric spent half the day in the hospital wing."

"Yeah," Crabbe added righteously, remembering that he was supposed to be angry at Harry.

Harry sighed and picked at his food, looking up gratefully when a wad of paper hit him in the back of the head. He ducked down to retrieve it and opened it to find Neville’s handwriting on the paper. He twisted around to see a pale, worn-looking but nevertheless smiling Neville, giving him a thumbs-up from the Gryffindor table.

*Music Room after dinner -- lots to talk about.*

Harry nodded, turning back to his food while around him the other third-year Slytherins found new and inventive ways to simulate the sex act with mashed potatoes, porkchops, and dinner rolls.

***

"How're your parents?" Harry asked, as Neville joined him outside the Great Hall on their way up to the music room. He'd seen Draco get buttonholed by the Hufflepuff prefect about something, and Padma was talking to her sister; they'd catch up in due time.

"Ted's not so great, but they let him out of hospital this afternoon," Neville answered. "Mum's just a bit bruised. Could have been a lot worse, they kept saying, but I don't want to think about it."

"Did you get any news about why it happened?"

"Nah. Grownups won't talk to me about it, 'fraid it'll upset me I expect. Sirius was there, he kept the MLE from pestering us. Professor Snape was there for a bit but only to make sure that the Healers didn't muck anything up. Where were you? I got back a few hours ago and everyone said you hexed someone and McGonagall dragged you off."

"She made me go help Dora clean up the mess."

"Who'd you hex?"

"Eric Crabbe. He was saying nasty things." Harry gave the passwords to the Music Room and stepped through the portrait-hole. Here, the outside world was muffled and a sense of serene peace prevailed. London and all its troubles seemed very far off. It wasn't long before the portrait opened again and Padma and Draco came through, each carrying desserts scrounged from the kitchen-elves.

"Well, that was a day," Padma said, flopping down on the floor. "Neville gone, Harry vanished, Draco and I left to fend for ourselves in a crowd of horny thirteen-year-olds who can't talk about anything but sex. I imagined my life at Hogwarts would be quite different from this, you know. Draco's still traumatised."

She jerked a thumb at Draco, who frowned. "I am not."

"Are so. You've been quiet ever since class. Don't you want to know more about your boooody?" Padma teased.

"I didn't know it was so...squishy, that's all," Draco said primly. Neville hooted. "I mean it! I didn't
know how you did things like that, it's a bit much to absorb. Did you know girls bleed down there?"

"Once a month," Padma said, annoyed. "It's not like it's a constant thing."

"Do you think we bleed?" Draco asked, looking extremely worried.

"Did you not pay any attention at all? Of course you don't."

"This is pleasant," Harry remarked. "I could just sit here and listen to this all day."

"Sorry," Draco said. "Weren't you a little shocked, Padma?"

"Nah, Mum told Parvati and me about all this. Didn't yours?"

"Picture Draco's mum talking to him about sex," Harry said.

"I'm really glad she didn't," Draco said fervently. "Did your parents?"

Harry glanced at Neville. "Well, Sirius did."

"Ted gave me a book about it," Neville added. "He got all red in the face, too."

"You're not a freak, your mum's a freak," Padma said, which was probably intended to comfort. "That's why the Ministry sends people to talk to us about it, so that kids whose parents are freaks still know what's going on."

"Yeah, well, I'd rather just forget the whole thing," Draco said. "I wish Professor Lupin was back."

"Which is a good reminder that you have homework to do," Padma said, poking him. "And I'm supposed to be helping."

"We just got here!" Draco protested.

"Yes, well, when you fail Charms -- "

"Fine," Draco grumbled, rolling his eyes at Neville and Harry. "We have to go to the library. I'm behind on Charms homework. Want to come?"

"Nah, I'm going to stay here a bit," Harry said. "See you for breakfast tomorrow, though."

"Right. Come on, Padma," Draco said, offering her a hand up off the floor. Harry noticed that when she took it Draco blushed pink, and he wondered if Draco wasn't thinking about sexual education tutoring with Padma. She was nice enough, and he'd jump in front of a dragon for her any day, but he'd do that for Draco and Neville too and kissing Padma'd be like kissing a sister.

"Do you suppose we missed anything? Really, I mean," Neville said. "What if Ted or Sirius forgot to tell us something? Or didn't on purpose?"

"I don't think Sirius would do that," Harry said doubtfully. "He was pretty confident about it. And I bet he told me stuff she didn't tell the others today."

"Like what?"
"You know. About men," Harry said vaguely.

"Like, two men?" Neville pondered this. "Nope, my book didn't say anything about that either. How do they do it, then, do you suppose? Maybe it's like when you..." he made a vague gesture.

"When you wha -- oh," Harry said. "You do that?"

"Sure, don't you?" Neville frowned. "Only, if it's two men, you do it to the other person."

"I think this is the most uncomfortable conversation I've ever had," Harry said.

"Well, they must somehow, right? How do you suppose Remus and Sirius do it?"

"Neville!"

"What? They do, don't they? Do you suppose they have a book about it?"

Harry gave him a horrified look, in part because Neville was voicing questions he'd sort of wondered about too. "They're my parents!"

"So?"

"So picture Ted and Andromeda having sex! Reading books about it!"

Neville's face was hilarious to see. "Ew!"

"See?" Harry said. "Picture your gran -- "

"Eew! Okay, okay! No more parents!" Neville brought his hands down in a placating gesture. Both boys fell silent for a while as they tried to excise the mental image of their parents in the throes of passion. Finally, Neville spoke again.

"Padma's kissed a boy. Sort of. Hermione told me that she heard from Lavender that Parvati said Padma kissed Zacharias, but that was to win a bet," he said. "You ever kiss a girl?"

"Nope. Not properly. You?"

"Nah. I suppose we've got loads of time before we need to worry, don't we?" Neville looked troubled nonetheless. "Though...it'd be nice to know if I'm any good at it."

"Good at kissing? Can you be bad at it?"

"I think so. How do you know, though? I mean, and if you aren't, how do you get any better?"

"Well..." Harry felt very daring. "We could try it."

"Kissing? Reckon I should just go up to Hermione and say Fancy a snog? It's for science! and see what she says?" Neville asked.

"No, I meant, you and me could try it."

Neville looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "What, like kiss each other?"

"It's not like it would mean anything," Harry said defensively. "But then we'd know if we were any good at it or not and if we weren't the other person could say something. You said it yourself. It's for science!"
"It'd be nice to know," Neville said thoughtfully. Harry's heart was racing as if he was in the middle of a really great prank; this was something he knew that kids were probably not supposed to do, but it was exciting to try it out. And who better than Neville? Neville could keep a secret, and he wasn't high-strung about people like Draco could sometimes be.

"So...do you want to?" Harry asked.

"Okay, I guess," Neville said. "Should we stand up or something?"

"No, here, look," Harry said, scooting close to him so that their crossed legs touched at the knee. "Just lean forward."

Neville obediently leaned forward and Harry did something he'd seen Sirius do once, tipping his chin up slightly so that they were more on a level. Neville closed his eyes, so Harry did too; their noses bumped together and Neville laughed.

"That can't be right," he said, and Harry laughed too, opening his eyes and rubbing his nose. He turned his head slightly so that it wouldn't happen again, and then Neville leaned even further forward unexpectedly.

Their lips brushed, and Harry tried not to think so hard about it. What was there to think about, anyway? Neville's lips were a little bit dry, and Harry licked his own before he thought about it. He caught the edge of one of Neville's teeth with his tongue and realised that this was really a proper kiss. He'd seen people kiss like that.

It was strange, not to be kissing another boy or to be kissing Neville but to be kissing anyone that way. It was sort of...wet.

He pulled back, licked his lips again, and glanced at Neville.

"How was that?" Neville asked, looking startled.

"Well, you're all right," Harry said, head spinning a little. "What about me?"

