The Other Side: Thick and Thin

by ChapterEight

Summary

Being sorted into Gryffindor was possibly the worst fate imaginable for Sirius Black, eldest son of a long line of ancient and noble pure-blooded Slytherins. He inevitably found himself pushed and pulled between his Dark family and his Light friends, and he wasn't even sure what side he was supposed to be on anymore. (Sirius's early Hogwarts years.)
Walburga Black despised many things. Chief among them, of course, were Muggles, Mudbloods, and blood traitors, but her personality was such that she treated less hated things scarcely any better than she would treat a Mudblood. Her family had long since accepted her ornery nature as a part of life, and her husband and sons usually did their best to abide her many rules. Usually. Her husband she had quite well in hand, but she had found in her nearly twelve years of motherhood that little boys were much harder to control than married men.

Thus, when she heard a horrible racket from somewhere above and thunderous stomping coming down the stairs, she did not mistake it for a sudden infestation of hippogriffs, no matter how much the noise resembled one. She pursed her lips into a thin, displeased line and promised herself that her oldest son wouldn't be allowed to have any of the cherry tart she had ordered for dessert, even though she had ordered it specially for him, because cherry tart was his favorite. Sirius must be the source of the awful noise, of course. Regulus was far too obedient and refined to cause such a commotion.

Sure enough, he burst through the door of the drawing room, sending it crashing into the expensive silk wall covering with a bang. His glossy black hair was in disarray, a pink glow covering his thin cheeks and a grin spread over his whole face. If somewhere in the darkest corner of her mind Walburga quite admired her older son's spirit and secretly thought her youngest too timid, she would never admit it to anyone, least of all to herself.

"MUM!" he burst out as soon as the door opened. She glared.

"SIRIUS ORION BLACK!" she exclaimed at the same moment he cried out, "IT'S HERE!"

"Well, I never…" came from somewhere to her left.

She knew that it was Adolpha Lestrange, as her other visitors were far too used to Sirius's antics to be surprised. It was only sheer willpower and her great desire not to lose face in front of the other woman that allowed Walburga to forcefully calm herself, so her next words came out much calmer than she actually felt.

"You have been told time and time again not to run in the house, Sirius Black! And you know better than to interrupt me when I have guests! You've embarrassed me." She watched in satisfaction as his expression froze. "You have also embarrassed your cousin," she added, tilting
her head slightly to indicate Bellatrix, who was glaring at Sirius from her place next to her future mother-in-law. She was Sirius's favorite cousin, and the effect of his actions on her might have a greater impact on the young boy than the effect of his actions on his mother.

Sirius Black had the good sense to look abashed, even though he was so filled with excitement that he couldn't have felt sorry even if he'd tried. He knew from experience that he would get what he wanted much faster if his mother wasn't angry with him. Luckily he was an expert at getting out of trouble. He looked down as he worried his toe into the thick green carpet, the perfect picture of contrition, and let a few seconds pass in heavy silence.

"I'm sorry, Mummy," he said miserably, laying it on as thick as he dared, "Aunty, Belley." He looked at each woman as he spoke, then noticed the stranger next to his cousin. "Er… Madam."

None of them responded, and this time the silence actually felt uncomfortable to Sirius. He looked down again.

"Only I was so excited, and I forgot you had company."

It was Aunt Druella who spoke first. She quite doted on him, as she had only daughters and he was her oldest and handsomest nephew. "What has you so excited, dear?"

His excitement rushed back all at once, along with the color in his cheeks. "My Hogwarts letter came!"

The women reacted immediately, their lingering annoyance disappearing. Sirius had been displaying magic for so long that it had never been in question that he would be accepted into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardy, but regardless the acceptance letter was still considered one of the most important moments in a young wizard's life.

There were exclamations of delight all around, even from Bellatrix, who had been unreasonably angry just moments before, and Madam Lestrange, who didn't know him at all as they were only briefly introduced amidst the chaos. Even though the letters were standardized and hadn't changed at all in decades, Sirius's was passed around and perused as if the ladies had never read one before.

Finally, Druella turned to her eldest daughter. "It seems like only last year when you received your Hogwarts letter, Bella," she said, a gentle smile gracing her features, "but here you are two years out of school and ready to be married."

Both Bellatrix and Madam Lestrange looked like they might respond, but Sirius spoke up first. "What's Hogwarts like, Belley?"

His cousin gave him an amused look, her dark, hooded eyes full of laughter under one perfectly arched eyebrow. "Andy, Cissy, and I have each told you a dozen times if we've told you once, as many times as you've asked us in the past few months."

Sirius was less than pleased with her answer. In the first place, he never tired of hearing about the school. More importantly, his mother and aunt and even the new visitor were chuckling as his expense.

At her son's suddenly dark expression, Walburga intervened gracefully. "Now, Bella, I seem to recall how you couldn't find anything you'd rather have talked about when you were eleven."

"I dare say all of us were the same. It is so exciting to finally get a wand and begin learning magic," said Madam Lestrange.
Walburga's agreement of "Quite right, Adolpha" was drowned out by her son's sudden exclamation of "Let's go to Ollivanders today!"

His mother didn't seem to mind the indecorous exclamation this time, and Sirius was too excited to mind when the ladies laughed at him again. However, he quickly deflated at his mother's response.

"Not today, Sirius. I'm quite busy, and your father won't be home until just before dinner."

Sirius would not be put off. "Can't Grandfather take me?"

"There are trials today, Sirius." His grandfather, Arcturus, was a member of the Wizengamot.

"Can you take me, Aunt Druella?" he asked desperately. The wide-eyed, pleading expression on his face was completely genuine this time.

Walburga would not have allowed anyone other than herself to accompany her first child on such a momentous shopping trip. Fortunately, she was spared having to disappoint him when her sister-in-law had the good sense to answer in the negative. That was quickly followed by Bellatrix laughingly preempting Sirius's next request by saying that she and Adolpha would be leaving soon to have lunch with her fiancé, Rodolphus, and the rest of the Lestrange family. Sirius sulked next to his mother, visibly displeased, and she decided that she had better distract him before he was uncontrollable for the rest of the day. The boy did have a temper quite as bad as his father's.

If everyone else would have remarked that Orion Black was actually a relatively calm person and it was *her* temper that Sirius had inherited, Walburga remained willfully ignorant of it.

"We'll go soon, I promise. For now, why don't you go upstairs and begin sorting through your things?" He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, trying not to show his curiosity at what she meant. Pretending not to notice, she continued, "After all, a wand isn't the only thing you'll need. You'll need warmer clothes for the Scottish winter, and to see what other things you'll need to fill in your wardrobe. You'll also want to decide if you want to take any of your other things with you."

Sirius's cross expression clearly showed what he thought of that chore.

Walburga smoothed his mussed hair. "We'll go on Thursday. If you have it finished by Wednesday, you shall have an owl."

"An owl!" He could no longer sulk at that information.

His mother smiled. "Yes, my darling. You had better get started, though, if you want to finish in two days."

He sprang up from the settee immediately. The older ladies managed to show no more than the slightest smiles at his rushed farewells, all of them more amused than insulted, but Bellatrix laughed outright. Despite the eight-year difference in their ages, they had always been the closest to each other of any of the cousins. They shared passionate thoughts, impatient dispositions, and explosive tempers, and were much better suited to one another than either of them were suited to Andromeda's levelheadedness, Narcissa's complacency, or Regulus's timidity.

"Siri," she caught his attention just as he was rising from kissing her mother on the cheek, "if you send me a letter with your new owl, I'll take you to Diagon Alley sometime before the start of term, since I won't see you again until Christmas. If it's okay with you, Aunt Walburga."

Where Bellatrix had only asked permission as an afterthought, Sirius completely ignored his
mother's reaction as he leapt across the room towards his cousin. She had just enough time to throw her arms out to catch him as he crashed into her, both of them laughing as his lips collided with her cheek. He was gone just as quickly as he had come, heading for the door.

As he all but ran back out the way he had come in, Walburga called after him, "We'll have cherry tart to celebrate!"

Conversation resumed as soon as the door closed behind him, much more decorously this time than with his explosive entrance.

"You will have to excuse my son's behavior, Adolpha," Walburga told the other woman out of politeness, though those closest to her would have recognized in the tone of her voice that she didn't really believe that a Black owed any such apology to a Lestrange. Or to anyone else, for that matter.

Madam Lestrange offered a thin smile in return, as there was nothing else she could have done politely except to deny the need for an apology. "Not at all. My boys were just as excited when their Hogwarts letters came. I do sometimes miss my young boys, now that they've grown into young men." Although her boys wouldn't have acted in any such way in front of company, she thought to herself.

"And such fine young men," declared Bellatrix, her perfectly serious tone a striking contrast to her demeanor only moments before. Her mother and aunt exchanged an amused look at Bellatrix's attempts to ingratiate herself with her fiancé's mother.

"I wish I had boys," interjected Druella. "I wouldn't trade my three daughters for the world"—she leaned over and patted Bellatrix's hand—"but I am quite jealous of Walburga and her two sons."

Adolpha seemed content to continue in that vein. "Sirius is such a handsome, lively child." Truthfully she thought uncontrollable would have been a better description than lively. "Is your youngest very much like him?" She hoped not.

As the conversation revolved around their children, Walburga accepted the praise heaped upon her sons by her aunt and cousin, and bragged no little amount herself. Walburga Black detested many things, noise and disruption included, but she loved to flaunt the superiority of her family, her offspring in particular.

The next two days passed by dreadfully slowly for Sirius. It had only taken him until Tuesday morning to sort through his things. When his mother asked him to make a list of everything he had decided to take so that they could purchase everything else he needed in Diagon Alley, it only took him until Tuesday afternoon to complete that. He might have stretched it out longer had he not conscripted the family's house-elf to help, but he hadn't thought of that until after it was done. He had tried to fill the rest of his time by playing chess and Exploding Snap with his younger brother and by writing letters to every friend he had, but he was easily distracted. Thoughts of his new wand, his new owl, and his new school invaded his mind no matter how much he tried not to think about them. Even his lessons with his grandfather, which he usually enjoyed more than anything, were tedious.

Arcturus observed the transformation with a critical eye as the toad's legs shrunk into its body, which was rapidly molding itself into a square shape. Sirius had already turned his eyes back to the garish gold clock on the shelf behind his grandfather's head.

"Sirius." Arcturus was using his sternest tone, the one that caused nearly everyone to wilt.
Sirius let out a breath that was somewhere between a huff and a sigh. It had only been a few minutes since the last time he'd checked the time.

When he turned his attention back to the man in front of him, Arcturus's expression was implacable. "If you had done any worse, this snuffbox would be hopping away."

Indeed, the back legs had failed to completely disappear, and the small box was balancing precariously on its remaining feet. The shape was still too froggy in nature to be called a square, and although the color and pattern were what he had envisioned, the texture still looked like toad's skin. Sirius couldn't fully repress a grin, although he managed not to laugh.

Arcturus's expression never faltered. "Perhaps if you don't want to pay attention," he said, "then you should remain at home so you can practice, and you can put this shopping trip off to a later date."

"What!" Sirius sat up straighter in alarm. "No, you know I can do it!"

"What have I told you, son?"

Sirius let out another breath. "Power is built through consistency," he repeated the lesson. "But Grandfather, I hardly ever mess it up! I'm just so excited!"

The older man's expression softened just a bit, the skin around his stern mouth relaxing a fraction. It was not enough for most people to notice, but it was obvious to Sirius, who had spent time with his grandfather nearly every day for as long as he could remember, as they lived together in the ancestral Black home.

Pushing his luck, Sirius grumbled, "I'd never mess up if I could use my own wand. Yours doesn't fit me."

Arcturus raised one imperious eyebrow. "Things will be easier with your own wand," he explained, "but that will not replace the importance of concentration."

"Well, we'll never know if Mother doesn't—"

"Sirius Orion Black," Arcturus interrupted, "you know perfectly well that I will not tolerate this whining!" His tone was as cold as ever, but his face had not hardened again.

Sirius schooled his face into as serious a mask as he could manage. They glared at one another over the desk, Arcturus sitting perfectly straight in his chair and Sirius slouched back in his. The older man's icy gray eyes bore into Sirius's matching pair. Though Sirius struggled to maintain his composure, he couldn't. He cracked first, and a chuckle escaped unbidden from his throat. His grandfather did not laugh, but the corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly. Sirius knew that it was as close to a laugh as he'd get from the Black patriarch, and he laughed freely in return.

"A watched cauldron never boils, Sirius," his grandfather told him once his grandson had calmed down, and Sirius sighed in return. Arcturus gave a long-suffering sigh of his own, but his eyes remained warm with amusement. "Well, go on then."

Sirius refocused on the toad, which Arcturus had untransfigured, and quickly transfigured it back into a snuffbox. This time the legs disappeared and the shape and texture looked like they were supposed to. Sirius had concentrated extra hard and managed to add a few details. It was just some ridges on the surface, but it was more than he had ever accomplished before. He grinned.

This time Arcturus's critical eyes retained their warmth. "That was very well done, Sirius," he praised. "You'll need more practice before you are able to really manage the details you attempted,
but you're further along than your father was at your age."

"Really?" Sirius asked.

"Certainly," his grandfather replied. "Orion had barely managed to transfigure a match into a needle before he went to Hogwarts."

Sirius beamed at that knowledge. His grandfather had been tutoring him since he had turned eleven last November, as he had tutored his own son before that and had been tutored by his own father before that. It was technically illegal for Sirius to perform magic outside of Hogwarts, as Arcturus knew full well as a member of the Wizengamot. However, the Trace could only detect the presence of magic and not the specific caster, so there was no way for anyone to know that it was Sirius casting spells instead of one of the adults or a house elf. And Arcturus Black had never followed a rule he didn't have to follow, despite his chosen profession.

The only person in the house who minded was Regulus, who thought it was unfair that he had to wait until his own eleventh birthday to be allowed to leave his regular tutor behind and start magic lessons for himself.

Arcturus, never one to mollycoddle anyone, declared, "Your father was much further along in potions than you are, though. He had more patience."

Sirius scoffed, "Who cares about brewing boring potions, anyway?"

"You had better care, because you know that your parents and I will not accept school marks lower than we know you're capable of receiving," his grandfather told him. He examined his grandson's expression closely. "You're probably correct that your own wand will work much better than mine. I think that mine is too short for you. You require a longer wand, one much more suited to your flourish for the dramatic. Your father and I are much more subdued."

"Does wand length really have anything to do with that?" Sirius asked, not bothering to be insulted at his grandfather's entirely truthful assessment of him.

Arcturus nodded once. Sirius mulled that over for a few moments, but he was never one to spend time thinking about things far off in the future, so his thoughts quickly turned back to the clock. All the talk of wands had only made Sirius more aware that he would have his own later that very day. If his mother ever decided that her son's trip to Diagon Alley was more important than gossiping with a bunch of silly women, that is, and she ever decided to throw out her visitors and take him shopping.

The rest of his lesson passed by as slowly as ever. Arcturus was so frustrated at Sirius's lack of attention that the two were glaring at each other across the desk, for real when the family's house-elf popped into the room.

"Mistress has sent Kreacher to summon Master Sirius downstairs," he announced.

Sirius didn't wait for his grandfather to dismiss him, but had leapt from his chair and made it halfway out the door before the man called after him sarcastically, "By all means, take my wand with you!"

Sirius barely took the time to turn back around and all but throw his grandfather's wand back to him before he raced down the corridor towards the landing leading to the ground floor below. He thundered down stairs, the indignant shouts of all of the Noble and Most Ancient Blacks trailing behind him as he disturbed the portraits, and skidded to a halt in front of his parents. His mother began to reprimand him for his behavior, but Orion took his wife's arm to forestall her.
"Now, dear," he said, his authoritative voice brooking no opposition, "I think we can forgive Sirius for being so excited. It isn't every day a boy gets his wand, now is it?"