"Yeah, well, I guess you do fine too."

Harry nodded. "So that's okay then, isn't it? Now we know and if you wanted to kiss a girl you won't have to tell her it's all in the name of science."

Neville laughed. "Sure. Let's go to the library and hex Draco's bum to his chair."

***

In the aftermath of the attack on Tonks & Tonks, Sirius spent much of his time in London, helping to put up new wards on the storefront and making sure Ted didn't do any more work than was absolutely necessary. He helped Julian move into a tiny but serviceable flat and, two days after the attacks, brought Anne home with him. The young woman had been terrified to wake up into chaos and even more frightened once she heard what had happened; she didn't even want to leave the house, but Sirius was certain a few days in the peaceful Scottish countryside would do her a world of good.

"It's spring; plants blooming, ducklings on the lake, birds fucking each other loudly in every tree, it takes a person right out of themselves," Sirius said, bringing Ted a cup of tea. Ted sat in one of the comfortable chairs in the living room of the house overlooking Creadonagh Valley while Anne bumped around upstairs, settling into a linen-closet hastily transfigured into a proper bedroom.
"So it is. Are you certain you don't mind? I know the kids have the Easter holiday in a few days, and you don't get much time with Harry."

"Bout as much as you get with Neville, he's home all summer," Sirius replied. "Don't you fret about Harry. He's going to spend most of his time up at Hogwarts anyway, I reckon, keeping Draco company. I've promised to show them some broomstick tricks. Harry tells me Oliver Wood is staying over too -- parents are off somewhere in Hungary, I think -- and he's impartial now that Gryffindor's definitely going to be playing in the House Cup."

"To the House," Ted said, raising his tea.

"Indeed."

"Which reminds me, you've yet to name your actual house, have you?" Ted said. He set the tea down and gazed out the window, watching a pair of kneazles patrolling regally through the yard. He looked tired, Sirius thought, and not at all like his usual genial self.

"Not yet. Remus thought the Valley House might be nice, but it's a little plain. I said we should call it Wolfhold but he says that's right out. He veto'd The Refuge too, said it made it sound like a hut in the woods."

"You could call it your winter house," Ted suggested.

"Rather bleak, don't you think? I'm sure the name'll come in time," Sirius said, sipping his own tea thoughtfully. "How's Mary getting on?"

"No change, she's still unconscious. We've spoken to a couple of other Support Network people about someone taking it over; neither Andi nor myself have the time and frankly I'm not sure my nerves would be up to it after this week. God, Sirius, it made me feel old, facing down those youngsters."

"Well, give the job to a werewolf, then."

Ted looked at him curiously. "Mary was a pensioner, Sirius. There's no salary for the job."

"None at all?"

"Nope. All the income she had was in goods -- clothing, food, that kind of thing. Didn't you know?"

"No, I thought perhaps she had some kind of grant."

Ted laughed bitterly. "From the Ministry? You need to move back down to London and get some perspective, my friend."

Sirius began to feel a little annoyed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ted leaned forward, steepling his fingers. He tapped them against his lips a few times before speaking, and when he did he spoke as if they were being listened to, in low tones. "The climate in Diagon's not very good right now. There's a lot of fear and anger boiling around under the surface. The Prophet doesn't help, either, but it's mostly just the gossip network. Nobody gossips like magical folk do. I'm a shopkeeper, people tell me we're pillars of the community -- we hear a lot."

Sirius sat down, feeling as if he were nineteen again and holding some kind of secret Order meeting. "A lot about what?"
"The Ministry's tightening security, they think Peter Pettigrew's going to... I don't know, blow up a building, murder people in their sleep. People have heard about the Dementors on the Hogwarts grounds, and they're worried London will be next, which seems to be a valid concern. Business is down because people are stockpiling money to get out of the country if things start to go bad."

"Merlin, Ted."

"That's not nearly so worrying as what's coming out of eastern Europe." Ted glanced towards the ceiling; the noise upstairs had stopped. He waited until it started again before continuing. "We do a little foreign mail-order and the embassies at the Ministry recommend us for foreign visitors who want English wizarding clothing. There are upsetting rumours in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, even Poland -- which all add up to the idea that Pettigrew may be looking for a way to resurrect You-Know-Who."

Sirius dropped his teacup, cursed, and blotted at his trousers with a napkin.

"It's all hearsay," Ted said, leaning forward to pick up the cup. "But it's coming from people who have no reason to lie, and no real reason to be afraid of Pettigrew. After all, the Dark Lord never really extended his grasp much past this country. They say someone, maybe more than one someone, has been poking around asking nosy questions about You-Know-Who. Did he ever visit the village, are there known Death Eaters in the area, that kind of thing."

"Voldemort's dead," Sirius said, unaccountably angry and frightened by the news. "And when I get my hands on Peter, he will be too. That's all there is to it."

"Maybe for you, but not for Wizarding Britain. And you can bet the werewolves are suffering because of it."

Ted looked up suddenly and Sirius turned to see Anne standing on the stair like a ghost, one hand holding the banister.

"I'm done unpacking," she said quietly.

"Splendid -- how'd you like to go down to Hogsmeade and we'll get some posters for your walls?" Sirius asked, still dabbing at the tea-stains on his trousers. Finally he took out his wand and flicked it at the stains, which evaporated neatly. "It's a nice walk..."

"If you want," she said, still in the same subdued tone.

"And I'm off for home. Enjoy yourself," Ted said, touching her shoulder hesitantly. "You'll have fun. There's loads to do in Hogsmeade."

She nodded and watched him as he walked to the fireplace and disappeared into the floo network. Sirius found himself alone with a young werewolf and a lot of uncertainties.

Still, she wasn't all that much older than Harry, just a few years, and Sirius had spent most of his life with a werewolf, so he ought to know something about it by now.

The silence stretched out between them, tense and thick. Finally, he walked to the entryway and began pulling on his shoes.

"Come on then," he said, with a cheer he didn't feel. "I'll show you the sights."

***
The next week brought a reprieve from school in the form of the Easter holiday, a full week off from school and for most, a much-relished trip home to see their families. Remus and Harry would both be home, all day, for a whole week, and Sirius could visit Hogwarts at any time without having to resort to being Padfoot or coming up with excuses.

It was good, too, because Draco was the only Hufflepuff in his year who was left behind. While he repeated that he was happier than he would be with his mum (and this in itself was depressing), he was still lonely and bored, fractious about spending the time doing homework.

On the first sunny day, a few days after everyone else had left for home, Sirius took Harry and Draco out on the Quidditch Pitch and spent hours showing them trick moves -- daredevil broom-dangles, sharp turns, and a disastrous attempt at the Wronski Feint that nearly resulted in a broken nose. After a few hours he left the boys to their own devices and climbed into the stands, where Remus and Anne were sitting and watching, occasionally calling out encouragement.

"That's no way to go about it," he said, sitting next to Anne and reaching around to ruffle Remus' already windblown hair. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "PUT SOME STICK INTO IT, SLACKERS!"

Harry pivoted on a dime and made a rude gesture.

"You're teaching him terrible manners," Remus commented.


"Hi," she said, her eyes on Harry and Draco.

"Anne and I were just talking about when she goes back to London," Remus said. "Andromeda's holding a spot for her as a shopgirl with Tonks&Tonks, but I thought she might like working in an apothecary's shop."

"Six of one, half dozen of the other," Sirius said. Anne seemed to draw in on herself. "You'll learn more about potions, working for an apothecary, but there's a lot of slimy, slithery work to be done as well."

"Lots of access to potions ingredients, though," Remus said. "Plenty of Master Brewers got their start in shops. It's like an apprenticeship."

"Wolfsbane," Anne murmured quietly.

"Yes, you could definitely get a lot of training about that potion, I imagine it'll be quite popular in the future. And useful to you, of course," Remus added.

"I just meant plain wolfsbane," she said. Sirius saw Remus tense.

"What would you want plain wolfsbane for, Anne?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, it's a cheap way out," she replied, looking down at her hands.

"Out of what?" Remus inquired, a sharp edge to his voice.

"If I wanted...I mean if I didn't want..." she trailed off. "It's not important. I guess whichever you think is best."
Sirius looked over her head at Remus, whose face had gone very pale. What would the girl want poison for --

Oh.

Suddenly the edge in the other man's voice made perfect sense. It was hard to kill a werewolf, unless you knew what you were doing...or had easy access to wolfsbane.

"Anne," Remus said, his voice very distant, "I think you and I had better take a trip to London tomorrow. I think there's a man you should meet. His name is Seth, he's quite nice -- he works at St. Mungo's."

"I don't want someone to ask me if I've come to terms with my lycanthropy," she said rebelliously.

"I know, and Seth won't ask that. He never did me, anyway," Remus said. "He's been my caseworker at the hospital for years. Maybe he can help you in ways I can't."

"No, I want to stay with you."

"And you are, but a visit -- "

"I don't want to!"

Sirius blinked at her.

"Anne," Remus said, in a voice Sirius very rarely heard. "You will come with me tomorrow or so help me Merlin I will ground you like the child you're behaving as."

Anne looked up at him, then at Sirius, who shrugged. "Don't look at me. He knows more than either of us about it. If you won't be told by Remus Lupin you may as well just off yourself now."

"Sirius!" Remus said, looking suddenly furious.

"Well, that's what she's on about, isn't it?" Sirius asked. "Go to the bloody hospital, you silly child."

Anne looked like she was about to cry, but when she opened her mouth she shocked both men.

"You think I should?" she asked. Remus raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, I do," Sirius answered.

"Okay." She stood, shaking out the wrinkles in her robe. "I'm going to go talk to Harry and Draco."

They watched as she climbed the steps to the back of the stand, then disappeared from view down the ladder.

"How do you do that?" Remus asked. "How do you do that to everyone? You just say something and they do it."

Sirius shrugged, smiled, and leaned back. "I'm just that good. You think Rubins will help her?"

"He helped me."

Sirius, in the act of relaxing, found himself suddenly tense. "You never -- you didn't think about..."

"No, not like she is," Remus said, indicating where Harry and Draco had landed and were showing
their brooms to Anne. "He just helped me, that's all. We're all screwed up when we're young."

"Good thing you've got me to tell you what to do then, isn't it?"

Remus gave him a warm, tolerant smile. "Good thing."
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

On the final day of the Easter holiday, Remus left Sirius and Harry playing chess in the garden and walked along the raised path that skirted the Forbidden Forest, heading up to Hogwarts. It was a bright day, sunny and windy, and the walk did him good -- invigorated him, dropping as he was into the relative calm of the early waxing moon.

When he reached the rooms they'd given him to live in as a professor, rooms he used rather less than anyone knew, he went first to the windows to open them and let in the fresh air. Then he turned, leaning against the bookshelf next to the window, and regarded the object hanging from the far wall warily.

Draco's Firebolt, tested extensively and all but dismantled in the hunt for whatever hexes might be on it, dangled quietly from a broomstick-mount. As far as he could tell, it was clean; he'd given it one last examination and set one last detection charm on it, a charm that had been left to run all week while he occupied himself with Harry and Sirius, Draco and Anne. Harry and Sirius were occupying themselves, Draco was safe at Hogwarts, and Anne had gone back to London; it was time to admit that the broomstick was clean.

He sighed and took it down, holding it at arm's length as if he could see what was hidden in it just by staring at it. Perhaps there weren't any hexes. In fact, by now he was fairly sure there weren't. Still, it worried him to give it back to Draco, and not only because it was a fast, professional-grade broom that he wasn't entirely sure the mild little Hufflepuff could handle.

Still, nothing to be done about it now. It was the boy's by right.

"Denbigh," he called. "When you have a moment, it's Professor Lupin."

There was a pop as the head of the Kitchen Elves appeared. Denbigh executed a low bow and looked up expectantly.

"How can Denbigh be helping Professor Remus Lupin today?" he asked. "Has Professor Remus Lupin had his breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you. Actually, I'm looking for Draco; I had a suspicion you might know where he is," Remus said. Denbigh nodded.

"Master Draco Malfoy is being in the kitchens with the house-elves," he said. "He is being very entertaining to the house elves, Professor Remus Lupin."

"Very well," Remus said with a smile. "I'll be down shortly. Don't tell him I'm coming, please?"

Denbigh saluted and vanished again. Remus strolled down to the kitchens idly, carrying the broomstick in one hand. If you paid close attention you could almost feel the reined-in power in the Firebolt. Even Remus could appreciate the champion-grade, suspicious or not.

He tickled the pear outside the portrait entrance to the kitchens, feeling a little like an illicit fourth-year again, and opened it just enough to peer inside.

In the hot, good-smelling kitchen, Draco was trying to silence a band of laughing house-elves.
When they finally settled down, he bowed.

"For my next trick," he said, and pointed at a large raw chicken, sitting in a roasting pan. "Coquo Dilisius!"

There was a fizzling noise, and a small sandwich sat where the chicken had been. The house-elves burst into applause.

"That was quite good, Draco," Remus said, and the elves fell silent. Draco whipped his head around, turning pale. "No need to be startled," he added, propping the broom against the outer wall and stepping inside. He picked up the sandwich, bit into it, and chewed thoughtfully.

"Any second-year can turn a chicken into a chicken sandwich," Draco said shyly.

"Any second-year can make a sandwich out of a cooked chicken. With a couple of slices of bread, even a Muggle can do that," Remus said. "Raw chicken..." he gestured at the counter, "...cooked chicken sandwich."

He indicated the other half of the sandwich, still sitting in the roasting pan. "Sliced, even. And with just the right amount of mustard."

Draco frowned. "It's not that hard."

"Isn't it?" Remus asked, taking another bite. Draco watched him chew. "All that remedial Transfiguration -- isn't so remedial, is it?"

"It used to be. I got better."

"You have a talent for it."

"No," Draco shook his head. "I just work hard."

"Like a good Hufflepuff," Remus said with a smile. He set the sandwich down and walked back to the portrait-door. "At any rate, I have a reward for your patience and hard work. Here it is -- we've done everything we could think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all. You've got a very good friend somewhere."

He turned around, broomstick in hand, and Draco's eyes got wide as saucers. The boy came forward almost reverently, taking the Firebolt from his hands.

"I can have it back?" he asked Remus, examining it with wary care. "Seriously? It's safe?"

"As far as I can tell. There's only one test left, of course," Remus added. "That's to put you on it and see how it flies. I couldn't really do that test on my own."

"I can ride it?"

Remus nodded. "Carefully, at first. But if you like, this afternoon we can fly all the way to Hogsmeade. Well, the edges, anyway. How'd you like to show off your broomstick to Harry?"

"I'm not supposed to leave the grounds," Draco answered.

"Draco, I'm going to give you a piece of advice that is going to get both of us in a lot of trouble someday," Remus said, bending and putting a hand on Draco's shoulder, their faces on the same level. The feeling came back to him again, the one of being a young man, the sort of boy who helped James and Sirius execute intricate plots. "There are some times when life requires that, for
our own sanity, we break a few rules."

From the air, riding a school broom with terrible aerodynamics, it looked like Harry and Sirius had given up their game of chess and were playing one-on-one football with an old decommissioned Quaffle. He saw Draco drop like a stone and halt smoothly, leaping off the broomstick and leaving it to hover obediently in midair. He would give the young Hufflepuff this much: put him on a broomstick and he was fearless. Draco never ceased to surprise him. Then again, he did have that daring, arrogant, brilliant Black blood in his veins.