Orion Black was a tall man, at least a couple of inches taller than his imposing father, with the characteristic aristocratic Black features. He had high, sharp cheekbones and thin cheeks. His nose was straight and proportionate, set over thin lips and a strong chin. He was dressed in impeccable velvet robes—green, of course—and his neat black hair was perfectly parted. His wife looked resplendent on his arm in robes of silver silk, her jet-black hair pulled up into an elegant, intricate chignon. She was tall for a woman, though nowhere near as tall as her husband, and the top of Sirius's head already almost reached her shoulder. His family saw it as a sure sign that he would be tall like his father and grandfather.

Sirius grinned up at his father, grateful that he had been spared his mother's wrath at least on this occasion, though he knew that he would have to be on good behavior for the rest of the day if he was to have a peaceful shopping trip. And if he wanted to maybe get some treats beyond what was on his school list. He had taken special care in dressing and arranging his hair that morning because he'd had an eye for pleasing his mother and therefore increasing his chances of an ice cream sundae at Fortescue's or maybe a quick stop by Gambol and Japes for some pranking supplies.

Walburga looked her son over, and Sirius straightened even further than he had been previously, remembering the constant reminders about posture he'd received for as long a he could remember. After a few long moments, Walburga nodded, and Sirius was glad that he had thought far enough ahead to please her with his appearance.

"Yes, Orion, I suppose we can forgive his behavior just this once," she said. Then she turned her sharp black eyes back to her son. "Do you have your school list, Sirius?"

After Sirius had dutifully handed it over, he took his father's other arm opposite his mother and the family Apparated away. Fortunately, the Leaky Cauldron was relatively near to Grimmauld Place, and Sirius only had to take one deep breath and blink the moisture from his eyes to recover. He hated the sensation of Apparition, as he suspected anyone who wasn't completely mad must, even though he was used to traveling Side-Along with his various family members. Flooing was considered by his mother to be much too filthy, and he could remember his Grandmother Irma insisting on many occasions when her many grandchildren had Flooed over that no amount of cleaning charms could completely get the Floo powder out of one's clothing and carpet.

Orion released his arm and clapped him on the shoulder. "All right, son?"

Sirius was about to answer in the affirmative when his mother broke in.

"Of course he's all right!" she said, her tone conveying just how ridiculous she thought her husband must be for asking if their son could handle a bit of Apparition. "Now, we had better hurry if we want to miss the crowds. I don't suppose the common people will be about until the weekend, but all the same we only have a few hours before any of them who want to come today start to show up."

She set off across the pub, dragging her husband along by the arm for a moment until he wisely fell in step with her stride. Sirius fell in beside him, father and son sharing partly amused, partly exasperated looks at Walburga's behavior. Walburga Black, like most other members of her family, had very decided opinions about anyone who held a usual nine-to-five job. Or any low-level Ministry job. Though perhaps her opinions were a bit harsher than most others'. Sirius stamped down the urge to point out that they would have had longer until the end of the workday if she hadn't insisted on spending all morning socializing with her friends. Saying such a thing was not the way to go about getting treats.
Instead he asked, "Mother, may we start at Ollivanders?"

Walburga took out her own wand to tap the bricks leading to the alley, as her husband's wand arm was engaged by her. "We'll have to start at Gringotts, Sirius," she replied as the wall began to open, "but yes, it does make sense to walk to the end of the alley first instead of doubling back several times."

Sirius didn't particularly care what was practicable; he just wanted his wand. However, as his mother's opinion coincided with his wishes, he gave her a pleased smile as they stepped into Diagon Alley.

The street wasn't particularly crowded, but Walburga's expression still took on the look of someone who had smelled something unpleasant as witches and wizards brushed close by the family on their way past the shops and vendors. A group of teenagers rushed by them as they were going by Quality Quidditch Supplies, obviously forgetting their manners in their haste to reach the store. Sirius was quite annoyed when one of them knocked into his shoulder, sending him crashing into his father's side, until he heard the group's chatter and ascertained that one of them had been given permission to pick out a broomstick for his birthday. Sirius couldn't begrudge someone's excitement at getting a broom, though he decided that he'd better hold off on mentioning it on this trip, since he wasn't allowed to have one as a first year anyway.

He'd better mention something he wanted that he could actually take with him, he thought, and then next summer he'd ask for a broom.

Finally they reached the tall, white edifice of Gringotts, and the goblins waved them through the bronze outer doors and the inner silver without any fuss. Orion's face had transformed by now so that his haughty expression perfectly matched his wife's, and he stepped up to the first goblin without a care for the wizard who was currently being helped by the creature.

"You'll have to wait your turn like—" the goblin began, then stopped abruptly when his gaze finally landed on Orion. "Ah, Mr. Black, of course!" he said, his tone now much friendlier, though he offered no apology.

The man he had been being waiting on previously protested, "Excuse me!" but Orion ignored him as he said, "I will make a withdrawal from my family vault."

Walburga spared the wizard a disgusted glance before muttering something to her husband, of which Sirius only caught the words "filth" and "such gall."

The goblin waved over one of his colleagues. "Bogrod will take you," he told the family before turning to the other goblin. "Vault eight hundred and eighty-eight. You'll need the Clankers."

As the family walked away, Sirius heard the first goblin explaining to the other wizard about how they were "very old customers," which was probably a bit unnecessary given the number of their vault.

The ride down was as twisty and turny as ever, and though Sirius loved every moment of it he could tell that his mother was fighting to maintain her arrogant expression over her slightly green pallor. When they stopped, Sirius only shook his Clankor halfheartedly, because he was too fascinated watching the dragon as it cowered against the wall farthest from them. Soon enough he was being ushered into the vault by his father's hand on his shoulder and the great beast was out of sight.

Walburga was already scooping gold into the small purse she kept for that purpose, which had an Undetectable Extension Charm on it so that it could hold much greater quantities of money than
seemed possible from looking at it. Orion dug around in his robes for a moment before pulling out a handsome black leather bag Sirius recognized as his father's own moneybag. However, his father offered it to him instead of beginning to fill it with money, and Sirius took it, confused.

"Since you're going off to Hogwarts, it's time you begin to manage your own money," Orion explained. "You grandfather allowed me to have forty Galleons per term when I first started Hogwarts, but as you've excelled so well in your studies this year, I think you may have fifty."

Sirius grinned and, without questioning his father further lest he change his mind, began carefully counting out Galleons from the pile of gold nearest him. Orion pulled a matching bag from the same pocket in his robes and moved further into the vault to gather what he needed.

"If you don't mind some advice, sir," said Bogrod, who was standing near him by the door as his parents examined various items deeper inside the vault, "you would do best to get some Sickles and Knuts as well as Galleons. Not everything you buy will be worth a Galleon, and sometimes it's easier if you have exact change."

Sirius thought that this was very good advice and thanked the goblin before turning back to the pile of gold. He counted out three more Galleons so he had an even thirty, then moved further into the vault to join his father again. As there were seventeen Sickles to a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it just wasn't practicable to count out twenty Galleons worth of them by hand. Orion helped him by sorting the appropriate amount of money into a separate pile using a charm, and Sirius scooped the pile into his bag.

No sooner had he finished than his mother caught his attention and waved him over to some shelves along the right side of the vault.

The shelf was full with gems of various types and sizes, some resting loosely in boxes and some set into jewelry, but Walburga was gesturing towards a handsome silver-colored ring with a large black stone. The stone had the Black coat of arms engraved on its surface, and there were two of the greyhounds carved into the metal on either side in a perfect reproduction of the ones on the crest. Sirius recognized the ring as identical to the ones his father and grandfather wore constantly on their right hands. He had never given a thought to receiving his own, but now that he was faced with it he felt his chest filled to bursting with pride. He reached out decisively to take it, removing the box from the shelf and the ring from the box quickly so he could examine it up close.

"Put it on, dear," his mother urged, clearly pleased with his reaction.

Sirius obliged and felt the ring magically size itself to fit his finger perfectly. It looked regal and, he thought, perfectly in place on his hand.

"I received my ring just before I went to Hogwarts," Orion told him as he looked over his son's shoulder to admire the new ring, "and your grandfather received his then, and my grandfather received his, stretching back for nearly thirty generations beginning with your first namesake."

"I had it commissioned as soon as I found out that I was having a son. I was so proud to know that the Black name would continue," his mother nearly whispered.

Walburga's expression was as soft as Sirius had ever seen it, and she didn't seem able to tear her eyes away from the ring on his hand. He knew that her children's status within the family was almost as important to her as the family's status in the wizarding world in general. Walburga herself was a Black by birth as well by marriage, as she and her husband shared a great-grandfather, but Orion's grandfather had been the eldest son and Walburga's grandfather the third eldest.
If she was also beyond pleased that she—and her husband, of course, though what credit he deserved since he hadn't been the one to suffer through pregnancy and childbirth, she couldn't say—had managed to have sons when her siblings had only girls or no children at all, she certainly never openly gloated about it.

Suddenly his father's much larger hand was beside his, and Sirius couldn't help another grin at the sight of their matching rings.

"And she's been waiting to give it to you ever since," Orion declared. "Don't we look like even more of a matching pair than ever?"

"Don't be absurd," huffed his wife, more in amusement than any real annoyance. "You know very well that he looks much more like Arcturus than like you."

There was nothing else to do in the vault, so the family headed back to the surface, Orion and Walburga's good-natured argument pausing only as long as it took for the cart to reach the surface. It was a longstanding debate that Sirius had heard more times than he could count, so he tuned out his parents' voices as they emerged back into the sunlight and headed towards the end of the alley. He was fairly certain that Orion only insisted that his son favored him because he enjoyed arguing with his wife, anyway.

A few minutes later, Sirius all but burst through the door of Ollivanders in his excitement. Wand boxes were stacked floor to ceiling in neat rows, and he looked around, nearly bouncing with energy. There was only a single spindly chair in the narrow confines of the shop, and Orion helped his wife into it before conjuring another, much sturdier looking chair for himself.

"Ah, Mr. Black," came a voice from his left, and Sirius spun around from where he had been examining wand boxes to find himself nearly nose to nose with a white-haired man with startling blue eyes.

"Er, hello," he managed to say, but Mr. Ollivander was already speaking over him, exclaiming, "I've had a veritable stream of Blacks coming through lately, with all of your cousins!" Sirius wasn't sure if he was meant to respond, but fortunately the man spoke again before he had to think of anything to say. "Orion and Walburga Black! Ten and three-quarter inches, cherry and dragon heartstring for you, Mr. Black. A very tricky wand, takes exceptional self-control to wield. And Mrs. Black, yours is nine and a half inches, cedar with unicorn hair. Particularly good for curses."

Both of his parents opened their mouths to confirm that Ollivander's memory was correct, but the man was already working around Sirius with his tape measure, which was currently measuring the length of his ears. It continued to measure various parts of his body, some of which Sirius couldn't understand as useful to using a wand, as the wandmaker himself bustled back and forth in the rows of neatly stacked boxes.

Soon enough Ollivander had waved away the tape measure and thrust a wand into Sirius's hand. The wand—eleven inches, elm, dragon heartstring—was snatched away almost as soon as he'd gripped it.

This continued for several minutes, with Mr. Ollivander occasionally muttering things such as "Well, definitely not unicorn hair" and "Very tricky indeed" as he pulled box after box from the stacks.

Finally, Sirius ventured to ask, "My grandfather told me that I might get a longer wand because they're better for people with more passion. Is that true?"

"Longer wands are usually best suited for wizards with large personalities, yes." The wandmaker
eyed him up and down curiously. "This was your Grandfather Arcturus?"

"Yes, sir," confirmed Sirius.

Mr. Ollivander's misty stare seemed to bore into him. "Well," he finally said, "I suppose he knows you best."

Suddenly Sirius found another wand thrust into his hand, and when he gave it a wave a brilliant light shot from the end without causing any destruction at all. Ollivander took it back again, but this time he commented that they were getting much closer, indeed.

Sirius took the next wand without expecting much to happen, but this time warmth began in his fingers and traveled up his hand into his arm. Already knowing in his gut that this was his wand, he waved it through the air decisively. Silver ribbons of light shot through the air, and Mr. Ollivander exclaimed, "Oh, that's the one!" while his mother said, "That's just what happened when my wand chose me," and his father rushed forward to examine the wand.

It was dark gray with an elaborately carved square handle, which continued straight into a rounded end. It was quite a handsome wand, and the shape was quite unusual to Sirius, who had only ever seen round wands, though he had seen various forms of straight and bent and everything in between.

"Blackthorn with dragon heartstring," said Mr. Ollivander, "and thirteen and a quarter inches, pliable. Mr. Black, your grandfather was quite right about the length. Quite surprising indeed given that most of your family favors neat wands, although your cousin Bellatrix's is twelve and three-quarter inches so maybe it isn't too shocking. It's a powerful wand, indeed, quite suited to powerful feats of magic and well-suited for a warrior. Let me warn you, though, that you might find that it will only perform at its very best after you've been through some trials together."

Sirius was quite pleased with this, though he didn't know what to make of the bit about going through trials.

His father paid nine Galleons and seven Sickles for the wand, which Mr. Ollivander said was made of a particularly rare type of wood and had come from a Norwegian Ridgeback notorious for burning down entire villages, but Sirius was unwilling to have his wand wrapped. Walburga assured Mr. Ollivander, not exactly impolitely, that since Sirius came from a pure-blood family there was little chance of him accidentally revealing his wand to Muggles or accidentally getting into trouble under the watchful eye of his parents and grandfather, and the man desisted trying to re-box it.

The family walked back onto the cobbled street, Sirius with his hand in his pocket since he was unwilling to let go of his new wand just yet. Orion, noticing this, insisted that they should stop at the magical accessory shop before going on to Twilfitt and Tatting's to purchase Sirius's robes. They headed a few more doors down from Ollivanders until the alley made a ninety-degree turn into the more upscale section of the wizards' shopping district, then into the accessory shop. There were all kinds of interesting and downright odd items in the store, but Walburga was rushing her husband and son along, so Sirius was only able to look at the selection of dragon hide gloves, which were on his school list, and wand holsters, which his father insisted he should have. He chose an arm holster that fitted snugly between wrist and elbow and which released his wand with a certain flick of his first and second fingers.

Getting fitted for robes was particularly boring, as Sirius always found shopping for clothes to be, and then Walburga insisted on stopping by the home goods shop. The linens at Hogwarts were simply too rough to fathom, she insisted, and so Sirius found himself bored out of his mind while his mother chose silk bedding with built-in cooling, heating, and cushioning charms.
Then they were heading into the shop that carried rare breeds of owls, and he was nearly as excited as he had been to get his wand. The shop was dark in deference to its inhabitants' nocturnal natures, and big, glowing eyes shone through the darkness. His mother told the shopkeeper that they would need an eagle owl, and Sirius was perfectly happy to browse the rows of cages and perches to find the perfect one. The store was dark enough that browsing required the use of lighting spells, and Sirius and Orion walked along beside each other illuminating the birds one by one since Sirius was not yet allowed to use magic outside of school. Or rather, he wasn't allowed to use magic outside the confines of his own home, as it happened.

The eagle owls were beautiful and imposing creatures, but none of them caught Sirius's eye as he looked at one after another. Then suddenly, as he was admiring another eagle owl, a bird higher up in the darkness caught his eye, and Sirius grabbed his father's wrist and jerked his arm upwards so he could get a better look. The owl was not an eagle owl, though Sirius couldn't have said what kind it was, as he had never seen one before. It had feathers that Sirius could only describe as fluffy, which were brownish-gray with white ones shot through. The face was huge and round, with gray feathers and big, round yellow eyes. It was much more attractive and fearsome-looking than any of the eagle owls, in Sirius's opinion.

"The eagle owls grow the largest by weight of any of the species," the shopkeeper was telling his mother.

"I want this one," Sirius cut into the conversation, pointing at the unusual owl, which was still illuminated by his father's wand.

Walburga stared for a moment, pursing her already thin lips into an even thinner line. "Sirius, dear, an eagle owl is really what's expected of someone with your status."

Sirius didn't care, and he said so. Walburga looked about to argue the point further. The shopkeeper, sensing a sale falling away from her, explained, "She's a spectral owl. They're larger than eagle owls in terms of length, and as you can see, they really have quite a distinctive appearance. You'll certainly be noticed if you choose her."