Harry tackled Draco cheerfully and the two wrestled for supremacy until Sirius hauled Harry, nominally on top, up by the collar. Remus touched the broomstick down just as Harry was begging pleadingly for two minutes on the Firebolt.

"You're certain it's safe?" Sirius asked, over the heads of the two boys.

"Well, it's a stick meant to hover in the air and support a teenage boy while turning sharply and moving at high speeds," Remus replied. "So, it's certainly not safe. But as for hexes...no."

"But you can't have it at the Quidditch match," Draco said to Harry as the other boy straddled the Firebolt. "We're playing Slytherin and I'm going to kick your arse with this."

"We'll just see about that," Harry said, and the broom took off like a rocket.

"I assume you got permission to bring Draco off school grounds," Sirius said.

Remus glanced at Draco and winked at Sirius. "Course I did."

Draco's smile as he watched Harry try to tame the wayward Firebolt was the biggest Remus had seen since the holiday began.

***

"Okay," Padma said. "I've done it."

She placed an index card flat on the table between herself and Neville. He picked it up, squinting at it, then sighed and dug in his pockets, producing five Sickles.

"What's all this?" Harry said, gesturing at the card with his spoon. School was back in session and entertainment thin on the ground; if there was mischief he wanted to be a part of it. "What are we betting on?"

"Neville's been complaining all week about who he's supposed to root for in the match," Padma said, "because he's too coward and stubborn to flip a coin."

"This much we knew," Draco said gravely.

"So, I told him it was really just a simple formula, weighing pros against cons," Padma continued.

"I bet her she couldn't turn it into a formula," Neville said, passing the card over to Harry. He studied it, perplexed.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{set } a & \text{ (if } N = S \text{ then } 0D + 1B \\
\text{set } b & \text{ (if } N = H \text{ then } 1D + 1B - 1H \\
\text{set } c & \text{ (if } (N \neq S) \text{ and } (N \neq H) \text{ then } -5P \\
\text{Ret } X & \text{ (where } X = 5N) \text{ if } (a = b \text{ and } P > 0) \text{ OR } (N \text{ GROWS A PAIR)}
\end{align*}
\]
"How do you know it's any good?" Harry asked, tilting his head.

"I don't," Neville replied. "But it looks very official."

Padma rolled her eyes. "It's quite simple. If Neville roots for Slytherin then Draco will be annoyed and it'll seem like Bad Sportsmanship. If Neville roots for Hufflepuff then Draco will be happy but Harry will be annoyed and it'll still seem like Bad Sportsmanship. If Neville doesn't root for Slytherin or Hufflepuff then I'm going to smack him. If Neville balances Slytherin and Hufflepuff without annoying me any further, or grows a pair and picks a team, we return Success. That's 5N, for 'lots of Neville'. You know. Go Neville and all."

"Padma, you're the only girl I know who can make Arithmantical death threats," Draco said. "I -- "

He was interrupted by a cry of "Malfoy!" followed shortly by a different voice calling "Potter!"

The two captains stood in the doorway, Cedric and Marcus, each glaring at their teammates.

"No fraternising," Marcus Flint called. "Time to get ready."

"Good luck," Neville said, as Harry and Draco glanced at each other. "Don't be nervous, if I can't pick a team Padma'll beat me up and then neither of us will see the game anyway."

Harry put out his hand and Draco shook it. Marcus made a disgusted noise.

"When you two are done bonding, we have a game to play," he said.

"Leave them alone. Come on, Malfoy," Cedric said, elbowing Marcus. This was probably a mistake.

"I'll say whatever I want when they're acting like idiots," Marcus answered, elbowing back.

"Shut your mouth," Cedric replied angrily.

"Oh, you want to get into it with me, Hufflepuff?" Marcus demanded, turning to face Cedric. "Go ahead. I know you're dying to knock me out so Slytherin will forfeit -- "

"I wouldn't dream of giving your masochistic soul the satisfaction," Cedric answered.

"Gentlemen," came a new voice, and Professor McGonagall appeared behind both boys. Madam Hooch stood nearby, already in full flight gear. "I believe you have a game to prepare for."

Harry and Draco followed dutifully, pretending not to notice that Madam Hooch gently knocked Flint and Diggory's heads together on their way to the pitch. They parted ways and went to their respective teams, preparing for the last game before the Quidditch Cup, the one which would decide who would play Gryffindor for the House championship. Hufflepuff had already lost to Gryffindor once, but if Draco hadn't tumbled from his broom the outcome might have been very different -- and Draco had a Firebolt now.

Harry knew he wasn't the only one weighing up Draco and his new broomstick as Marcus and Cedric shook hands, but he bet he was the only one worrying about having to play against one of his best friends. At least Draco wasn't playing Seeker; still, a Beater could do a Seeker a lot of damage if they wanted. Harry wasn't sure whether he wanted Draco gunning for him or not. If he did, at least that would show that he could play the game without letting personal feelings enter
into it, like Harry did when he was playing against Oliver Wood.

Madam Hooch gave the signal and the teams kicked off from the ground, the Chasers jumping into immediate action while Harry and the Hufflepuff Seeker rose high above the game, circling the Pitch. Down below, somewhere, Lee Jordan was nattering on about the Firebolt as Draco executed sharp turns and bursts of speed to get himself between the other players and the Bludgers; Professor McGonagall kept having to remind him to talk about the game and not the broomsticks.

The Slytherin girls were hogging the Quaffle from Pucey, the only male Chaser on the team now; Mary scored for Slytherin just as Harry spotted a glint of gold near one of the barriers, well under the general level of play. Even as he dove he saw that he was going to have to cut straight through the action, and sure enough --

Well, he thought, as a Bludger whistled past his ear, clearly Draco didn't have any trouble playing to win. He ducked and lost sight of the Snitch; when he looked up again all he could see was Towler hitting the Bludger back towards Draco, and the Firebolt leaping upwards even as Draco leaned low and swung under his knees to hit it wide.

Harry was pleased with what he saw when he rose up out of gameplay again, looking for a flutter of silvery wings or a spark of gold in the sun. Ever since Slytherin had begun to play on levels and not just back-and-forth, and the other teams had picked up on it, the game seemed to be faster and more ruthless, which was how Harry liked it. He felt a little twinge of pride that he had helped to cause the improvement in play --

And then he realised he ought to be looking for the Snitch, which...yes...there, by the Slytherin goalpost. The last he'd heard, Slytherin was up twenty points, which meant that whoever had the Snitch won the game.

He accelerated madly, noticing as he did so that not only Cedric but also both Beaters were following him. Another Bludger whizzed past him, knocking his broomstick slightly sideways. If he could just get to the goalpost before the Cedric saw where he was going...

Harry dropped suddenly into the fray, nearly crossing broomstick-handles with Draco, who pulled back and gave him a startled look. Cedric, taller and riding a larger broomstick, couldn't follow him into the tight knot of Beaters and Chasers, and he hadn't yet seen the Snitch.

He practically had to elbow his way through the scrum. Even as he dropped again, aiming for where the Snitch still hovered by the goalpost, he heard someone shriek. Several people, in fact; Towler, bellowing a warning, was pointing down at the Pitch where three hooded figures were gliding slowly -- almost serenely -- towards Harry.

Dementors.

Harry didn't stop to think about why there were only three of them or why he didn't feel anything at such close quarters; he jerked his elbow, sending his wand out of his sleeve and into his grip.

"Expecto patronum!" he shouted, thinking of the happiest memory he and Remus had managed to unearth for him: the day he got his Hogwarts letter. It wasn't a very impressive patronus, still not much more than a white mist, but it seemed to knock all three Dementors flat while Harry zoomed past, still aiming for the goalpost. With his wand in his hand he couldn't very well grab the Snitch; in a moment of decision, he let his wand fall, hoping he'd be able to find it afterwards, and brought his hand around in an arc, neatly capturing the small, flighty gold ball. The whistle sounded; the game was over.
Harry turned his broomstick to find six green blurs headed straight towards him, and a second later he'd all but been knocked off his broomstick by the congratulatory violence of his teammates.