Sirius smiled at the woman in thanks, and Orion commented that the owl was really quite handsome. Walburga, however, was not convinced. "I would prefer you to get an eagle owl," she told him, her tone brooking no argument.

"Fine then," Sirius said, not particularly minding arguing with his mother, "if you won't buy her for me, I'll just use my own money to get her!"

Orion had to stifle a chuckle, which he dared not let his wife hear. Walburga, for her part, glared hard at her son, though the impact was lessened somewhat by the fact that the shop was too dark for him to properly see her face. Finally, after many long seconds of this stalemate, she reached for the moneybag in her robes.

"No, I said that I would buy your owl as a reward," she said tightly, clearly displeased. "If this is the one you want, then this is the one you shall have…. Are you absolutely certain that there aren't any eagle owls you would prefer?"

But Sirius had stopped listening after hearing that he could have his owl, and had turned and held his arm out to it. It stared at him for a moment, head tilted and disconcerting yellow eyes gazing at him hard, and Sirius thought that it would be very humiliating if the animal rejected him after he had argued so hard to have it. Then it finally gave a little trill and flew down to land on his proffered arm. He spent several minutes getting to know the bird as his parents chose everything he would need, including a cage and owl treats, and completed the transaction.
Finally, it was time to leave the shop, and Orion opened the cage to allow the owl to enter. She stared at him reproachfully and turned on Sirius's arm so that her back was facing his father and the cage.

Sirius let out a bark-like laugh. "Well, you know where Grimmauld Place is, don't you?" he asked the bird, and she hooted softly, nibbling his finger softly for a moment as he tried to pet her.

That decided, the family excited the shop and the owl took flight as Orion shrunk the cage so that it could be carried more easily. They headed back out to the main street in Diagon Alley, as all they had left to visit at this point was Flourish and Blotts, the apothecary, and the cauldron shop. As they passed Gringotts on their way back up the alley, Orion paused at the entrance to Knockturn Alley.

"I should really pay a call into Great Uncle Herbert," he said to Walburga. "There's really no need for you and Sirius to come along. Why don't you stop at Fortescue's and enjoy some ice cream, and I'll meet you there in a few minutes?"

Sirius knew very well that his father simply didn't want him to know about whatever it was he was getting at Borgin and Burkes, the store his great-great uncle owned, but as one of his goals for the day had been getting an ice cream sundae, he wasn't likely to complain. If his mother's cross expression was anything to judge by, his father's detour might also have the benefit of transferring her ire from Sirius to Orion.

Sirius gave his mother his most endearing smile, the one he always used when he wanted to be allowed a treat or when he needed to get out of trouble, and took her arm as they walked to the ice cream parlor. If he played his a cards right, he might just be able to go to Gambol and Japes after all.

After quite a bit of fuss when Walburga insisted that she had to perform thorough cleaning charms on every surface before they could sit at one of the outdoor tables, Sirius and his mother had settled outside of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor with their sundaes. They were enjoying a silence the nature of which Sirius wasn't entirely sure. Waburga was capable of enjoying comfortable, companionable silences with her son, but they were few and far between. It was much more likely that she was quite cross with him about the owl and giving him the silent treatment in public so she wouldn't draw attention to their disagreement.

He transferred his spoon to his left hand and placed his right on his mother's arm where she would see the family crest on his finger. "Mother," he said, "I'm really glad that Father had to do an errand for Grandfather, because I like it when we can spend time together just us."

The softening of her face, a slight lessening of the frown lines that were just beginning to appear between her eyebrows, was much subtler even than Arcturus's expressions, but Sirius noticed it nonetheless.

"I'm going to miss you when you're at school." She patted his hand. Sirius thought that he was successfully out of the woods, but then the lines reappeared suddenly on her brow. "How do you know that your father is doing an errand for Arcturus?"

Sirius stared at her for a moment, taken off guard. He had thought it was obvious, but then again he knew that his parents liked to keep him sheltered from their goings on that weren't quite socially acceptable except among other pure-blood families who practiced the Dark Arts. Arcturus, Orion, and his uncles thought that he should be involved in their dealings, but his mother, for all that she was probably more devoted to the traditional ways than even the men in the family, thought he was too young to be dragged through Knockturn Alley or to take part in shady business deals.
Sirius was saved from responding by a sudden yelp of his name from somewhere on the increasingly crowded street.

"Sirius!"

Two heads of glossy black hair spun around to find the source of the disturbance. There was a young boy approaching through the crowd, his unkempt dark hair becoming even more tousled by the jostling of adults much larger than he was. Sirius smiled genuinely at the other boy. Walburga's face was suddenly a perfect mask of politeness, with the exception of her thin lips, which she couldn't help but press together reflexively in displeasure.

Sirius waited until the boy was closer to the table, as his mother wouldn't be very happy at all if he shouted across Diagon Alley, then addressed his friend, "Hello, Evan! Shopping for Hogwarts?"

The boy showed his white, slightly crooked teeth. "Yes, I was just coming out of Madam Malkin's and saw you here across the street. That shop girl was perfectly horrid, wasn't she?"

"I didn't go into Madam Malkin's, so I wouldn't know," Sirius told him.

"We went to Twilfitt and Tatting's," broke in Walburga. "Their robes are of much better quality."

Evan smiled pleasantly and greeted Walburga, as he had neglected to do it earlier. Apparently he didn't catch onto Walburga's jibe about the quality of his robes, but the woman who had just stopped beside him did. Mrs. Rosier had walked across the street at a much more respectable pace than her son and had just reached the group in time to hear Walburga's remark. Her olive complexion was suffused with color, though whether from embarrassment, anger, or both Sirius couldn't have said. He knew that his own cheeks were probably red with anger at his mother, and he made sure she caught his angry glance.

Mrs. Rosier gave the other woman a tight smile. "Hello, Mrs. Black. We'll stop in at Twilfitt and Tatting's later this afternoon. It's much more sensible to use Madam Malkin's for everyday robes so your nicer robes aren't splattered with potions ingredients or covered in dirt from Herbology class, don't you agree?"

"Indeed," replied Walburga, her lips pursing together just a bit more, "very sensible."

Sirius knew that she was thinking it was only sensible for people who couldn't afford a full wardrobe of high quality robes, or to replace ones that were ruined in potions mishaps or Care of Magical Creature accidents. Fortunately she wouldn't say such a direct insult out loud. At least not when the target of her criticism was her sister-in-law's family and Aunt Druella would probably hear about it if she insulted the woman.

Sirius gave his friend a grin that was a bit more forced than it had been earlier and tried to change the subject. "So you started at the Leaky Cauldron? I started on the other end, so I haven't been to the apothecary or the bookstore yet."

"No, Madam Malkin's is the first place we've been." Evan returned Sirius's smile and they shared a look of understanding about their embarrassing mothers.

"Oh," cut in Sirius's half of the embarrassing pair, "then did you just arrive? I must say that I'm quite surprised to see you here at all at this time of day. I thought that Evan stays with Druella while you go to your job." She said job in the same tone Sirius had heard her use to describe a Muggle establishment.

Mrs. Rosier's eyes narrowed, though her polite smile remained plastered to her face. "This time of
year is quite slow at the Department of International Magical Cooperation. It was no trouble at all to take a half day, and my Evan has been desperate to come shopping since he received his letter on Monday."

"I've been begging Mother and Father to bring me since Monday, too," Sirius said rather loudly, desperate to interrupt before his mother could open her mouth again.

"I just want my wand!" Evan replied with equal energy. "Have you got yours yet?"

Sirius immediately released his new wand from the holster on his arm. The movement was still novel and he didn't catch it perfectly in his hand, but it was smoother than it had been when he'd first tried it. He'd only had his wand for a couple of hours, after all. He smiled in contentment as he gripped the wood. It had been worth the wait. The grooves in the handle and even its square shape seemed to have been carved especially to fit his hand. It was absolutely perfect. It just felt right to hold it, and he couldn't wait to perform magic with it. He hoped that neither Evan nor his mother asked to hold it, because he couldn't imagine letting anyone else handle his wand.

Fortunately neither asked him to relinquish it, though Evan did come around the table to get a better look, much to Walburga's well-masked consternation. The conversation carried on in this vein for several more minutes, with the ladies carrying on with a thin veil of civility and the boys trying to redirect them, until Walburga stood suddenly.

"There's Orion. We really must be going so we can finish shopping before this place is overrun," she declared. Sirius knew she meant overrun with low-class people, and she included Mrs. Rosier and her son in that group.

"Well, it was lovely running into you."

"You'll see me before then," his friend informed him. "Uncle Cygnus and Aunt Druella are taking me to the station since Mother and Father have to work, so I'll be at your family's breakfast that morning."

Sirius was very happy to hear that, because he had not been looking forward to arriving with his older cousins and having to seek out people his own age to sit with on the train. This way he could just stay with Evan the whole time.

Sirius took his own mother's arm and led her away before the situation could get any worse, waving back at his friend as they left. They were barely far enough away that the pair couldn't hear them before Walburga spoke.

"You know I don't like you associating with that Rosier boy."

"Mother," Sirius's voice came out on almost a whine, "he's my friend. And he's Aunt Druella's nephew."

They met Orion in time for him to hear the beginning of his wife's well-rehearsed tirade about how her brother never should have married that Rosier girl to begin with.

"Oh, poor Druella isn't to blame for the circumstances of her birth, of course," she was sure to repeat, though they had heard her say so countless times in the past already. "Just the same, I told
Cygnus that he ought to make sure she would break ties with her family or else he ought not to marry her. And now look at how they have to take that dreadful boy of her brother's into their home every day, because his parents are impoverished and have to work." Free of the company she was criticizing, when she said the word work Walburga's she made a face as if she was discussing inviting a Mudblood to dinner. "And the wife! Greek, can you imagine? What on earth was wrong with the perfectly pure-blooded girls here in our own country, or even France if he didn't like anyone while he was at Hogwarts?"

Sirius didn't think that Evan was dreadful at all, though he was certainly not as refined as Walburga would have liked, and he thought that the olive complexion he had inherited from his beautiful mother was quite nice looking. And his friend had enough toys and new things that he didn't think the Rosiers could be impoverished, though he had never spent time with anyone who was so he wasn't sure what it would be like. However, to Walburga, anyone who did not have a high security vault at Gringotts and could not afford brand new custom robes for every occasion must be poor.

As they always did, Sirius and Orion exchanged looks halfway between amusement and exasperation.

"Though the elder Mr. Rosier's connections certainly make up for some of the family's lack of wealth and sophistication," finished Walburga. There was an inflection on the word connections that Sirius couldn't quite understand.

He glanced up at her, confused. "What connections?"

His mother and father shared a look that he recognized as the one they used when they agreed that he wasn't old enough to know something.

"Nothing at all, son. Nothing important," Orion deflected, his large hand coming to rest on Sirius's shoulder. "How about we head to Gambol and Japes now, before we start back up the alley to finish your school list? I'll buy you anything you want today, but tomorrow you must start managing your own money."

Sirius didn't intend to forget his question or to let it go indefinitely, but he wasn't about to argue his way out of carte blanche at the joke shop. He agreed happily and the family moved towards the shop that had been his ultimate goal since that morning, besides Ollivanders and the owl shop of course. Now that he was guaranteed a trip to Gambol and Japes by his father, Sirius felt that it was safe to bring up possible names for his new owl despite his mother's ire over his choice. The three chatted about it with varying degrees of enthusiasm as they walked across the alley.
September 1, 1971

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains some lines lifted directly, as well as some general ideas but not direct quotations, from Philosopher's/Sorcerer's Stone and Deathly Hallows. As the disclaimer states, I do not own any of these.

Updated on 8/20/2014 to fix some typos and to reflect the fact that McGonagall had only just started teaching at Hogwarts and probably hadn't been there long enough to be made deputy headmistress. I chose Slughorn because he's the only professor whose name we know who had been teaching for quite a while by Sirius's time but retired before Harry's first year so that McGonagall could take over the position. (I don't imagine that someone else, like Flitwick or Sprout, would have been deputy but then given up the position to McGonagall while still continuing to teach.)

The morning of September first found Sirius Black fidgeting in the first floor drawing room, waiting for the rest of his family to come down. It wasn't that they were late. Rather it was that Sirius was early. It was perhaps the only time in his life that he'd been early for anything of his own accord, but he'd been so excited the night before that he'd woken up at four o'clock and not been able to fall back to sleep. He had read some of his Transfiguration textbook until six thirty, when he'd gone ahead and begun his preparations for the day.

Now he was pacing from one end of the gray and black rug to the other, because he hadn't been able to sit still for more than a minute or two at a stretch.

At seven fifty his mother appeared in the doorway. "Sirius," she said, stopping short when she noticed him, clearly astonished that he was already downstairs. "I just sent Kreacher upstairs to get you."

The house-elf popped into the room just then, Sirius's things along with him. He was wringing his hands and, Sirius assumed, getting ready to punish himself for failing to carry out his mother's order.

"I was already here, Kreacher," he told the elf. "Don't bother punishing yourself."

It wasn't that he particularly cared whether or not the elf hurt itself—in fact, it was quite funny to watch—but Walburga appreciated it when he was nice to it.

Orion appeared next, Regulus on his heels. "Ah, your school things are already down here," said Orion. "Are you sure you've packed everything?"

Sirius replied that he was, as he had already been packed for three days and checked again and triple checked at his mother's behest. He wasn't sure if she was really that concerned over him forgetting something or if she just had been running out of ways to distract him as September first approached and everything at home seemed to bore him. In recent weeks, Sirius had taken to setting up elaborate booby traps around the house using the supplies his father had bought for him in Diagon Alley in July and the additional ones he had bought when Bellatrix had taken him again in August. Originally Regulus and Kreacher had been his targets, and he had managed to get them with everything from buckets full of water that wouldn't dry to itching powder. His mother had
tried to stop him, but his father and grandfather hadn't seen the harm.

That is, until Arcturus had accidentally sat in some of Sirius's Bulbadox Powder. There hadn't been any effects until later, as it only affected skin but had only touched his grandfather's robes. Arcturus must have been sprinkling the powder as he went, because no less than a law wizard, a witness, and two Wizengamot members had appeared to spontaneously burst into boils throughout the day. No one had known the cause, until Arcturus had gone to use the facilities and had broken into boils himself on a most uncomfortable part of his body.

After that, Walburga had any number of mundane tasks for Sirius to perform and re-perform at the slightest hint that he was bored, though Sirius had heard her quite sweetly repeat Arcturus’s own words back to him about the lack of harm from boyhood pranks, before she'd agreed to keep her son entertained.

Regulus surveyed Sirius's things with a jealous eye. "Where's your owl?"

"Aquila decided to fly to Hogwarts. She didn't want to be in that cramped cage all day."

There was a snort from Walburga, and Sirius grinned. He had named his owl after the constellation Aquila both because it was in keeping with the Blacks' normal naming procedure and because it meant eagle. He'd found it incredibly funny to name her after an eagle when his mother had been so set on him getting an eagle owl. Indeed, his mother's red face the first time she'd ever heard him address the owl by her new name had been well worth his effort. If asked, Walburga Black would insist that she never snorted.

His grandfather's most sickeningly sweet tone came from the direction of the doorway. "Is something wrong, Walburga?"

"Why would something be wrong?" she asked, matching his tone and turning to stare at him.

He raised an eyebrow. "My dear woman, I am merely worried at the most alarming noise I heard."

He was exaggerating, of course. It had its intended effect as Walburga spluttered angrily and insisted that she had no idea what he was talking about. Sirius grinned at his grandfather behind his mother's back. No one could get under his mother's skin like Arcturus could. As soon as Walburga looked away from him, the older man winked at Sirius.

"I don't know why I bought this bloody thing," Orion was grumbling as he shrunk Aquila's cage so that it fit neatly just inside Sirius's trunk, on top of all the carefully packed items already inside it. "That owl has never used it."

"It wouldn't do not to have a cage. Other people would wonder at it," Walburga declared. "Besides, I bought it, not you."

Orion opened his mouth to respond, but his father beat him to it. "I believe I bought it, as every last Knut in that vault belongs to me until the day I die, which I'm sure will not happen nearly as soon as you would like. In any case, Aquila will be happy for her own private cage in the Hogwarts owlery."

"If Hogwarts is that bad, she could just stay here," came Regulus's petulant voice.

Everyone ignored him, as they knew he was simply jealous that his brother was going to Hogwarts and getting his own owl when Regulus himself could not.

Sirius nodded. "Yes, Grandfather put some special charms on her cage for me because he said owls can't get into the Slytherin dorms, so poor Aquilina needs her own private cage to get a break
from all the other owls."

"Why can't owls get into Slytherin?" his brother asked.

No one answered because just at the same moment Walburga exclaimed, "Oh my, it's seven fifty-seven already! Quickly, everyone, gather your things. Quickly!"

Sirius had already gathered everything he was taking, so as his father, mother, and brother flitted around them, he stepped closer to his grandfather. Arcturus wouldn't be coming to the family breakfast, because it was more strictly for Pollux's immediate family, most particularly his grandchildren. Of course Grandmother Irma had sent an invitation along to Arcturus, as it was the respectful thing to do, but Sirius's two grandfathers really wouldn't have wanted to willingly sit in a room together for anything less than a wedding, birth, funeral, or Quidditch game.

For the first time since he'd received his Hogwarts letter a month and a half before, Sirius felt anxious about going to school and felt the prick of tears beginning behind his eyes. He held them back through sheer determination.

"Come, my boy, let's have none of that," said Arcturus, recognizing the sheen in his grandson's stormy eyes.

He placed his hand on Sirius's shoulder, and Sirius began to raise his arm to do the same, though his own hand wouldn't quite reach the man's shoulder. However, the next moment he felt himself being pulled forward. He resisted for a second out of confusion and the briefest of reactions that he must be falling, but then his grandfather's other arm went around his back. He realized with a jolt that the man was hugging him. He couldn't remember Arcturus ever having done that before. Before he got over his shock and was able to bring his own arms around his grandfather, the man had already pulled back and placed his second hand on Sirius's other shoulder. Matching gray gazes locked onto each other's, and Arcturus's mouth pulled upwards just slightly at the corners.

"You have worked very hard this past year," the older Black told him, "and I am sure that you will make your family proud."

Regulus appeared at his grandfather's elbow, his black eyes flashing with envy and his mouth twisted downwards into a frown.

"We're going to be late if you don't hurry."

With his last goodbyes said, Sirius stepped out into the foyer (the only point in the house from which one could Apparate outside) and gripped his father's arm as his brother grasped Walburga's.

The sensation of Apparition was much worse than when they had traveled to Diagon Alley, because Grandfather Pollux and Grandmother Irma's house was in Tutshill, in Gloucestershire, which was almost all the way to Wales. Sirius miserably tried to clutch at his chest for long seconds that felt like minutes, absolutely sure that his eyeballs were going to be sucked back into his brain and that his ears were going to implode. Then suddenly he landed hard on his feet and pitched forward, only stopped by his father's strong arm linked with his.

His parents disentangled from their children and rushed forward to greet his grandparents. Sirius stood in place with his head bowed, wanting a few seconds by himself so he could catch his breath and blink the water from his eyes before he faced everyone. Shiny black shoes come into his line of sight, stopping very close to him.

"When I turn eleven I'm going to have almost a whole year to train with Grandfather," said Regulus, his voice full of sneering condescension and low enough that the other occupants in the
room couldn't hear. "I'll be better than you at everything, just like I'm better than you at Apparating."

It was true; Regulus had never had any problems with the sensation of Apparition, whereas Sirius had always struggled with it and thought that he probably always would.

"Maybe you will," he replied, not wanting to take the bait today of all days. He knew that his brother was just feeling bad about having to watch Sirius get to experience everything while he still had to wait for two more years before he could go to school.

But Regulus would not let it go. "I'll be the favorite then, and I'll get all the attention. We'll move you into the servant's quarters with Kreacher, and I'll get the biggest eagle owl there is and it will kill your stupid owl."

Regulus had never said any such thing to him before, and the threat to his familiar enraged Sirius more than any cruel words directed at him personally. When he spoke his own voice was full of malice, and when he met his younger brother's gaze his normally bright gray eyes had darkened to the color of a thundercloud.

"No matter what you ever do, I'll always be the favorite, because I'll always be smarter, handsomer, richer, and older. Grandfather will never hug you," he spat out nastily.

Regulus jerked backwards as though Sirius had hit him.

"Sirius!" shouted Pollux Black. Even though Sirius was quite used to his maternal grandfather's volume, he was so caught up in his altercation with Regulus that he was taken by surprise and jumped at the address. "Come let me look at you!"

Sirius trod on his brother's toe as he moved past him.

Even though Pollux had called him over, he stepped up to his grandmother first and put his arms around her as he kissed her cheek. Irma Crabbe was a large woman, so his arms didn't reach all the way around, and she had to lean down as he stretched on his tiptoes to reach her face. He didn't get to formally greet Pollux, because as soon as Sirius stepped out of his grandmother's embrace the man was speaking again.

"You look more like my father by the day," he boomed. "I'd recognize those cheekbones anywhere."

"He looks like my father-in-law," Walburga interjected.

Pollux leveled a glare at his daughter. "Well, where do you think my cousin got his looks? From the Weasleys?"

Walburga began to respond, but her father's loud voice easily drowned her out when he declared, "I bet Arcturus gave you those Muggle rags, too!"

The trouble with dressing for today had been that the clothing had to be something appropriate for his stuffy grandparents' formal breakfast yet also comfortable enough that he wouldn't mind wearing it for hours on the train. To make matters even more complicated, it had to be something suitable for Muggles to see, as they had to pass through the Muggle King's Cross Station to reach platform nine and three-quarters. His Grandfather Pollux and Grandmother Irma did not mix well with Muggle-appropriate attire. Or with Muggle-appropriate anything, for that matter. He was hardly wearing rags, but his grandparents would think that his black shirt and gray trousers were pitiful just for not being robes.
"Now, Pollux, you know that the Ministry doesn't like us to wear robes around the Muggles," Orion stepped in. He was dressed perfectly in gray trousers with a green shirt and Slytherin-style tie.

"In my day we didn't care what Muggles thought!" harrumphed Pollux.

"Soon enough we'll enjoy those days again." Bellatrix had stepped up to the group and wrapped her arm around Sirius's shoulders as she spoke. "But we won't fix the problem this morning, so perhaps we had better go ahead and step into the dining room."

Bellatrix was undoubtedly Pollux's favorite grandchild, Sirius's gender notwithstanding, because she was the one who most agreed with him. And by extension with Sirius's own mother, his eldest child. Therefore, he took her advice easily enough, and soon the family was crossing into the formal dining room and sitting at the heavy oak table.

Conversation revolved around Hogwarts, and there was a particular focus on what Sirius (and Evan, though no one paid much attention to him) could expect, as there always was when there was a first year in the family. This was despite the fact that they had all heard it multiple times already as his three cousins were preparing for their first years. Fortunately it didn't take long until the adults were reminiscing with one another and not paying very much attention to the children at all, and Sirius was able to hold a quiet conversation with his friend.

"Did you get any sleep last night?"

"No," barked out Sirius, half laughing. "You?"

Evan smiled, less sheepishly than before. "Not a wink."

But all too soon they were interrupted by their Uncle Cygnus shouting, "What boy?"

All other conversations at the table came to an abrupt halt.

Both Sirius and Evan looked further up the table, to where everyone was staring as Narcissa blushed and Andromeda watched her sister with a guilty look on her face. Narcissa was even paler than most of the Blacks, and the red across her cheeks stood out starkly against her porcelain skin and blonde hair. Cygnus's own face was even redder than his daughter's, though with an impending fury rather than embarrassment.

"The Malfoy boy, dear," Aunt Druella informed him calmly. Her husband gaped at her, clearly surprised and unimpressed that she'd known about it.

Pollux's words drowned out whatever response his son might have been capable of making. "What about the Malfoy boy?" When no one answered immediately, he turned to his middle granddaughter and demanded, "You there, girl, tell me what you were talking about."

Andromeda shot another apologetic look at her younger sister before bravely meeting her grandfather's eyes. "I was just teasing Cissy about inviting Lucius to sit with her on the train, telling her that it's what she ought to do if she likes the boy."

"She doesn't like any boy!" roared Cygnus.

His wife shushed him and his mother spoke up for the first time to exclaim, "Oh hush! That's a very good match, Cygnus!"

Walburga ignored all of the commotion around her and addressed her niece directly, inquiring, "This is Abraxas's eldest son?"
Narcissa was too overcome with her father's reaction to answer. Cissy didn't like it unless everyone was pleased with her. At her father's glare, she ducked her head down even further, eyes staring intently at her plate now.

"It's his only son," Bellatrix stepped in for her sister. "His only child, in fact. He's friends with Rodolphus's younger brother Rabastan." Their father turned to look at her. "Same year, you know. I'm sure he's just as respectful of my sister as Roddy is to me."

Which was not at all what Cygnus would want to hear if he knew what really went on between his eldest daughter and her fiancé, Sirius thought, recalling the way the couple had snogged a few weeks earlier when Rodolphus had briefly met the two of them in Knockturn Alley. He didn't know a lot about kissing, but he certainly knew a lot more after that display.

But everyone else seemed to accept Bellatrix's statement at face value.

Walburga nodded thoughtfully, and Pollux said, "That is a good match, then. Old family, old money. Plus we haven't had a marriage between the families in centuries."

"Twelve generations," Walburga helpfully informed the table. She had memorized most of the Black family tree, as the tapestry that magically recorded it hung in Arcturus's personal drawing room at Grimmauld Place. "I haven't kept up with their family since Althea died, because she and Abraxas never had any daughters and he's never remarried…." she trailed off, but Sirius knew she was thinking that a pure-blooded family without daughters wasn't any use to her in marrying off her perfect pure-blooded sons. He rolled his eyes, though no one took any notice.

"He's a very nice boy," Narcissa finally spoke up, her voice so quiet that Sirius had to strain to hear her from his place further down the table. Then she looked up, and her voice grew stronger as she kept speaking, "We were partners in Potions and Herbology last year. He's very lonely at home since it's just him and his father there, so I've been writing him all summer. He was chosen this year to be the other Slytherin prefect, so I'm sure we'll be spending a lot of time together this year, too."

Bellatrix laughed. "And are you going to ask him to sit with you on the train?"

Cygnus's head swiveled back around so he could stare at his youngest daughter.

Narcissa's blush deepened, but she bravely said, "He already invited me in a letter last month, and I replied that I would."

"It's settled, then!" Druella exclaimed cheerfully. "You'll introduce us to him on the platform. And a prefect! How lovely."

"Mother," Narcissa said sternly, "you can't scare him off talking about marriage or what a good match it would be. We're only fifteen."

Grandmother Irma cried, "Nonsense! I was engaged to your grandfather when I was fifteen, and Walburga would have been engaged to Orion much sooner if he hadn't been four years younger."

What followed was an extended conversation about the Black family tree and memories of each of the adults' own marriages, which was really more a lecture that all of the children were expected to attend rather than a friendly chat. Sirius chanced a glance at Evan, who looked to be fighting to keep a grin off of his full lips. He couldn't hide the laugh in his eyes as his hazel gaze met Sirius's gray, though. For his part, Sirius was torn between laughing at his family himself and being embarrassed that his friend was witness to this particular conversation. Evan might be his aunt's nephew, but he wasn't a Black, and he usually wasn't present at such intimate family functions.
The uncomfortable conversation continued until the gilded monstrosity of a clock on the mantle struck ten o'clock, and the breakfast was declared officially over. The Hogwarts Express left the station promptly at eleven, but everyone, including the adults, liked to have time to mingle with other families on the platform. The family adjourned back to the main drawing room in preparation for their departure.

"Now, as everyone knows, this is Sirius's first year at Hogwarts," Pollux boomed across the room. "I see that you've already received your ring." Sirius wasn't sure if his grandfather's expression when he looked at the ring was one of pleasure or displeasure, but it only lasted a second before the man continued. "My family has its own traditions, and so your grandmother and I would like to give you this."

He snapped his fingers and a house-elf that Sirius hadn't noticed before approached him carrying a small box. He took it and opened it to reveal an elaborate silver-colored tiepin. It was shaped like a serpent, curling around in a sort of S-shape without being too obvious, with every scale carved out in exquisite detail so that it looked like it might come alive and slither away at any moment. Its eye was an emerald, the green standing out vibrantly against the silver.

"My father gave me one just like it, you see," said Pollux, and Sirius looked up as the man gestured to his own tie, where he noticed his grandfather's tiepin for the first time.

His Uncle Cygnus gestured to his tie as well. "Father gave me one before I left for Hogwarts, and Alphard has one, too."

Sirius noticed that his mother had to visibly work to keep herself from commenting on Alphard's absence from the family breakfast. He was glad she managed not to say anything, because it would have ruined the moment.

Instead, she rushed over to him and took the tiepin from its box before carefully positioning it in his tie. "There now, that looks very handsome," she declared as she ran her hands over him to smooth the non-existent wrinkles in his clothing.

Sirius thanked his grandparents, shaking his grandfather's hand rather formally but giving his grandmother another hug and kiss (which was much easier when she was sitting down), and then moved on to say goodbye to Bellatrix, who had no desire to go to King's Cross since she was neither a student nor a parent. She hugged him rather more forcefully than was proper.

"You should try to make friends with some of the older Slytherins," she told him quietly as the rest of the family said their goodbyes to each other. "I don't know of any important people in your year"—Sirius didn't interrupt even though he thought that she was being quite unfair to Evan—"but you should get Narcissa to introduce you to Rabastan and Malfoy in her year, and they can point you in the right direction."

Sirius assured her that he would, even though he sincerely doubted that anyone in fifth year would want to have much to do with a first year. He supposed that Bellatrix must know better than him, because she'd already finished Hogwarts and knew how things worked.

Then his uncle was yelling about the time and his mother was dragging him away as they prepared to Apparate to King’s Cross, and Sirius only had one last glance at the rest of his family before he felt the familiar yet sickening tug of Apparition.

"I still don't know why we can't just Apparate directly onto the platform," Aunt Druella was complaining as they trudged through the train station.
It must have been a rhetorical complaint, because no one bothered to respond to it as they made their way through the throng of Muggles towards platforms nine and ten.

Sirius had never really been around Muggles before, except for passing some of them on the street whenever they left Grimmauld Place by the front door, but that was very rare because they could just Apparate or Floo to wherever they needed to go. They all looked very normal, he thought, despite what his parents and grandparents frequently told him about all of them being uncivilized and dirty. He did see one man with tatty clothes and greasy, ratty hair pushing a cart full of what looked like trash, and that man smelled very bad like he hadn't had a bath in ages. But the other Muggles all appeared well kempt, and even the rest of them seemed to be giving the dirty one a wide berth.

There was the fact that none of them were wearing robes or hats, of course, but Sirius already knew that Muggles and wizards dressed differently. He and his family must have done a good job of dressing like they were supposed to, because they didn't seem to be attracting any more attention than Sirius was used to when he went out.

On the other side of the large space from his family, Sirius saw another wizard family pushing carts with their trunks and even their owl in its cage. They were attracting rather a lot of attention despite appearing to Sirius's eyes to be properly dressed. He wasn't sure why until he heard a snippet of conversation from some of the Muggles passing by him.

"—owl, how strange—"

He supposed Muggles must not keep owls as pets and determined that as soon as he met a Muggle-born he would ask how they delivered their mail. Surely Muggles had mail.

Soon enough they were standing between platforms nine and ten, and Sirius watched as his aunt, uncle, and cousins all disappeared onto platform nine and three-quarters.

"Now," said Orion, pointing at the barrier, "we just think about the platform on the other side and walk right through."