Beyond them, however, he saw the Dementors moving again; rising, yes, but also...

Picking up the hems of their robes, and running.

Harry cocked his head. That couldn't be right. He was pretty sure Dementors didn't wear Hogwarts trousers under their robes. He could see Professor McGonagall and Madam Hooch both aiming stunning hexes at the so-called Dementors, but the hooded figures were dodging deftly, and after a moment they had disappeared around the corners of the stands, into the Forbidden Forest.

"What the hell was that?" Harry asked Cedric Diggory, who had already dismounted his broom and was walking with perhaps slightly exaggerated dignity towards Flint. He slid respectfully from his broomstick, waiting while they shook.

"Don't know," Cedric replied, rubbing the back of his head curiously. Draco pulled to a stop next to him breathlessly, almost tumbling off when the Firebolt braked faster than he expected. "Prank, I reckon."

"Did you see that?" Draco mock-punched an invisible enemy. "You flattened them, Harry!"

Cedric put a hand on the back of Draco's neck warningly.

"Good game," he said, and forcibly turned Draco, marching him back to where the Hufflepuff team was receiving consolation from their House.

"That was quite a Patronus," said a new voice in Harry's ear, and he turned to find Remus grinning down at him, looking a little shaken but mostly pleased. He passed Harry his wand, a little dirty but none the worse for its momentary abandonment. "A shame you couldn't have tried it on the real thing."

"I was wondering why they didn't affect me," Harry sighed. "Too good to be true, I suppose."

"Ah, looks like they've caught one," Remus added, looking over Harry's head. In the distance, Professor Snape and Madam Hooch were dragging a hooded, protesting Dementor along by the arm, both looking furious. "I think I'll let Snape be the one to lose his temper this time; you carried yourself off quite well and I have no complaints. Well done, Harry."

Harry gave him a nod. "Thanks, Professor."

Remus' grin widened a fraction, and Harry swore he saw a flicker of a wink.

"Well, Potter," Snape said, one slim hand still clenched tightly around his victim's arm as they approached. "Seeing as you are the conquering hero, would you care to attend to the unmasking? You gave our anonymous costumed lover quite a fright."

"An unworthy trick," Madam Hooch said coolly, smacking the still-hooded student in the back of the head as McGonagall approached. "Very unsportsmanlike."

Harry, still much shorter than his opponent, stood on tiptoe to grasp the tip of the hood and pull it off. A messy-haired, red-faced Ravenclaw fourth-year emerged. Harry recognised her, vaguely, but he couldn't place her name.

"Detention," McGonagall pronounced severely. "This way, Ms. Turpin."
She took custody of the girl from Snape, and Harry watched as the girl tripped over her robe, trying to keep up with McGonagall's pace.

"Did you catch sight of the other two?" Remus asked Snape, as the students began to pour forward and around them, congratulating Harry on his win.

"No," Snape said. "Only that they were taller. That robe's tailored for a bigger person."

"That doesn't narrow it down," Remus sighed, watching the Ravenclaw as she was led away. "We've no idea who it was?"

"None at all."

***

"I think I know who it was," Harry said, setting his books down on the library study table. Draco, busily copying notes from Padma, didn't look up.

"Well, let's cream 'em," he suggested, as Padma and Neville closed their books and looked at Harry, who slumped down into the library chair. It was Saturday, but not yet warm enough to spend much time outside; most of the students had taken to the library, where they could gossip and amuse themselves as long as they maintained at least the illusion of trying to be quiet.

"I think it was Gryffindors," Harry continued, leaning in close so that they wouldn't be overheard. He felt slightly sick and headachey; the Slytherins had been celebrating their victory and the fact that they were now going to the Cup against Gryffindor. They'd been up until nearly one in the morning, at which point a lookout had signaled that Snape was coming and everyone scattered before the wrath of their Head of House could descend, Harry grateful for the reprieve and the comfort of his bed.

"Ravenclaw and Gryffindor?" Draco asked. "The Houses don't normally work together like that. Well, 'cept for us, of course," he added conscientiously.

Harry tapped his quill thoughtfully on the table, his eyes darting away. His friends followed his gaze to where Fred and George Weasley were pretending to study together, heads bent over some new project of theirs.

"Not the twins," Neville said. "I mean, do you really think?"

"Who else is going to pull something like that, especially when they've got it in for me after Remus scared the hell out of them?" Harry asked. "Snape said they were tall, and they're just the kind who could get someone from another House to join in."

"Then we've got to get them," Padma said. All three boys looked at her. "What? I can't be angry they played a dumb trick and made my House look bad?"

"You aren't normally, that's all," Neville said.

"Well, then this time is an exception. What do we do to them?"

"Nothing," Harry pronounced. Draco frowned. "We're going to leave them alone."

"But they're vicious, careless boys," Padma said.

"So are we sometimes. No -- I want to let them off before this gets any worse. Remus is always
going to come down on my side if we get into a prank war, which isn't fair, and anyway they've got OWLs coming up."

"Are you sure you're a Slytherin?" Draco asked. "Cause what you're saying sounds awfully like something one of my Housemates would say."

"I've thought about it," Harry said. "That's the thing. I kind of think it's good that it was them and a Ravenclaw."

"He's lost it," Neville told Padma. "Studying's gone to his head, it's making him go all funny."

"I haven't," Harry protested. "I don't think what they did was very good, but I flattened them then and...I don't want to punish them for this. Not for working together with Lisa Turpin."

"Working together to be mean," Draco said. "Don't forget, I was up there too. All of us saw the Dementors and flipped out."

"Yeah, but at the same time -- well, we've always been stronger because we come from different Houses, right?" Harry asked. The others nodded hesitantly, not wanting to give Harry too much leverage in this fight. "We always know what the other Houses think because we're friends, and that's more important than Houses. Now other kids are learning that it's easier to pull something off if they work with the people who are the most helpful, not necessarily their friends in their own House."

"Stronger for what?" Padma asked.

"Well, Hogwarts is a target for trouble, it's been attacked twice in the last two years, more or less. If something really big ever comes down at the school, we'll be more ready for it. We'll be more unified, as a school," Harry said.

"Nothing like that could happen here," Neville said. "Dumbledore'd protect us."

"Well, either way, I'm putting bans on us going after Fred and George, and I'm going to make sure the Slytherins don't lynch Lisa. How mad are the Hufflepuffs?" he asked Draco, who shrugged.

"It was a well-played game," he replied.

"You Hufflepuffs," Harry grinned, shoving Draco affectionately. "If the world ended you'd all shrug and say that it was a very pretty Armageddon."

***

Remus had no hallway-patrol duties that weekend, and he needed to rest at any rate; the full moon was fast approaching, and he seemed to have caught temporary arthritis from this one. Sirius was more than happy to have him come down to Hogsmeade and be fussed over. For once Remus allowed it, sitting in a chair by the window and marking papers with worrying slowness. Sirius, cheerfully quiet and idle, wanted nothing better than to sit nearby in the window-seat and shred the Daily Prophet's Saturday edition, working his way slowly from front page to back, flinging pages aside when he was done with them.

"The Sports section's gone all to shit," he remarked, tossing aside the offending page. "Skeeter's got a shill to do a paragraph about the game, and the rest is all gossip-column about the Firebolt and Harry. And us," he added, annoyed. Remus noticed he was trying to hide just how annoyed he was. Poor Sirius; such a fireball of feelings, to be the -- what, lover? boyfriend? He supposed they qualified under common law for husbands by now -- the partner of a man who did not deal well
with high-running emotions.

He leaned over, hearing his spine crack and protest, and picked up the offending page.

"I'm going to write a letter to the Prophet," Sirius continued, as Remus scanned the article.

"Best not," he murmured. "I'm sure plenty others will, and we can ill-afford the publicity."