His parents began walking arm in arm, and Sirius and Evan fell into step beside them. He watched curiously as the barrier got closer and closer, though he wasn't anxious at all. He could not grow up around magic and still be the least bit suspicious when told that they wouldn't actually hit something as trifling as a brick wall. Sure enough, the wall seemed to shimmer and dematerialize all of a sudden, and all at once Sirius found himself standing on a crowded platform in front of a great scarlet steam engine. People were standing in groups all down the platform, some catching up with friends and others loading trunks onto the train.

The rest of the family was standing together just inside the entrance, and once Sirius and the others joined them they all started off towards the back of the train. Apparently there was something of an argument going on about Sirius himself.

"—already going to have a full compartment," Andromeda was saying.

Narcissa shot Sirius an apologetic look. "Us, too. Lucius and I have to spend the beginning of the journey in the prefects' carriage anyway, so he can't sit with us. After that, we'll be sharing a compartment with both my friends and his friends."

Sirius was a bit annoyed that neither of his cousins appeared to want to sit with him, but he didn't really feel that he needed them in the first place. He said as much.

"Besides," he added, "it would probably be a good idea to meet some people in my own year.
Evan and I can sit together."

That decided, Sirius, Evan, and his parents walked further down the platform alone as Andromeda found her friends and the rest of the family was stopped by Narcissa so they could talk to two tall blond wizards, the younger of which was obviously this Lucius character that had caused such a commotion at breakfast. When they found an empty compartment two-thirds of the way down the train, Orion enlarged Sirius's trunk and levitated it onto the luggage rack above the seat. It was then that they realized they didn't have Evan's things.

"Uncle Cygnus has my trunk," he told Sirius's parents, who promptly decided that they would fetch it.

"You two stay here and make sure no one steals your compartment," Walburga told them. "Orion and I will go and say hello to Abraxas Malfoy, and we'll come back to say goodbye and bring Evan's trunk with us."

And so the two of them were left alone on the Hogwarts Express for the first time. The time passed quicker than Sirius would have thought as he and his friend laughed about what had happened at breakfast, occasionally sneaking glances out the window at the great meeting of Blacks and Malfoys happening on the platform, and then started talking about the upcoming year and what they could expect.

Evan was particularly nervous about the Sorting Ceremony. "What do you think happens?" he asked. "I tried to get the girls to tell me, but Bellatrix would only say that it's only slightly painful and only hurts for a few minutes."

Sirius couldn't help but laugh. "She was just teasing you. There's a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* in the library at home that says they sort using this old hat, plus when I asked him about it Grandfather told me that they just put it on your head and it yells out which house you're supposed to be in."

Evan frowned. "Why would she tease about that, though?"

"Belley's just like that sometimes," replied Sirius.

In truth, he knew that Bellatrix usually reserved her cruelty for people she felt were beneath her, and he was surprised that she included her cousin Evan in that group. Sirius had heard enough of his own mother's ranting and raving on the subject to know everything that was unsuitable about Evan Rosier, but he hadn't thought that Bellatrix would feel the same way given that her own mother was Evan's aunt.

"Do you have two seats available in here?" asked a boy who had come to stand in the doorway to their compartment. He was very skinny, with skin even paler than Sirius's and dull, dark hair that hung down around his face. There was a girl with bright red hair standing slightly behind him, peering around his shoulder into the compartment.

"Sure," replied Sirius, and the two newcomers moved into the compartment lugging their trunks behind them.

Sirius wondered why they hadn't just magicked them the way his father had done for him, but then again there were no parents in sight so perhaps their parents had just enlarged them to place them on the train. It took the new boy, Evan, and him working all together to get both of the heavy trunks into the overhead compartment. When they were finished, Evan offered a window seat to the girl, and her friend sat across from her, which left Sirius and Evan to sit closer to the door. Sirius opted to sit next to Evan instead of across the compartment from him so that they
could converse more easily in case more people joined them.

"Thank you," the redhead was saying. "I'm Lily and this is Severus."

Sirius wondered why Severus couldn't introduce himself. It seemed very odd to him to be letting a girl do your talking for you, because it reminded him of the way his mother and father acted, except they were married so it was all right.

"Sirius," he introduced himself.

Evan smiled. "I'm Evan."

"Oh, how funny!" Lily let out a girlish giggle. "My last name is Evans!"

They were all laughing when Sirius's parents appeared back in the doorway. His father smiled happily at the scene before him, but Walburga did not smile. Her sharp eyes took in the newcomers with curiosity but no visible pleasure.

"We brought your trunk, Evan," Orion informed him, which brought the youngsters' laughter to an abrupt halt as they noticed the adults.

"Thank you, sir," the olive-skinned boy replied as Orion levitated his luggage onto the rack.

Walburga ignored her sister-in-law's nephew and turned to her own son. "Who are you new friends, Sirius?"

He was quick to perform the introductions. "Mother, this is Lily Evans and Severus—er, actually I don't know his last name. Lily and Severus, these are my parents, Orion and Walburga Black."

It was clear that Severus recognized the name, because he gaped at Sirius for a moment in surprise before regaining control of himself.

"Snape," he said, finally. "My last name is Snape."

Orion turned to look at his wife. "Snape? Isn't that—"

"Yes," she interrupted him, her thin lips pressing together in the way that Sirius recognized as displaying her displeasure, "that's the name of the Muggle Eileen ran away with."

She said Muggle as if she was speaking about a particularly disgusting bug, and Severus's face lost what little color it had held. Walburga either did not notice the boy's distress or did not care.

"So she had a son, did she?" She rather more spat it out than asked it. "I suppose one of her letters to me might have said that, but of course I threw them all into the fire instead of reading them."

Sirius was staring at his mother in open astonishment, while Severus was watching her with a frightening mix of fascination and embarrassment. Lily, for her part, was torn between sending sympathetic, worried looks to her friend and glaring angrily at the woman who had caused him distress. Evan didn't seem to know what to do, so he was looking at all of the occupants of the compartment in turn, an uncomfortable yet curious look on his face.

Orion took his wife's arm and used the authoritative tone of voice that Sirius knew might hold back Walburga's outburst if they were lucky.

"Yes, yes, it was a horrible falling out, very unfortunate," he said quickly, then looked visibly relieved as the train's whistle sounded loudly and interrupted him. "Ah," he said, once the noise
had died down, "well we had better get off the train, my dear, unless we fancy repeating Hogwarts ourselves!"

He proceeded to facilitate extremely quick final goodbyes with Sirius and shepherd his wife off the train, though he couldn't stop her from telling Sirius one final time, as she was staring pointedly at Severus Snape, that he should remember to "make his family proud." Sirius knew that meant not making friends with a half-blood.

An uncomfortable silence descended on the compartment as the occupants varyingly looked around at each other and then broke off eye contact as soon as it was made. Sirius finally caught Evan's hazel gaze and felt his friend reach for his hand where it rested between them on the seat and squeeze it briefly before letting go. His courage restored, he turned to look at the ashen countenance of Severus Snape.

"I'm sorry about my mother," he said, but at just that moment Severus had also decided to speak and asked, "So you're a Black?"

They stared at one another for a few moments until Sirius realized that the other boy wasn't going to comment on his apology but expected an answer to his own question.

"Yes, obviously," he said.

Severus stared at him with hard black eyes. "Well, my mother always told me that you're a self-important, unpleasant bunch of snobs. I guess she was right."

Sirius felt an immediate swell of indignation and anger in his chest, and he wanted to take out his wand and hex the other boy. He was in a difficult position, he knew, because his mother had all but come out and attacked the other boy and he had every right to be upset, but at the same time Sirius couldn't help the anger he felt at his entire family being insulted. Not to mention he had apologized to Severus Snape, and it wasn't his fault at all if the other boy wanted to be a git about accepting it.

Using every bit of training his family had ever given him about not losing face in front of others, he kept his face as blank as possible and calmly said, "I don't think someone with rags like yours could be an authority on the subject, and I doubt your mother is either or she'd have been too embarrassed to let you leave the house looking like that."

He knew that he was playing into what Snape had said about him, but in the same stroke the boy had revealed that money and importance was his own weak point, and Sirius had jabbed directly at it.

Evan laughed. Snape flushed and stood abruptly, storming out of the compartment with only the briefest of comments to his little girlfriend that he'd be back. Evan laughed even harder at that and at the way Lily was glaring at both of them. Sirius laughed too, pretending that he found it all funny instead of upsetting.

When the train began to move a few moments later, Lily turned her attention back out the window and started waving. Sirius presumed it was to her family. He knew that his own family would find it unseemly if he made such a display in front of others, so he stayed in his seat and didn't try and catch a last glimpse of them as the train pulled out of the station.

Just then the compartment door slammed open with a bang, and Sirius looked around warily, expecting it to be Snape. Instead it was a spectacled boy with supremely messy black hair and a large grin on his face, holding an enormous black cat.
"Can I sit here?" he asked. "Some sixth years kicked me out of my compartment."

Sirius and Evan gave their assent, but Lily never turned away from the window.

The boy sat across from Sirius and held out his hand. "Great, thanks! I'm James."

"Sirius." He took the boy's hand, and then watched as Evan did the same and introduced himself. Lily still didn't turn away from the window, and James stared at her in complete confusion for a moment before Sirius told him, "Don't bother," and he shrugged and sat back in his seat.

James quickly forgot the odd girl and turned his grin back on Sirius and Evan. "This is Broadmore." The cat looked up at its name, but then almost immediately went back to grooming itself.

"Broadmore?" asked Evan, shooting Sirius an amused glance.

"After the Beaters, of course!" James seemed offended that anyone would even have to ask the question.

Sirius returned Evan's look. "Why would you name your cat after those dunderheads?"

"Dunderheads!" James cried, looking mortally offended.

Evan finally let out the laugh he'd been holding in. "You'll have to excuse Sirius," he informed the other boy. "He isn't a fan of Falmouth."

James's offended look remained firmly in place, and Sirius cut in to inform him, "I'm a fan of Tutshill."

"The Tornados!" James crossed his arms. "I'll bet you're just a fair-weather fan. Nobody liked them until they started winning."

Sirius laughed then, and Evan let himself fall backwards against the seat as he laughed even harder than he had before. James looked between the two of them in confusion, but Lily still stubbornly refused to look away from the window.

"My grandfather owns the Tornados," Sirius finally informed the other boy in between laughs.

They were still laughing and good-naturedly arguing about Quidditch when the compartment door slid open again, this time much less forcefully than when James had come in. The three boys all ignored Snape's entrance. Sirius and Evan did so pointedly, and James was too busy discussing the state of the British and Irish League for the upcoming season to have paid him any mind. He went to sit beside the other window across from Lily, and Sirius noticed that the boy had changed out of the ratty clothes he had made fun of earlier and into his Hogwarts uniform, which was nowhere near the quality of Sirius's own but still in much better shape than his Muggle clothes.

Sirius didn't hear any of the conversation from the other side of the compartment, and he had nearly forgotten that Snape had even re-entered the compartment at all until James's head swiveled around to look at the other boy.

"Slytherin?" he asked with a frown. "Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" he directed his question to Sirius and Evan.

Sirius tensed, and he felt Evan's hand brush against his again in another show of comfort. Or perhaps in a silent request for Sirius not to start another fight with James like he'd fought with Snape.
Finally, Sirius replied, "My whole family have been in Slytherin."

"Blimey," said James, "and I thought you seemed all right!"

The Slytherin tiepin suddenly felt very heavy and like it might burn a hole through Sirius's clothes and touch his skin, even though he knew that was absolutely ridiculous and just his imagination. Evan's hand squeezed his tightly.

He grinned, deciding that he didn't want to bring his tally up to three enemies before he even got off the train.

"Maybe I'll break the tradition," he said flippantly, and Evan squeezed even harder in surprise. "Where are you heading, if you've got the choice?"

James lifted an invisible sword.

"'Gryffindor, where dwell the brave at heart!' Like my dad."

Snape's snort was almost but not quite soft enough that the other boys didn't hear it. Sirius and Evan both bristled in anger, because anything Snape had said or done at that point would have been enough to set either of them off again. James beat them to the punch.

"Got a problem with that?"

"No," said Snape, though his slight sneer said otherwise. "If you'd rather be brawny than brainy —"

Sirius, quite tired of the smaller boy's insults, interrupted him and asked, "Where're you hoping to go, seeing as you're neither?"

He watched in satisfaction as the other boy flushed with anger once more. Evan laughed again and squeezed Sirius's hand again before letting him go, apparently thinking that the danger was finally over. James roared with laughter. Lily Evans finally turned her attention back to them for the first time since Snape had left the compartment earlier. She was almost as flushed as Snape, and she glared between James and Sirius in open dislike.

"Come on, Severus, let's find another compartment," she said angrily as she rose to her feet.

Sirius thought that her attempt at sounding haughty paled in comparison to the tone of voice his mother used every day, with nearly everyone, and he wasn't impressed at all. He joined James in imitating her, because he knew that it would get under her skin. He watched James try to trip Snape as he attempted to exit the compartment, and Broadmore hissed at the movement of his master's lap and moved to fill Snape's vacated seat.

"See ya, Snivellus!" Evan called out as the boy slammed the compartment door shut behind him.

Sirius and James both laughed at the name.

"Good one!" James said.

The boys spread out more now that they were the only three people occupying the two long bench seats. James propped himself up against one wall and stretched his legs out along the length of the seat, briefly disturbing his cat and earning himself another hiss and a swipe at his newly bared foot. Sirius took one wall and Evan the other, their legs meeting in the middle.

"You'd better not push me off," Sirius warned, as his legs were on the outside of the seat and
Evan's were against the backrest.

"I won't," his friend promised, though he playfully nudged at Sirius's legs. "Now, what do you guys think of the new Keeper over at Montrose?"

Conversation returned to Quidditch, the earlier altercation all but forgotten by the time the trolley came around offering refreshments, and the three boys spent the rest of the train ride in lively discussion.

The enormous castle loomed above them, the bright glow from the hundreds of windows casting the many towers into shadow against the inky sky. After several mishaps and at least one person slipping and soaking his leg up to his knee in the lake, the first years had finally managed to clamber into a number of small boats and were making their way across the vast lake towards the castle. Or rather towards the cliff on which the castle sat.

Sirius, James, and Evan had snagged a boat together, though they were joined by a girl called Janice Edgecomb. She had been gazing at Sirius in undisguised wonder ever since she'd joined them, and though they were all cast in darkness now and couldn't see each other clearly, he could still feel her gaze on him as she chattered away about this and that. He just wished she'd leave him alone. And preferably shut up while she was at it.

"Heads down!" yelled the enormous, hairy man who had corralled all of them into the boats. Sirius ducked his head as they went through a curtain of ivy and underneath the cliff. If he had to duck his head to fit, he wondered how on earth that huge man was fitting under here. Surely he had to lie down in his boat to fit under the cliff? Sirius looked around to see if he could tell, but he couldn't.

They disembarked in a cave that must serve as the harbor for the boats, then climbed up a path that was hewn out of the rock until they reappeared on the surface near the castle's giant front doors. The man—he must be a half giant at least, Sirius thought—banged on the wooden door three times, and it finally swung open to reveal a short, enormously fat wizard with graying blond hair and a huge mustache.

The first man introduced him as Professor Slughorn, and then he led them through an enormous entrance hall with a grand marble staircase and into a small room where they all had to crowd together to fit comfortably.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor Slughorn. "You are about to take part in the Sorting Ceremony, and then we will have a feast to celebrate the start of the new school year. There are four houses—Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin—each with its own history and traditions. No one house is better than another—" Here Evan had to disguise a snort as a cough, and Sirius knew that he was thinking about how the lineages of Slytherin house were superior to any other house. The professor paused and chuckled good-naturedly.

"You should think of your house as your surrogate family while you are here. You will live with your house, attend classes with your house, cheer for your house Quidditch team (and maybe even play for it), and spend your free time in your house common room. Furthermore, your good deeds will earn points for your house, while your bad deeds will cause your house to lose points. The house with the most points at the end of the year will win the house cup."

"Are there any questions?"

Sirius could feel a ripple of tension move through the crowd so he knew there were questions, but no one was brave enough to speak up and ask one. Sure enough, as soon as Professor Slughorn
had told them that they had a few minutes to freshen up and exited through a different door than the one they'd come in through, whispering broke out among the other first years.

"—wonder what we have to do—"

"—if none of the houses are right?"

James nudged him. "Can you believe how afraid they are of a little old hat?"

Evan leaned around Sirius to reply, "Well, not all of them are pure-bloods, you know. I'll bet some of them have no idea what even happens in the Sorting Ceremony."

Sirius stamped down the urge to remind Evan that he hadn't known either until this morning when Sirius had told him, because Evan was his friend and he didn't want to embarrass the other boy in front of James and whoever else might be listening.

True to his word, Professor Slughorn returned a few minutes later and led them all into the Great Hall single-file. They lined up in front of the head table facing all four of the house tables, all of them looking up at the enchanted ceiling. Even Sirius was staring at it in wonder, though he had known all about it from his family and from skimming through the interesting parts of *Hogwarts: A History*. It was different to hear about it and to see it. Later, Sirius couldn't have told anyone what the Sorting Hat had sung or any words that had been spoken, but soon enough the first name was called and the ceremony began.

He barely paid attention as "Avery, William" was Sorted into Slytherin, because his blood was pounding too loudly in his ears, and then suddenly it was his turn.

"Black, Sirius!"

He heard a choking sound from beside him, but he didn't take the time to glance back at James to see what was wrong before he stepped forward towards Professor Slughorn. He sat on the stool facing the student body and saw the encouraging grin of his cousin Andy at the Slytherin table before the hat was placed on his head and fell over his eyes.

"Well," came a voice, "this is certainly interesting. I'm surprised that you're so difficult." Sirius moved his head as if he might be able to see where the voice was coming from, but then he remembered that he couldn't see anyway because of the hat on his head, and he realized all at once that the voice must belong to the Sorting Hat itself. "You've got plenty of courage, but you've also got a keen mind. You're loyal to a fault, so you might do well in Hufflepuff."

Sirius almost choked on his own saliva, thinking that he'd transfer to another school first thing in the morning if he got placed in Hufflepuff.

"Ah, not to worry," said the Sorting Hat, "you aren't patient or steadfast enough to be in Hufflepuff. But which of the other houses would do well for you? Gryffindor or Ravenclaw would both do nicely, though I can see that you don't seek knowledge for its own sake so perhaps —"

*What about Slytherin?* Sirius thought frantically. *All of my family has been in Slytherin!*

"Slytherin? I should think not," replied the hat. "Oh, you're cunning enough, of course, but you've not got the ambition of a Slytherin. I can see that you don't think very far into the future at all, and that isn't the mindset of someone who would do well in that house." Before Sirius could form another thought, the hat said, "No, you'd do best in GRYFFINDOR!"

Sirius sat there, stunned. The Great Hall was silent for long moments that to him felt like hours,
but all of a sudden cheering erupted from somewhere to his left, starting rather slowly but quickly building up into a raucous cacophony of clapping and shouting and whistling.

He still stayed rooted to the stool unable to move until the Sorting Hat was finally snatched from his head. He felt a beefy hand on his shoulder, gently pushing him forwards.

"Go on, Mr. Black," encouraged Professor Slughorn, though he sounded almost as disappointed as Sirius felt. "Gryffindor is waiting for you."

He stood on shaky legs and started making his way towards the table on the far left, where students with red-and-gold ties were clapping and cheering for him, some even standing for him as he approached. The walk seemed to take forever, as he felt like his legs had been simultaneously hit with a Jelly-Legs Jinx and turned to lead, but he finally reached the table and sunk down gratefully onto the bench. Greetings came from all around, and several of the older boys clapped him on the shoulders and back in friendly gestures, and Sirius smiled weakly back at all of them.

Lily Evans was sorted into Gryffindor shortly afterward, and Sirius automatically moved down the table to make room for her. He was still in such a state of shock that he didn't even notice when she turned her back to him in a deliberate snub, which surely would have made her even more enraged had she realized that he didn't react in the least.

Finally, when "Greengrass, Eleanor" was sorted into Slytherin, Sirius chanced a look up at the Slytherin table. The entire table was clapping and cheering enthusiastically for their new arrival, except for his cousins. Andy was clapping distractedly, but she was staring right at Sirius and not really paying attention to what was going on around her. Cissy wasn't clapping or cheering at all, just staring at him with undivided attention. Her face was still a perfect picture of surprise and disbelief, and Sirius was sure the expression matched his own.

Then something collided with his shoulder and he broke off eye contact to spin around.

"Oi, budge up, you lot," said James, who had apparently knocked into Sirius on his way further down the table. The older Gryffindors laughed and voiced humorous complaints at the first year's demand, but they made room on the bench all the same. James sat down beside an older boy whom he greeted as if they were old acquaintances. They probably were, Sirius thought, since James was a pure-blood and he was sure that Gryffindors kept social circles outside of Hogwarts just like Slytherins did. James's parents probably knew the older boy's parents.

Sirius still wondered, though, why his new friend hadn't sat beside him, and why he had knocked into him like that. It must have just been an accident, since Sirius couldn't recall having done anything to anger the other boy between spending time together on the train and now.

"Rosier, Evan!"

Sirius turned his attention back to the line at the front of the Great Hall. Evan caught his eye and gave him an uneasy smile as he sat on the stool, but then the Sorting Hat fell down over his eyes and contact was broken. It only took the hat a few seconds to yell out, "SLYTHERIN!"

Sirius felt his stomach plummet even further than it already had. He hadn't really imagined that it would happen, but he had been hoping that his friend would end up sorted into a different house, too. If not Gryffindor, then at least Ravenclaw. Then he wouldn't be the only one. But Evan removed the hat himself, with a huge grin on his face, and all but skipped to the Slytherin table.

He didn't meet Sirius's gaze again.

"Snape, Severus" was next, and Sirius watched in undisguised awe and fury as that greasy git was
sorted into Slytherin, as Sirius himself should have been. Lucius Malfoy clapped Snape on the back and smiled at him in welcome. Sirius was the one who was supposed to be introduced to Malfoy, as Belley had said. His stomach clenched uncomfortably as he thought of Bellatrix. If Andy and Cissy's reactions were bad, Belley's would be ten times worse. Maybe she would never even speak to Sirius again.

Oh Merlin, he thought, what about his parents? Surely they would be bitterly disappointed. Would they be angry with him? And his grandparents? Grandfather Pollux would be furious, Sirius knew, and he could just imagine the cold expression on Grandfather Arcturus's face. Grandfather Arcturus who had only just hugged Sirius that morning and told him that he was sure he would make the family proud. He very much doubted that anyone in his family was going to be proud that he was the first Gryffindor in the family.

He realized that the Sorting Ceremony must be over when food appeared on the table before him. He automatically placed a random assortment of food onto his plate, but later he couldn't remember what any of it was. He remembered that everything he put into his mouth tasted like rubber, so he stopped trying to eat. He remembered that a smallish brown-haired boy had smiled nicely at him, and a chubby blond one had attempted to make conversation, but he couldn't remember actually responding.

Later, when everyone rose from the table almost as one, Sirius stared up at them numbly for a moment before standing alongside them. He followed the crowd as a prefect led them out of the Great Hall and towards the great marble staircase he had noticed earlier. The Slytherins were heading down a different staircase that obviously led into the dungeons, and Sirius had the urge to leave the Gryffindors and follow his family down to the Slytherin common room where he belonged. But then the Slytherins had disappeared and the Gryffindors had reached the stairs, and he found himself being herded along by the crowd as everyone chatted excitedly around him.

After many more staircases and several hidden doors, they finally reached a portrait at the end of a long corridor which portrayed a fat lady in a pink dress. Sirius still wasn't really taking anything in as the boys were directed up a spiral staircase until they reached their dormitory, where four beds were hung with red velvet curtains that Sirius thought looked like the same material as his own green bed at home. Just the wrong color.

"You're a Black!" accused James.

At the anger in the other boy's voice, Sirius snapped to attention for the first time since he'd been sorted. He briefly really took in his surroundings for the first time. He was still hovering in the doorway, and all of the other boys had moved further into the room. James was standing next to the bed nearest the door, his arms crossed and a glare aimed straight at Sirius. The blond boy was sitting on the next bed watching them. The brown-haired boy was bent over his trunk at the third bed, though he had stopped whatever he was doing to look warily between James and Sirius.

"I—" Sirius felt himself floundering. "Er—Yes, I am."

"Did you not tell me because you knew I wouldn't talk to you if you did? What game are you playing?"

Sirius stared at him in bewilderment. "I—No, I—What do you mean?"

James uncrossed his arms and stalked over to him, stopping feet away so that he could stare right into Sirius's eyes as he said, "You knew I wouldn't talk to you if I knew you were a Black, because I'm a Potter."

"A Potter…" Sirius trailed off for a moment as everything clicked into place for him and he
realized who James must be. "But then, you're a Black, too! Or at least your mother is a Black. We're first cousins once removed!"

James made a noise somewhere between anger and disgust.

"I am not a Black! They're Dark wizards! No one in that family has talked to my mother since she married my father, and my parents have raised me up right!"

"But—but your mother is still on the family tapestry," Sirius said, confused, "and your father and you, too. You haven't been blasted off it."

James's own face showed confusion now, but the brown-haired boy beat him to it, asking, "What on earth is a family tapestry?"

Sirius blinked at him, as he had quite forgotten for a moment that there were two others in the room with them.

"It's a magic tapestry that records the Black family tree. You get blasted off of it when you're disowned, and Dorea Black was never blasted off it."

"Potter," growled James. "It's Dorea Potter, and she wouldn't want me talking to a Dark wizard."

He stomped back over to his bed and threw himself onto it, drawing the bed hangings closed around him. "I'm going to bed."

Sirius was left standing awkwardly in the doorway, staring at the spot where the other boy had disappeared behind his curtain. He had thought they were friends, earlier on the train. They had gotten along very well for the hours it took to go from London to Hogwarts. He hadn't realized that anyone could dislike him so much because of his family. He hadn't even realized that anyone could dislike his family so much in the first place!

"Sirius," said the brown-haired boy, "maybe you should come in and shut the door. I think that's your bed there by the window." He pointed, and indeed Sirius's trunk was sitting at the end of the bed furthest into the room.

As he moved towards it, the other boy stuck out his hand as he passed. "I'm Remus Lupin, by the way." Sirius stared at the proffered hand for a moment before he came to his senses and took it. "I tried to introduce myself at the feast, but you looked to be in shock so I thought it was best to let you be for a while."

"I'll bet he was in shock!" cried the blond, and then he blushed to the roots of his hair when Sirius and Remus both spun around to look at him.

Sirius didn't need to be reminded that he was the first Black to ever not be sorted into Slytherin, much less the first one to end up in Gryffindor of all places. But he didn't need to make another enemy, seeing as he already had one in his dorm, so he stamped down the urge to lash out at the shorter boy.

"Who're you?" he finally asked.

The blond stared at him for a few moments, but finally managed to stutter out that he was called Peter Pettigrew.

"Right," said Sirius, moving again towards his bed. "I'm going to bed, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. Maybe when I wake up this will all just have been a nightmare."

He plopped down onto his mattress still fully clothed and dragged the red curtains shut behind
Hours later, Sirius was still awake, unable to sleep for all of his racing thoughts and fears. There was a very good chance that he might actually be disowned, he thought. He was a disgrace to his family, being sorted into Gryffindor like this. His cousins and his friend didn't want to have anything to do with him. His mother would probably go upstairs to blast his name off the tapestry right away. And Sirius would be stuck living in a dorm with James Potter, who hated him and whose mother was still on the tapestry even though Sirius himself wouldn't be.

There was a tapping sound that Sirius thought he was imagining at first, but then it grew more and more insistent and he realized that it was real. He threw back his bed hangings and looked around. All three of the other beds had their curtains firmly shut, and Sirius couldn't see any of his roommates out of bed.

The sound came again, seemingly from behind him, and Sirius spun around. Huge yellow eyes were staring at him, and he leapt backwards in fright.

Then he processed what he was seeing and recognized Aquila outside his window.

Heart still pounding from the sudden fright, Sirius padded over to the window and let the owl inside. She hooted softly and flew to land on the table beside his bed. Sirius followed her, collapsing face-first onto his mattress and lying there for a moment with his face buried in the bedding, not breathing, until he finally rolled onto his side to face the owl.

"I guess you won't need your cage in the owlery after all," he told her, "seeing as you can get into the Gryffindor dorms."

She cocked her head and considered him, but didn't make a sound.

He took it as answer enough and continued, "Can you imagine, girl? Me in a tower instead of under the lake! I'll bet Andy and Cissy will write to the family first thing in the morning, and then everyone will know, and I'll probably get a Howler by dinnertime telling the whole school how I've been disowned."

The owl still stared at him in silence. Then finally, with an exasperated look, she lifted her leg out as if he had a letter to tie onto it.

"A letter!" he exclaimed. At grumbling coming from somewhere behind him, he remembered his roommates and lowered his voice. "A letter, that's it!" he repeated, quieter this time. "You're such a smart girl, Aquila!"

His cousins couldn't send letters until the morning, because owls couldn't make it into the Slytherin dorms. Sirius, however, could send an owl right now. It would get to his parents before his cousins' owls could, and hopefully if Sirius explained how sorry he was and how he hadn't wanted to be in Gryffindor at all, his parents wouldn't disown him. Sirius wouldn't go so far as to hope they would understand, as he knew that they would still be shocked and bitterly disappointed, but maybe they would at least let him stay in the family.

Dear Father and Mother,

I don't know how to tell you this, so I guess I just have to come out and say it. I got sorted into Gryffindor.
I know it's a shock. You can't be more shocked than I am. I promise I didn't want to! I told the hat that I wanted Slytherin, I swear I did!

Please don't be too angry with me. Andromeda and Narcissa will probably send you letters a few hours after you get this one, but I wanted to tell you first so that I could explain it. Maybe I could transfer schools, if that would make you less disappointed?

Love,

Sirius

He didn't know what else he could say. He wanted to explain more, but he didn't really know for himself how it had happened other than what he'd already said. He wanted to ask for more reassurances that his parents would not disown him, but he didn't want to say it outright like that just in case his parents didn't think of it and he accidentally put the idea into their heads.

Heaving a great sigh, he tied the letter to his familiar's leg and sent her on her way.

Deciding that it would be far too much trouble—and probably too noisy—to dig through his trunk to get his pajamas out, Sirius stripped down to his underwear at the edge of his bed. He nearly teared up when he was removing his tie and found the Slytherin tiepin there. He stared at it for a while, the emerald eye taunting him in the darkness, before he sighed again and laid it gently on his table.

Then he pulled back the bedclothes for the first time, as earlier he had just thrown himself on top of them, and found another reminder of the house he was supposed to have been in: the green silk sheets his mother had purchased for him in Diagon Alley. The house-elves must have found them and put them on his bed when they moved his things upstairs. They didn't match his Gryffindor dormitory at all.

With one last glance at the glinting tiepin, Sirius sunk down into the green sheets, yanked his red curtains closed, and buried his head under his pillows.
The morning post arrived with the usual chaos of flapping wings and spilt pumpkin juice, but the owls avoided Sirius's end of the Gryffindor table just like all of the students did. He looked down the table to watch James Potter open his large box. Sirius knew from experience that it was a care package full of all sorts of sweets and homemade baked goods. It was the third such delivery that James had received—one for each week they'd been at school—and everyone had expected that another would come this Monday, too.

Not that Sirius would be allowed to have any of the treats. James never offered him any, even though he often ate them in front of him and offered Remus and Peter some. Just like he wasn't sitting with James but Remus and Peter were sitting with the other boy, even though this left Sirius set slightly apart and alone at the end of the Gryffindor table. Not that Sirius could really blame them; if their situations had been reversed, he wasn't sure that he would have willingly become a social pariah just to be nice to someone that everyone else hated.