"Yes, well. Your idea of not sitting together didn't even work." Sirius leaned over and stabbed the paper with his finger. "Proud Godfather Sirius Black was much in evidence, though not seated as usual with Professor Remus Lupin, well-known close friend of the famous bachelor. Dare we surmise the friendship has its rocky moments? Professor Lupin, seated with Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, certainly seemed pained by the lack of his friend, cheering half-heartedly and often seen to grimace."

"I was in pain," Remus said. "That bench is horrible."

"Didn't miss me?" Sirius asked.

"Of course I missed you, but I happened to know that in five or six hours you'd be cheerfully rubbing anti-inflammation salves into my shoulders," Remus said.

"Very erotic, those."

"You seemed to think so!"

"Aww." Sirius kissed him. "Upset that I find you irresistible?"

"No," Remus murmured, setting the paper aside. Sirius slid off the window-seat and helped Remus stand creakily, wrapping his arms around his waist. They stared out at the valley together, Remus tracing his fingers along the knuckles of the man holding him.

"You're not going to distract me from being angry about that article," Sirius said in his ear. "I'll start a campaign or something."

Remus sighed, half-bliss, half-perplexity.

"Sirius," he said. "I know you find plenty of occupation in Hogsmeade, but have you ever thought about having a regular job again?"

"Like what?" Sirius asked, nuzzling under one ear.

"I don't know, something to focus your energy on so you're not always fretting about Rita Skeeter. Or Harry," he added. "There are a few empty storefronts in Hogsmeade, you could open a shop again. Another bookshop, even, like Sandu --"

"No." The word was sharp and sudden, and Remus could feel his body tense.

"It's only a suggestion. You like books."

"I'm not opening another bookshop," Sirius said. There was an edge to his voice that Remus rarely heard.

"It was just an idea."

"I don't want to hear about that again."
Remus pulled away and turned, studying Sirius' face. It had closed off completely, eyes shuttered against scrutiny, mouth set in a thin, hard line.

"It doesn't have to be Sandust," he said gently. "We could put fireproofing charms -- "

"We're not discussing it," Sirius said. Remus raised a hand to cup his cheek affectionately.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't know it would upset you."

"I'm not upset."

"Sirius, you're practically vibrating with anger."

Sirius ducked his head and turned it away, looking out the window. He glanced back at Remus, looked off in the distance again. His hands were balled into fists, and Remus watched in amazement as the normally cheerful, relaxed Sirius Black forcibly calmed himself.

"I'm going out," Sirius said, turning away and lifting his cloak off the hook.

"Sirius -- "

"Moony, no." Sirius didn't look at him, which was possibly the worst sign of all. "I'll be back for dinner. You have marking to do."

Remus watched as he swirled the cloak around his shoulders and slammed the door. All was silence for a few minutes.

"Well, fuck," he said, and sat down again. He did have marking to do, and notes to prepare for when Kingsley would take over for him in a few days; he owed Anne and Ellis letters, and Dora had written to him to ask if he would look up a particularly complex charm for her.

Instead, he sat and stared out the window, quill tapping idly on parchment, watching the front walk. Sirius would probably just stop and have a drink at the pub, which in itself was not comforting, but Remus didn't know what else to do. There was an unwritten law between them that they didn't discuss Sandust. He'd broken it without meaning to, but five years should be enough to mourn the death of something that hadn't even been alive to begin with.

"If we hadn't had Sandust we wouldn't have Harry," he said to the empty room.

***

When Sirius didn't return by sunset, Remus gave up trying to work for the day and went into the kitchen, rummaging in the pantry and cold-cupboard for something to eat. Nothing looked particularly appetising, and he considered floo'ing the Three Broomsticks and asking after Sirius just to soothe his nerves so that he could settle down and eat something.

He had just about resolved to do it when he heard Sirius outside, knocking the mud off his boots on the small cast-iron guards by the door. He waited in the kitchen, listening to the door open and close and Sirius' keys clatter on the foyer table.

"Moony?" Sirius called.

"Kitchen!" Remus replied. "Just trying to sort out dinner."

"Don't bother," Sirius said gruffly, appearing in the doorway. He had a large, grease-stained paper bag in one hand. "Brought some with me. Got that curry you like from the place near Zonko's."
"That was nice," Remus said warily, accepting the bag and unpacking it. Awkward silence was so much worse when there hadn't been any in years, he reflected. Sirius shoved his hands in his pockets and watched as he unpacked the various containers and began piling food on two plates.

"I don't want to talk about it," Sirius said, startling him. He paused in the act of licking some curry sauce from his thumb.

"I surmised," he answered blandly.

"But I want you to know that I don't want to talk about it. So that we're not snapping at each other all night."

"I didn't snap," Remus retorted, stung.

"I suppose I'm the only one being irrational, then?"

"Sirius -- "

"Don't say it that way. You're the one who insisted on talking about Sandust."

Remus rested both hands on the kitchen counter, bowing his head patiently. After a minute, he picked up one plate and offered it to Sirius.

"I wasn't trying to make you talk about Sandust," he said, carrying his own plate to the table. "But now I sort of think you should, if this is the way you react to me mentioning the name."

"No."

"Yes, you've made that clear." He sat and began picking at the food with a fork. "Thank you for dinner."

"You're welcome." Sirius stabbed his kebab with a fork, yanking the meat off the skewer. Awkward silence unrolled again.

"I still think it might be a good idea, finding something to do," Remus ventured hesitantly. "Like when you give tours in the summer in Betwys Beddau."

"Maybe," Sirius grunted, the implication clear: not bloody likely.

"Anyway," Remus said, "We've only got about another month and a half before exams. Be nice to be back in Betwys Beddau."

"Sure," Sirius said. Remus sighed inwardly, looking forward to a long, uncomfortable evening.

After dinner, Sirius apparently decided that Padfoot was the best silent treatment he could give. Remus spent the evening trying to read while Padfoot snoozed on the sofa and did some arcane inspection of the house, snuffling along the baseboards and inspecting each stair as he climbed it. Finally, Remus set his book down.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

Padfoot yelped once and followed him up the stairs to the bedroom, arranging himself on the blankets once Remus had settled in. He glared a little balefully as Remus rolled over, unsettling him from his position at the foot of the bed, but he didn't try to make any noise or hog the blankets, which Remus supposed was something.
Remus awoke to the sensation of Sirius kissing him -- not Padfoot's doggy kisses, which were sort of disgusting and anyway rarely bestowed, but Sirius' lips on his throat and shoulder, Sirius nuzzling his skin.

"Whass wrong?" he asked sleepily, trying to get his eyes open.

"Nothing," Sirius muttered. "Want to talk to you."

"Mmh? What time is it?"

"About three."

Remus groaned. "You're lucky it's a Sunday, or I'd smack you on the nose and go back to sleep."

Sirius nipped his throat. More fully awake now, he could feel an arm draped over his chest, hand curled to stroke his other shoulder lightly.

"Make-up sex?" Sirius asked hopefully. Remus wriggled closer, brushing his lips over Sirius' forehead.

"Are we skipping the part where we say sorry?" he asked.

"No," Sirius said, resting his head on Remus' shoulder. "I just need to tell you some stuff."

"Well, I'm all attention. Have you come to your senses?"

Sirius growled. "I was in my senses before!"

"Okay, okay. Don't stop that," Remus said, and Sirius kissed his jawline.

"Everyone says," he said, working his way up to Remus' ear and biting his earlobe gently, "that you shouldn't go to bed angry. So, first apology. I'm sorry I went to bed angry."

"Accepted," Remus replied. "Me too."

Sirius slid his hand down from shoulder to stomach, fingers warm and sure. Remus felt he shouldn't enjoy it as much as he did; felt it was somehow a remnant of a more canine personality, enjoying having his belly rubbed. Sirius knew it, which was why he was using it, of course. Sirius knew how to get right through every defence Remus had, which was a little disconcerting sometimes.