Even his own family hadn't written him at all in the weeks since school had begun. His cousins and Evan had been avoiding him. The first week of classes he had tried to sit with Evan in double Potions with the Slytherins, but Evan had avoided him and sat next to Will Avery instead. Sirius had ended up sitting alone, because there was an odd number of students in the class. Sirius sat alone in every class except Herbology, in fact, because there was an odd number of Gryffindor first years—the four boys in his dorm plus three girls—so he had to sit alone when they had classes alone. It was pure luck that they shared Herbology with the Ravenclaws, whose seven first years brought the class up to an even number, which meant that one unlucky person couldn't avoid sitting next to him.

After the mail had been delivered and various treats and bits of bacon had been retrieved, the owls all flew back out the way they had come. Sirius sighed and rose from the table. It was clear that another day had passed without any response from his family, and there was no reason to stick around the Great Hall watching everyone else talk to their friends. The only reason he even attended breakfast was in case he got mail.

Shouldering his bag, he trudged out through the entrance hall and the front doors to make his way around the castle to Herbology.

He had several minutes alone to work on his homework before class actually began. He silently thanked his father for presenting him with a book bag with an Undetectable Extension Charm and a Feather-Light Charm so he could carry all of his things around with him all the time. Since no one was really talking to him, he had nothing better to do than schoolwork and was pretty far ahead. By the time other students started trickling into the greenhouse, he had managed to finish the Charms essay they had been assigned in class the previous Thursday and was reading ahead in his Transfigurations textbook.

Class went as it had for the past two weeks. Sirius kept quiet and diligently took notes, and Janice Edgecomb sat close enough to him that when he turned to answer one of her whispered questions
he got a face full of her curly hair.

Janice was one of the only people who wasn't avoiding him. If he'd had a mind to complain about it, the alternative of being completely alone had made him rethink that idea before he'd actually said anything unfortunate to her. He would rather have her over-the-top enthusiasm and lack of respect for personal space than no friends at all.

After class he walked slightly apart from his classmates as they all chattered together about things in which he had no part. He always headed straight to their next class and therefore spent the morning break in an empty classroom doing homework or reading ahead. During the lunch hour he would gather whatever food he could carry in his hands and immediately leave to go sit in the next empty classroom so he wouldn't have to watch everyone else carry on around him as if he wasn't there. He spent his remaining free hours in the library. He preferred the library to being ignored in the Gryffindor common room or, worse, antagonized by Potter.

That night he returned to the common room just as the clock signaled that it was time for the first years' curfew. He was met just inside the portrait by a sixth-year prefect who was apparently on her way out.

"Black!" she exclaimed, coming up short just before they collided. "You're cutting it really close tonight."

Sirius shrugged, and she pinned him with an annoyed look.

"Well," she said at last, "you had better be careful. I would hate to have to take points from my own house just because you think you have better things to do than spend your evenings in your own common room."

Sirius nodded and pushed past her. He set his sights on the stairs that led to the boys' dormitories, intent on going to his room so he could try to write another letter to his parents. A raised voice he could have recognized anywhere cut across the room.

"Black doesn't have anything better to do! He just thinks he's too good to spend time with the rest of us!"

The usual buzz of conversation suddenly became hushed as everyone heard Potter's words and turned to see what was happening. Sirius refused to stop. He held his head high and kept his gaze straight on the staircase as he continued his trek towards his room.

But Potter wasn't content to just let him go. "You see!" Sirius could hear him declare to the other Gryffindors. "He was bragging on the train about how rich his family is and everything, and we all know the Blacks are the worst sort!"

"It's true," chimed in a female voice. "Mrs. Black attacked my friend on the train, and Black carried on bullying him after we left the station."

The level of volume in the common room rose suddenly as people varyingly asked James and Lily for details, commented on Sirius, or returned to their previous conversations.

Sirius maintained his dignified gait up the stairs until he rounded the first corner and knew that he was well out of sight of the common room. Then he took off at a run the rest of the way, pausing his flight only long enough to make sure he didn't slam the bedroom door loud enough for anyone to hear it. He leaned back against the wood and closed his eyes. His heart seemed to be pounding hard enough that he could feel it throughout his entire body, and the thundering in his ears drowned out any lingering noise from the common room that he might have still been able to hear.
from all the way upstairs. He felt the sting of tears but refused to let James Potter make him cry.

Aquila cooed at him from across the room, and he looked up to see her staring at him from on top of one of his bedposts. He hoped her expression was concern and not something worse, like pity. Blacks don't need to be pitied, he thought.

"I can't believe him!" he yelled, causing the owl to hoot in surprise. "I never bragged about my family!"

Blacks don't need to brag, he remembered another of his lessons.

"And Evans!" He punched the bedpost in frustration, causing Aquila to ruffle her feathers in indignation as her perch shook. "That bint knows that I apologized and that Snivellus refused to accept it!"

Blacks don't need to apologize. The thought came to him automatically, another of the old lessons that he'd been taught by his parents and grandparents.

And suddenly Sirius was stopped in his tracks by the revelation.

He had been trying to fit in by playing by everyone else's rules. His mother had reminded him before she left him on the train that he shouldn't make friends with a boy with a Muggle father, but he had tried anyway. He had even apologized to Snape for his mother's reaction. He had tried to forge a friendship with Potter even after he knew about the other boy's disdain for Slytherin, and therefore for Sirius's entire family. It really came as no surprise that now James had shown his true colors. He had tried to fit in with all of the other Gryffindors but had been met with ridicule and distrust. It wasn't very surprising at all given that he wasn't really a Gryffindor. Oh, sure, the Sorting Hat had decided that his personality was more suited to Gryffindor than to Slytherin, but surely these things ran far deeper than what a hat could possibly know.

Sirius was a Black, first and foremost.

In a sudden flurry of movement, Sirius leapt across his bed and grabbed the quill that was resting on his nightstand. He had been composing another letter to his parents to apologize again for his unfortunate sorting and to beg them for forgiveness, but with his newfound clarity he knew that was the wrong thing to do. He tossed the crumpled parchment aside and started on a new piece.

The rest of that week and the next proceeded much differently than the ones that had gone before. Sirius refused to be chased off by Potter and the rest of the Gryffindors. He confidently placed himself right in the middle of their lives. He sat in the middle of the Gryffindor table, which at first produced startled looks and stilted conversations from those around him, but he refused to back down and doggedly inserted himself into whatever they were talking about. He stayed with the rest of the students during breaks, and he brazenly sat right in the middle of the common room instead of hiding in the library. Although Potter and Evans never spoke to him except to insult him, and Lupin stopped trying to talk to him after the first time he was nastily set down by Potter for talking to "scum" like Sirius, Pettigrew and the other Gryffindor girls in his year warmed up to him much more quickly than Sirius had imagined.

By the end of their fourth week, Sirius felt like he actually had friends in his house.

Peter was a bit sycophantic for Sirius's tastes, but the advantages of befriending him far outweighed the disadvantages. First of all, it drove Potter absolutely up the wall that one of his friends had abandoned him in favor of Sirius. More importantly, he was pretty sure that Peter would do absolutely anything Sirius wanted him to, which made Sirius quite forgiving of the fact
that the other boy only chose him over Potter because Sirius gave him more correct answers on their homework, had more spending money and nicer toys, and had mentioned that over Christmas break he would be attending the Quidditch League Final in his grandfather's private box. Puddlemere United were expected to make it to the league final, and Sirius knew that Peter hoped to be invited to attend the game since they were his favorite team.

Currently he was watching as Peter unsuccessfully tried to make a quill move across the space on the table that the blond had created by shoving his dishes out of the way.

"You're not doing the right wand movements," Sirius informed the other boy as he helped himself to another serving of sausage.

Peter tried again without success.

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Last night you told me the problem is I'm not saying it right! Now you're saying the problem is I'm not moving my wand right!"

"Yeah," Sirius replied, "that's because now you're trying so hard to say it correctly that you're not paying enough attention to your wand movements."

Peter's next attempt caused the quill to shake for a moment but was ultimately unsuccessful.

"If I can't do this today, Flitwick'll assign me another essay!" Peter cried, his frustration seeming to turn to panic as the food in the serving platters suddenly disappeared and all of the students began rising to walk to class.

Although Peter was quite good at Potions and Herbology, he was absolutely abysmal at Charms. Sirius had taken to helping him in Charms, and in return Peter would help him with Potions whenever Sirius was simply too bored with the subject to bother doing the readings for himself.

Sirius shoved the rest of his toast into his mouth and took an enormous swig of his pumpkin juice to wash it down.

"Watch," he said when he was finished, taking pity on his friend and pulling out his own wand. "It's easier if at first you match up the syllables with the wand movements."

He demonstrated once using a measured pace and slow wand movements, and Peter watched him avidly. Then he repeated the charm, this time at a normal pace, and directed the feather back in front of Peter.

"Pronunciation and wand movement are more important with charms than other things," Sirius reminded his friend. "'Remember Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself lying on the floor with a buffalo on his chest.'"

He tilted his head back to get the last bit of juice in his goblet, but he watched out of the corner of his eye as Peter tried a few more times. Finally his friend succeeded at performing the charm, and he let out a whoop of triumph as the quill crashed into Sirius's now-empty plate.

By then the Great Hall was almost entirely empty, and the two other Gryffindor girls in their year, Emmeline Vance and Mary MacDonald, were waving at them from the end of the table by the doors. Sirius and Peter hurriedly gathered their things and rushed up the table to meet the girls.

The two had been very friendly with Sirius since he had lent them his booklist for a Transfiguration essay they'd had to write. It just included the titles and a short note about what was helpful in each book, but Emmeline had thanked him profusely and insisted that they never would have found the information in half of them without his help. (There was, Sirius had been surprised to learn, quite an absence of libraries in most peoples' homes, and therefore a lot of other students'
essays weren't very well researched because they were still learning how Madam Pince's indexing system worked.)

Mary was the shyer of the two girls, but even she had been outspoken in her defense of Sirius when, two days later as they were comparing their finished essays, Potter had demanded to know why they were hanging around with a Dark wizard.

Mary held out a napkin to Peter as the two approached. "Here," she said, "I nabbed you some toast before the food disappeared. I saw that you didn't eat anything."

Peter took the small bundle from her. "Thanks! I would have been absolutely dying by lunchtime."

Sirius figured that it probably wouldn't be a very good idea to make a joke about Peter not looking like he'd suffer too much from missing a meal.

The four of them rushed through the castle towards the Charms classroom, their usual trudging pace sped up to nearly a run. They tumbled over the threshold just as the bell was chiming to announce the start of class, and Professor Flitwick looked up at them from his place perched precariously on a stack of books.

"Almost late!" he squeaked, though there was nothing chastising about either his tone or his expression. "Go on, take your seats! We've got a lot to go over today!"

"Sorry, Professor," said Peter as he slid into his seat next to Sirius. "Sirius was helping me with my Moving Charm."

Professor Flitwick nodded cheerily. "And did you finally accomplish it?"

Peter said that he had and demonstrated. His wand movements and incanting were still slow and methodical in the way that Sirius had demonstrated at the breakfast table a few minutes earlier. Though his style was far from elegant, he did manage to make his feather move across the desk.

"Excellent, Mr. Pettigrew!" cried Professor Flitwick, clapping his hands. "I see that Mr. Black has taught you to be more careful with your casting. You just want a bit more practice!" He turned his attention to Sirius. "Ten points to Gryffindor for helping a fellow student!"

Potter was glaring at Sirius from across the aisle, though Sirius couldn't have said whether the git was more upset that he was getting praise in general or that he was getting praise for helping Peter specifically. He grinned triumphantly and gave Potter a raised eyebrow, but his voice was everything humble when he spoke to their professor.

"Thank you, Professor, but it was nothing, really."

The rest of the day went by just as well. Sirius was awarded more points in Transfiguration for successfully transfiguring a beetle into a button on his first try, which caused both James and Evans to seethe even more than they already were. Furthermore, it seemed that Evans had taken his place as the house pariah. In classes Peter and Sirius were sitting together, Emmeline and Mary were sitting together, and Potter and Lupin were sitting together, which left Evans as the lone one out where Sirius had been in that position earlier. Despite their agreement over how horrible Sirius was, Evans seemed to hate Potter just as much as she hated Sirius, which meant that she couldn't sit with him and Lupin during meals or breaks. Emmeline and Mary had taken a decided dislike to the other girl both because she had badmouthed Sirius to them and because she had defended Snivellus after he'd insulted Mary's family.

It wasn't that Sirius disagreed about Mary being a Mudblood. He just wasn't stupid enough to say
so out loud or to defend someone who had, not when he was just making headway in Gryffindor house. He supposed that Evans, being a Mudblood herself, didn't know how insulting it was to call someone that, or else she wouldn't have tried to defend her friend. For that matter, maybe she wouldn't even be friends with someone who would say it, if she knew what it meant.

Either way, Evans's behavior had given Sirius an opportunity to prove that he wasn't going to treat anyone horribly just because he was a Black and a pure-blood (and he wasn't about to admit that he privately thought they would have deserved to be treated horribly). That had sent Mary straight into Sirius's company. Peter, a Half-blood, had been almost as insulted as she had, so the incident had cemented his bond with Sirius even more. Even though Emmeline was a pure-blood, she was a Gryffindor through and through, and Sirius had managed to use the incident to win respect from her, too.

Yes, Sirius was exceedingly pleased with the results of his efforts.

The next morning at breakfast, an enormous eagle owl landed in front of Sirius, sending eggs flying off of his plate and all over the table.

Though he was too delighted to see the owl to be angry for real, Sirius exclaimed, "You did that on purpose so I would have to give you those!"

The owl answered his accusation with an affronted hoot and turned her head away as if she had too much dignity to even acknowledge his presence. He knew she was joking when she held out her foot for him to take the letter despite her still-turned face.

"Thank you, Lyra," Sirius said as he took the letter. "You can have whatever you want, you know."

He was so happy that he would have put in a special request down to the kitchens for her if she'd been able to ask him. At that, she quickly dropped any pretense of anger and turned around so she could start swooping her head down around and into his plate, eating her fill.

"Look, Black finally got an owl!" crowed Potter. "We thought your family was glad to be rid of you!"

A few of the other students laughed. Sirius was glad to see that most of the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws didn't laugh. He was sure they all would have only a couple of weeks before. Lupin wasn't around to back up his friend (Apparently he had taken ill overnight.), but the few scattered laughs belonged to older students who were particularly friendly with Potter. Sirius ignored it both because he felt that he was too good to respond and because he was too excited to read his letter anyway.

Sirius,

You will have to forgive me for taking so long to write back. Your father and I are in Germany on business. Even superior owls like your Aquila and my Lyra will take a few days to make such a long trip.

I can't say that I was not disappointed to learn that you had been sorted anywhere except Slytherin, particularly into Gryffindor, but I suppose that in retrospect it isn't such a surprise. You have always had a different temperament from most of the family. I'm sure you recall that the two of us have had discussions about this before.

Indeed, Sirius did remember several such conversations. He remembered that most recently, just before he'd gone to Diagon Alley to purchase his school supplies, his grandfather had told him
that he would probably need a different type of wand than his father's or grandfather's because of their different personalities.

You are entirely correct that being a Black transcends differences in personality, preferences, or house. Although let's do hope that you are just an anomaly and not the start of a trend. (Sometimes your brother seems like more of a Hufflepuff than anything. Don't tell him or your mother that I said that.)

Sirius laughed aloud, drawing a few curious glances from all around, but he was very careful not to let anyone on either side of him see the letter, particularly Peter. He had asked his grandfather some very sensitive questions and had glanced ahead far enough to see that he had been answered. It would not be good if anyone else read the rest of the letter.

Your plan to ingratiate yourself with the other Gryffindors is sound. It's true that most of them don't have the pure and noble blood that you do, and even those who are pure have mostly forgotten how to behave properly. (I would have very strong words with my cousin about her son's treatment of you, but I think my interference would make his treatment of you worse.)

Sirius was glad that his grandfather hadn't said anything to Dorea Potter, because James would have just used that to humiliate him. He hadn't told his grandfather about Potter so that the older man would fight his battles for him.