But it felt so good he also didn't care.

"And I'm sorry I snapped at you," Sirius continued.

"Also accepted," Remus mumbled, arching his back a little. Sirius kissed his temple, cheeks, the corner of his mouth. "Don't stop doing that."

"Won't," Sirius assured him, hooking a thumb in his pyjamas and pulling them down. "You know how much I loved the bookshop."

"Yes..."

"And it's only..." Sirius paused to press his face to Remus' throat again. "If I didn't have the bookshop I wouldn't have you or Harry."
"Yes!" Remus said, feeling oddly triumphant and forgetting for a moment that Sirius' fingers were sliding along the ridge of one hip-bone. He pushed himself up on his elbows, dislodging Sirius slightly, and looked down at him. "That is exactly what I said this afternoon after you left! Only I forgot the part about me."

Sirius looked up at him reproachfully. "I'm trying to make out with you," he said.

"Sorry." Remus settled down again, turning to face him. He kissed him on the mouth, something Sirius had still been inching towards. "Can I ask...?"

"Mm," Sirius replied, which Remus took as permission.

"Were you afraid if you opened another shop, it'd burn down too?"

Sirius raised his head and looked at him for a long time, an almost curious look. Remus reached out with one hand and stroked his disordered hair, cupping his cheek.

"No," Sirius said. "That...no. Don't you see?"

"See what, love?" Remus asked. "I saw a man mourning for something he'd lost. Isn't that what it was?"

"Those seven years at Sandust...I loved it so much. It was...quiet, and you were there for a lot of it, and..." Sirius made a vague gesture. "But it was all a lie."

Remus tensed. Sirius put a calming hand back on his chest, rubbing slowly.

"That rat was living in our rafters, listening to us. And that's like...a metaphor, almost. All I did at Sandust was lie to myself," Sirius whispered, and there was real fear and pain on his face, something he didn't often reveal. Remus covered his hand with one of his own.

"You did what you thought was right, to protect Harry," he said.

"Did I? The whole time -- some of the lies were so old and ingrained." Sirius pulled his hand away and Remus could almost feel the tension crackling between them now. If he stepped wrong, this might go very, very badly; but he wasn't sure what Sirius was saying. He took his time, though he wasn't sure the end result was worth the consideration he was giving it.

"Tell me," he said.

Sirius bit his lip, looking like he might weep, which was even more upsetting than being snapped at. Remus rolled and gathered him in his arms, holding his head against his shoulder.

"I thought I was protecting Harry," Sirius said, voice low and uncertain. "But that wasn't so, was it? I let them treat him terribly, like some kind of animal -- for years."

"You didn't know. We didn't know."

"We knew it was wrong. We had eyes to see with, see him wearing hand-me-downs and being shouted at by the Dursley boy."

"That's my guilt too, though. And we fixed it, Sirius. Harry's a beautiful child. He loves us and he has friends, he's as close to normal as anyone could be in his situation."

Sirius was still tense, still holding himself together through sheer physical muscle. "That's not all."
"Tell me," Remus repeated, feeling Sirius' arms creep around his waist, holding him there in case he let go. Poor Sirius; still insecure. Remus couldn't have let go for his own life.

"I lied to myself about you, too," Sirius mumbled. "I lied about what you were going through those first few years -- "

"We've had done with that. That's not something to forgive, Sirius. You helped me when I didn't even want help." Remus kissed the crown of his head. If Sirius still cared that he'd nearly starved before coming to Sandust, then he'd carried that burden of guilt years after Remus had all but forgotten it.

"I lied about what I felt for you," Sirius said, and there was the crux of it; his voice broke. "I lied about who I was. I left you alone because if you'd been there the lie wouldn't have stood, and then when you came to Sandust I had to face that. All the women, I...suppose I lied to them too. I thought that was what men did, young men, I thought...they would give me some kind of answer if I kept at it long enough."

"Sirius, I don't understand," Remus whispered.

"All the time I kept Sandust, up until nearly the end, I thought I was Sirius Black, this -- I don't know, some kind of Famous Bachelor like they say in the papers, and my best friend on earth just happened to like men. And the whole time I thought...I just liked to talk to good-looking men, that's natural, and the whole time I fancied you rotten too and I didn't even notice, right up to the end almost. Even then until Sandust burned it was all this enormous lie. And once that was done I was free of it."

Remus swallowed tightly. Sirius' body had relaxed, now that the truth was out, and in some ways that was even more dangerous. Anything he said could wound him, slice him open and gut him. The tiniest sharp edge could wreck him and even silence could be sharp.

"You were lying about being gay," he said gently. "You thought you were just taking care of me."

Sirius nodded and kissed his skin again.

"And Sandust was that lie," Remus concluded.

"I'm so sorry, Moony."

Remus smiled and tugged his hair a little. "Sirius, I am much more annoyed that you woke me up at three am to say this than I am that you tormented yourself for a decade because if you touched another man's body you might enjoy it too much."

Sirius lay still for a moment, Remus sliding his fingers through his hair.

"You can go back to sleep if you want," Sirius said. Remus tugged his hair, lifting his head until their faces were level, waiting until Sirius met his eyes before continuing.

"I am also more annoyed that you are completely missing the point," he said, tugging gently again for emphasis. "I don't care if you don't open another shop, Sirius. I don't care if you never work again. Why should you, except to be happy? But it wouldn't be like last time. You would lock up your shop and say goodnight to your neighbours and come home, and instead of an empty house I'd be here. Reading or cooking or making the bed we sleep in together. This time I'd be here when you came home." He paused and licked his lips. "And now that you've had your big emotional coming-out, five years after you started sleeping with me, can we go back to the sex? Because this is terrible, terrible foreplay."
Sirius put his head down on Remus’ chest and laughed, shoulders shaking, breath warm against his skin. Remus waited while he laughed, full and deep, until finally he slowed and stopped.

"Moony," he said.

"Yes, Padfoot."

"I want to kiss you."

"Well, I'm not exactly stopping you."

Sirius propped himself over his lover and kissed his lips, affectionately, while Remus smiled.

"And I want to touch you," he whispered.

"Oh yes?" Remus raised his eyebrows.

"Mm. I want to touch you until you moan."

"Shouldn't take much," Remus said, the last syllable disappearing into another kiss.

"I want to make you want me," Sirius continued, hands drifting down his body, to his thighs and stomach and cock. Remus tilted his head back, eyes flickering closed, and Sirius took the opportunity to kiss his neck. "I want to touch you everywhere."

"Sirius," Remus moaned, as Sirius' fingers stroked him slowly.

"Would you like that, Moony?" Sirius asked in his ear.

"Yes," Remus hissed.

"Me too. I'd like to lick you, taste you. I want you to be desperate for me."

"Too late," Remus laughed, moaning again as Sirius' hand tightened slightly. Sirius needed this, he knew; not just the catharsis of sex, that was something they'd both needed in the past, but some kind of -- assertion. That what he offered was acceptable, desirable; that Remus wanted him. Because if both of them wanted it, then it was okay, whatever the rest of the world might say. Whatever poor, repressed Sirius had thought years ago when he wondered why the women he fucked never made him happy.

All those women, he thought, as Sirius kissed his way down his chest and stomach. All that sex never made him half so happy as he was with me.

The power was almost more erotic than the feeling of Sirius' mouth on his cock -- the knowledge that he had the ability to make Sirius pleased or miserable just by his presence. He couldn't ever misuse it, or it might be lost, because Sirius always walked a razor-thin tightrope, but then who wanted to misuse it? All he wanted was for his -- boyfriend, his lover -- to be happy.

Then all the philosophy in the world disappeared, because Sirius took his splendid, splendid mouth away and slid back up his body and whispered in his ear, "I want you to fuck me."

Remus laughed again and kissed him. "If I knew you were this good at dirty talk, my own, I would have made you do it years ago."

"Slow," Sirius continued, their bodies pressed together, his hips moving with agonizing deliberation. "I want you inside me. Please, Moony," he begged, which made Remus' head spin.
Remus smiled into his shoulder and let Sirius roll over. He pulled him close, chest to Sirius' shoulders, hips moving slightly.

"What was it you wanted again?" he asked, sliding a hand down his stomach.

"Moony --"

"Shh. Trust me, I know what I'm doing," he grinned, relief and love flooding through him. They knew almost every charm there possibly was for this kind of thing, which made all that Muggle fumbling with lubricant and fingers seem graceless and clumsy. He whispered a few latin words in Sirius' ear and felt him buck as the charm worked, heard him whine desperately. And, when he pressed inside him, heard him moan even more desperately.

He didn't want to move slowly; he wanted to crawl inside Sirius' skin until they were one person. He wanted to hear Sirius moan and say his name and feel the flickering, trembling tension in his body as he came, a delicious tension that would blank out the afternoon, the horrible afternoon and silent dinner and angry look in Padfoot's eyes. It took all his restraint to give Sirius what he wanted -- the leisurely push of his hips, the loose way his hand stroked Sirius' cock, slow kisses on his neck and shoulders. Even so, when Sirius gasped and his breath began to come shallow and fast, he couldn't help himself; Sirius should know that the desperate fast thrusts were as much a sign as the restraint he had (rather admirably) shown up to this point.

"Love you, Sirius," he said, moaning, trying to apologise for losing control. "Love you -- I love you --"

He shuddered and felt Sirius stiffen, and there it was -- the drawn-out keen from Sirius that took all thought from both their minds.

Remus gasped for breath as Sirius relaxed, pulling away slightly, rolling onto his back.

"Feel better?" he asked Sirius, collapsing against his shoulder. Sirius mumbled a cleaning charm, which tickled slightly.

"Yes," he answered. "Now you really can go back to sleep if you want."

Remus chuckled. "Not as good at pillow talk, alas."

"Everyone has their skills," Sirius said, making a dignified face.

"That is so." Remus closed his eyes and nosed against Sirius' shoulder, throwing one arm across his waist. They were silent for a few minutes, until Sirius drew in a breath again. Remus tried not to tense.

"This whole sodomy thing," Sirius mumbled. "I think it could really catch on."

Remus snickered, relaxing. "Well, I was a fan way before it was hip."

"Remus!"

"S'true," Remus yawned. Sirius kissed him before closing his eyes.

"There are some empty shops in Hogsmeade," he said idly. "I'd have to wait till next year, though. No point trying to get a shop open in two months before we leave for the River House."

"Don't do it for me," Remus said, already half asleep. "I just want you to be happy."
Sirius stroked his hair. "All right. I'll think about it first."

"Good boy," Remus said, and slipped back down into sleep.

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Remus reflected over the next few days that something in Sirius had changed; it wasn't as if the sex was ever bad, or ever infrequent, but it felt almost as though Sirius was in some odd honeymoon period. He touched him constantly when they were alone together and Padfoot was at Hogwarts much more often, sleeping under Harry's desk during classes and sitting at Remus' feet at meals. He knew it would probably wear off, but he enjoyed it while it lasted, especially after the April full moon. Despite the wolfsbane potion, he was still weak and tired, and the warm body curled around him at all hours was not unwelcome.

It was as if Sirius had been keeping back one last reserve, some leftover fragment from when they were only friends, and that had disappeared.

After the moon, when he finally moved back to his own rooms at Hogwarts to recuperate a little, he had visitors; Snape, as always, asking brusque questions about his physical condition and insisting on examining his throat and glands. Hard on his heels came Kingsley Shacklebolt, wanting to inform him of his students' behaviour and discuss their treatment of a Real Live Auror teaching them Defence while their professor was sick.

"I didn't expect them to ask so many questions," Kingsley admitted frankly, sitting on a chair next to the bed. Remus grinned at him from his bed, propped on pillows provided and rearranged solicitously by Sirius that morning.

"You don't see many children in your line of work, do you?" he asked. "They're always inquisitive. And you're a bona-fide superhero to them."

"Not all of them," Kingsley said. "Some of the older ones were suspicious. Some of them have parents with some pretty Dark skeletons in their closet, you know. Possibly literal skeletons, if you believe the stories that go round at headquarters. Slytherin, mostly."

"Not all of them, surely," Remus protested. Kingsley smiled.

"Are you asking if Potter was stroppy?" he asked. "I hear what he did to Umbridge, though even from her side of the story it sounds like she deserved what she got."

"Well..."

"I know you're friends with his godfather," Kingsley assured him. "Potter was all right; he even came up to me after class and asked a few...oddly insightful questions. Mostly about Dementors and the Patronus."

"Makes sense, what with all the Dementors around the school," Remus said blithely.

"Yes; I told him a Patronus was advanced magic he wouldn't see till his seventh year, though," Kingsley said.

"Not quite true," Remus replied, exhaustion from the moon loosening his tongue. "I've been teaching him on the sly."

"Have you? I heard he pulled something during the Quidditch game, but I was supervising forest patrols. I'd be shocked if he could create a full-fledged one. He asked me if I could."
"Not yet, but he's working on it. Did you tell him?"

"I said I could, but I didn't have time to show him. D'you know, young Malfoy came up to me too. He seemed pretty interested in what it takes to become an Auror."

Remus smiled. "Draco's a good lad, but I don't think he has the push for it. I could be wrong, but he's so timid, so much of the time. He and Harry get up to mischief together, but he never acts on his own."

"That was the sense I got," Kingsley agreed. "At any rate, they're a good lot, your students, and now I can put it about at the Ministry that when I taught class there wasn't a single problem. That'll get up Umbridge's nose."

"Thanks, Kingsley," Remus said. "I appreciate it."

"One more thing, then I'll let you bide...has Ted spoken to you recently?" Kingsley asked, looking as if he were fishing for something.

"He had a word with Sirius," Remus said guardedly. "Sirius had a word with me. Do you credit any of it?"

"From Ted, I do. Not sure if his gossip is good, but I trust his judgement. Do you think...I have some clout with the youngsters in the Ministry. Do you think it's time we talked to Dumbledore about rebuilding the Order of the Phoenix?"

Remus shook his head. "Not yet. An overreaction now would make us look like fools later, and it's still just stories. I'm sure Dumbledore's keeping a steady hand on things."

"He's getting old, Lupin."

"He's still Dumbledore."

Kingsley nodded. "Well, I'm not giving up my allegiance. But I will talk to one or two promising people. Just in case."

"Thanks, Kingsley." Remus took the parchment scroll of notes that Kingsley passed him. "Stay in touch."

"Practically the Auror motto," Kingsley said, and walked to the fireplace. "Ministry for Magic!" he called, stepping inside.

Remus considered Kingsley's words, toying with the scroll without actually untying the twine that held it shut. He'd heard the rumours about Pettigrew and Malfoy poking around Eastern Europe, but Voldemort was dead. Even if Dumbledore didn't believe it, Remus had to; he'd lost too much to the Death Eaters to believe otherwise, and Voldemort was powerful, even more powerful than Peter. Peter was still, in part, the sly, not-too-clever hanger-on of his school friends, and Lucius Malfoy was a raving madman. Madmen and schoolboys he could handle. Voldemort...

He prayed that Voldemort could not be resurrected. If he were, Remus would seriously consider the suggestion of taking Harry and bolting for safety, because he had lost Harry's parents to Voldemort and he was not about to lose Harry and Sirius as well.

Chapter End Notes
I regret to say that at this point I stopped writing Laocoon’s Children, and wasn’t able to start again. Book three remains unfinished. Because I didn’t want to leave it hanging forever, I did do a summary of the end of book three, and provided my notes for the rest of the books in the series.

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