You are worth a hundred of each of those people. However, we must adapt to our environments. I certainly would not have gotten as far as I have in politics if I had been too open about my disgust for those of lesser blood. My excellent grandfather, Phineas Nigellus, would never have become the headmaster of Hogwarts had he been too open about his opinions, and he was born nearly a century ago. You see the difference in status that I have achieved compared to your Grandfather Pollux, who is so open about his opinions, and you have been taught the history of your family and surely remember the difference in status between Phineas Nigellus and his sister, my Great Aunt Elladora, who proposed to make Muggle-hunting legal.

Become friends with them because you must. You are in Gryffindor and must make the best of it, and it would simply not do for a Black to be unpopular or a source of ridicule. Perhaps, if you are lucky, you can even teach the Mudbloods how to behave in our world and correct some of the Half-bloods' bad habits. But hear me now: Never stoop to their level, Sirius. Always remember that you are better than them. You are pure. You are more magical, more powerful, and more worthy than any of them can comprehend.

I will be having words with my daughter-in-law about her treatment of you. I was appalled when you told me that in her husband's and my absence she has not been returning your letters. You can be sure that if your father was home she would not have been allowed to carry on this way. She clearly has more to learn about being a Black than you do at your young age. I blame her father.

Sirius thought that it was rather more like if Grandfather had been home he could have influenced his mother's behavior. Sirius's father most often got his way with his wife on such big issues by reminding her of what Arcturus's reaction would be. He wasn't sure that he would be able to forgive his mother for only writing to him because she had been forced to do it, though.

Speaking of him, I will also be having words with that fool Pollux about his grandchildren's behavior. You will let me know if they make amends to you for withdrawing their support since your sorting, and if they do not I will simply have to
have a word with them myself over the holidays.

How are your studies going? Write back and tell me how you're getting on both with classes and with this little project we've discussed.

Toujours Pur,

Grandfather

Sirius folded his letter and put it inside his book bag to make sure that no one else could read it. He was glad that his grandfather agreed with his plan to make friends in his house, because he wasn't sure that he could have spent the next seven years as a social outcast. He could barely stand it for a couple of weeks!

He was also glad to think that maybe his cousins would be willing to talk with him after they got a good talking to about it. He might not be able to easily forgive and forget how they had ignored him, but they were family. Besides, he wouldn't turn down the opportunity to get to know the other Slytherins, and he particularly remembered that Bellatrix had told him to get to know Lucius Malfoy.

"Who was your letter from?" Mary's voice snapped him out of his thoughts and back into the present.

He looked up to see his friends watching him.

He replied, "My grandfather. He was—"

"Probably telling you how disappointed he is that you aren't a slimy snake!" cut in James Potter from his place a few seats away. "Hasn't your family disowned you yet?"

Before Sirius could reply, Mary scoffed, "Honestly, Potter, how stupid! Why would he have been laughing if his letter was anything bad?"

"He was just reminding me of some old family stories," Sirius said. "He had some things to say about your mother, Potter."

The way he said it had the intended implication, and Potter's face went bright red all the way to the tips of his ears. He sputtered in indignation, and Peter burst out laughing at Sirius's side.

A boy, whom Sirius recognized as the one Potter had sat beside during the opening feast, leaned around the others at the table to ask, "Why would your grandfather tell family stories about Mrs. Potter?"

"Don't you know?" Sirius asked, composing his face into a perfect mask of innocent surprise even as he was cheering inside at the perfect opportunity to discredit Potter's words about him in front of the entire house. "Mrs. Potter is a Black. She's my great aunt, actually, and Bellatrix, Andromeda, and Narcissa's, too. You know, my cousins from Slytherin?"

"That's right," piped up Emmeline, obviously having caught onto his game, "you're the first Black not to have been sorted into Slytherin. Wouldn't that mean..." She trailed off suggestively, and Sirius watched as James Potter's face achieved a rather impressive shade of purple.

Sirius nodded along. "That Dorea Potter was a Slytherin? Yes, it would." He had to fight to maintain his mask. "Say, Potter, since your mother was both a Black and a Slytherin, you must think she's at least twice as bad as me!"
The reaction at the table was mixed; Sirius's friends were laughing as if it was the most hilarious thing they had ever heard, but everyone else seemed torn between confusion and discomfort more than laughter. There were a few scattered chuckles, but they were the kind of reluctant chuckles that only come from people who know that it isn't entirely appropriate to find something funny.

Sirius stared across the table directly into the furious eyes of James Potter and felt no remorse. *If it were the other way around, none of them would have had any problem laughing at me,* he thought.

Potter got up and stormed out of the Great Hall alone, as his loyal sidekick wasn't around to support him today.

"*Merlin!*" Emmeline broke into his consciousness and he turned to look at her directly across the table from him. "I thought no one would ever put that tosser in his place!"

From beside him, Peter asked, "Did your grandpa really say anything about his mum?"

"Yeah." Sirius barked out a laugh. "I mean, he didn't really tell me any story about her, but I knew that would set Potter off."

Peter snorted in his laughter. Sirius found it distasteful, but he was determined not to let anything ruin his day since it was going so well for once.

Even double Potions with the Slytherins wasn't enough to dampen his good mood, though Potions was his least favorite class and he had to put up with being in the same room with two more people he'd rather not have anything to do with. Snivellus seemed to hate him more than ever, and Sirius supposed that the git must blame him for his little girlfriend's new position as a social outcast in Gryffindor. Not that Snape did much better in Slytherin, from what Sirius could tell.

Sirius stubbornly thought to himself that really everyone's suffering was Snivellus's fault. If Snivellus had just accepted his apology on the train, they would all be friends and no one would have had a hard time, not even Sirius after he'd been sorted into Gryffindor.

The other person he would rather not see was Evan. He had tried to think of the olive-skinned boy as Rosier instead of as Evan, but even in the privacy of his own mind he had to admit to himself that he missed his friend and couldn't think of him so unfamiliarly. But if Evan was determined to abandon him at the drop of a hat—Sirius chuckled to himself at the literalism of that saying in his case, drawing a curious look from Peter, who was sitting beside him—then he was determined not to have anything to do with his friend…. Former friend.

Lunch was immediately after Potions, and after three straight hours of class everyone was more than happy to exchange the dungeons for the Great Hall, even the Slytherins. Sirius noted with grim satisfaction that Potter hadn't shown up for lunch. He allowed himself to relax and let his guard down, and he was just in the middle of laughing with his friends at a silly story of Mary’s when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

He turned in his seat, halfway expecting it to be Potter or Lupin, but stopped short at the grinning face only a few inches above his own.

"Er—Hello, Janice."

"Hi!" She beamed at him. "Did Slughorn assign you the essay on when potions are better than spells?"

Actually the assignment was two feet on the pros and cons of using both potions and spells, including examples of when potions would be better and when spells would be better. The girl
was in Ravenclaw, so surely she knew that.

Sirius decided to answer with a simple, "Yes."

Her wild curls bounced around her head as she nodded enthusiastically. "Brilliant! Do you want to work on it together?"

Sirius wasn't really accustomed to working with anyone on his written assignments. After he had given that advice to Mary and Emmeline, they had talked once or twice about ideas they had for some of their homework, but they had never actually gone to the library or worked on the assignments together. But, he reflected, Janice had been nice to him since that first day at Hogwarts, and spending more time with her would be a good way to prove even more to everyone that he didn't think he was better than everyone other than the Slytherins. Plus she was a smart girl (at least from what he had seen in their one class together and what he assumed from her house), and they worked well together as partners in Herbology.

"Sure, I guess," he ended up saying. "We can each find the books we want to use over the weekend then meet up before dinner on Monday."

A look of disappointment passed over her face, marring her pleased expression for just a moment before she smiled at him again.

"Oh, okay, that sounds fine. We can meet outside the library right after class."

Sirius agreed and she turned to make the brief journey back up the Ravenclaw table to where a group of first and second-year girls sat giggling and apparently watching them. Sirius turned back to his own friends, and his slight confusion must have shown on his face, because Emmeline and Mary exchanged a look and promptly burst into their own fit of giggles.

Peter looked between them in just as much bafflement as Sirius. "What's funny?" he demanded.

But that just increased the girls' laughter even more.

Sirius was torn between being very angry that they were apparently laughing at him and just putting the entire thing out of his mind.

"Girls!" Peter said, his tone conveying just how barmy he thought they were. He turned towards Sirius and rolled his eyes, and Sirius decided that he concurred.

He turned to face Peter more fully, intent on ignoring the girls, and said, "Do you want to spend this afternoon down by the lake? I was hoping we could catch a glimpse of the Giant Squid before it gets too cold out."

His friend agreed enthusiastically with his plan. Sirius did his best to ignore the fact that he had expressed his agreement while his mouth was full of carrots.

The following Monday in Herbology, Janice seemed even more excitable than usual. Sirius had considered changing their seating arrangements now that he and Peter were friends (The poor guy was still stuck sitting next to Evans.), but he hadn't wanted to offend Janice. If nothing else, she had been friendly with him all along, and she hadn't really done anything wrong.

When Sirius met her in front of the library later that afternoon, she grabbed his hand and dragged him towards the back corner of the cavernous room. It was the Muggle Studies section from what he could tell by the titles on the shelves, and he questioned aloud why they didn't just sit in the Potions section.
"Don't be silly," replied Janice. "No one ever comes back here."

Sirius supposed that being alone did have its merits. They could talk freely without disturbing anyone else in the library, and no one else would disturb them. Plus they seemed to be out of the hearing range of Madam Pince.

"All right. Well, did you find any good books?"

He moved to sit at the lone table between the stacks, tossing his book bag on top of it as he went. He missed the look of exasperation that crossed over the girl's face. By the time she joined him at the table, he had already pulled out all of the books he had found to help with their essays.

The rest of their afternoon in the library was uneventful. They made what Sirius considered an inadequate amount of headway on their essays. Janice seemed totally distracted and like she was doing her best to distract him in turn. Sirius had asked her several times if she was feeling okay or if she would rather work on their homework another time, but she had denied that anything was wrong and had refused to leave the library.

Sirius looked at the parchment of notes he had managed to make despite the unproductiveness of their study session. "We should probably try to find some books on healing," he thought aloud. "All of the other information we have is fine, but our essays would be stronger if we had specific examples of when healing potions work more effectively than healing spells that do the same thing."

Janice sighed, and Sirius turned towards her, his annoyance finally breaking through. Whatever he had been about to say was abruptly cut off when Andromeda strolled into the aisle containing their table.

"Sirius!" She looked just as surprised as he felt. "What are you doing here?"

Sirius thought it was pretty obvious. "We're working on an essay. What are you doing here?"

She didn't have a book bag or any papers with her, so he didn't think she could be working on homework like Janice and he were. She was silent for several long moments, staring between him and his companion with a skeptical look on her face. Finally, she offered him a forced smile.

"The same," she said. Sirius briefly thought of asking why she didn't have any of her materials with her if that was true, but before he could, she continued, "Bella sent me an owl yesterday. She said that your grandfather is very angry at all of us."

Sirius didn't know what to say. He didn't want to assume that she felt bad about the way she had avoided him, and anyway he wasn't sure that he wanted to forgive that easily even if she did. So he stayed silent and stared at her. He was aware of Janice looking apprehensively between the two of them.

"Look, Sirius, I'm really sorry about—"

"Andy!" She was cut off by a male voice, and soon enough Sirius could see the source coming around the corner of the stacks.

It was an older boy with sandy blond hair. Sirius could see that he was about the same height as Andromeda, when he stopped next to her. He had a broad smile on his face, though he seemed to Sirius to be a jovial type of person in general, one who probably wouldn't frown too often.

An expression that Sirius couldn't quite read flitted across his cousin's face. "We'd better find
another table," she said to the boy. She turned back to Sirius and said, "I'll talk to you later, Siri."

The tone of her voice made the statement seem almost like a question. Sirius studied her face for a moment and took in the earnest expression. Finally, he gave a brief nod.

"You don't have to leave," he said, actually quite relieved at the excuse she had unwittingly offered him. "We've done as much as we can for now anyway."

Janice looked like she might argue, but Sirius had already started packing his things back into his bag, so she didn't really have any choice except to follow his lead. Andromeda gave him a little smile as he passed by her on his way out of the stacks, and he returned it halfheartedly. He hadn't forgiven her yet just because she had been nice to him once, when she hadn't even sought him out on purpose.

Janice was uncharacteristically silent as they walked side by side out of the library, and when they reached the point where they had to separate, Sirius felt that he should say something.

"I'm sorry my cousin interrupted us," he said, though he wasn't really sorry at all, "but at least we made good progress." He didn't really believe they'd made as much progress together as he could have made alone, but he thought he would be nice to her.

"Yeah, I guess." She didn't seem like she really thought so at all, and Sirius was extremely confused. She had asked him to work on their essays together, but then she had been distracted the entire time and had hindered his progress. Now she was the one acting as if she was disappointed?

_Girls_, he thought to himself. _They make no sense!_

Maybe if he actually did talk to Andromeda again, he would ask her about it. Although he had never been particularly close to her, not as close as he had been to Bellatrix. Maybe if Andy was talking to him, then Bella wouldn't mind talking to him either, and he could ask her about it over the Christmas holiday.

Sirius decided not to spend too much time worrying about it for the moment. He silently took Janice's bag off his shoulder and extended his arm out for her to take it back. He must have done something right, because suddenly her wide grin was back.

"Thank you, Sirius," she said. Then she leaned up and pressed a kiss to his cheek, and before he could react she had disappeared through the door that he could only assume led in the direction of Ravenclaw Tower.

_Girls!_ Sirius thought again.

The next few weeks passed by relatively peacefully. Of course Sirius had found that having friends meant that he had social obligations, and having social obligations meant that his life was a lot more hectic than it had been during his first few weeks of school. He was no longer far ahead in his schoolwork. There simply wasn't a lot of time to get things done when he was constantly playing wizard chess with Mary, listening to Quidditch games on the Wizarding Wireless Network with Peter and Emmeline, and studying with Janice. Well, if what he and Janice did could actually be called studying, which Sirius was quite sure it couldn't since they were never as productive as if he had been by himself.

Unfortunately, Potter, Evans, and Snivellus were still students at Hogwarts, and that meant Sirius's life was not entirely peaceful. Although Evans mostly avoided him and the worst he could expect from her was nasty looks, her little boyfriend had taken a liking to insulting Sirius whenever he
could. Sirius was still not entirely used to being an object of scorn to anyone. His entire life he had been respected by nearly everyone he met, which he supposed had something to do with only willingly associating with other pure-bloods.

The altercations with Snivellus were particularly frustrating to him, because he couldn't say most of what he wanted to say in return. He couldn't exactly call the other boy out on his blood status or his obvious poverty, because statements like that would upset his new friends.

This whole making friends with the Gryffindors thing was harder than he'd thought it would be.

Potter, though, was on another level entirely. Ever since the humiliation over breakfast several weeks ago, he had been on the warpath. Sirius could admit, if only in the privacy of his own mind, that antagonizing Potter in front of the whole house had been a bit shortsighted on his part. He supposed this really made him a rash Gryffindor after all.

It had started a few days after the Breakfast Incident, as the girls had started calling it. Potter had hit him with a tripping jinx as they were all walking in the large crowd heading to the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch match. He had fallen face-first into the slushy mixture of snow and mud that had been trampled by hundreds of feet, and nearly everyone around him had laughed. Sirius had retaliated by using the rest of his itching powder on every piece of fabric Potter owned. They had gone back and forth for weeks now. But the tipping point for Sirius didn't come until the beginning of November.

He had just spent another frustrating hour with Janice in the library, though perhaps a bit more productive than usual since she was actually having trouble in Transfigurations and sincerely wanted his help. Transfigurations was by far his best and favorite class. Still, when they had separated to go to their common rooms, she had seemed to be just as frustrated with him as she usually was, and he had yet to figure out the reason. He was still pondering what the problem might be as he gave the password to the Fat Lady, and he had decided that maybe he should ask Emmeline and Mary since they were girls.

He wasn't even thinking about Potter when he entered the common room, but when he walked by the area where Potter and his friends were sitting they all laughed loud enough to catch his attention.

"Black! Just who we've been waiting for!" Potter cried. He leapt from his seat and approached, and Sirius watched warily.

"Really?" he asked, allowing a tone of boredom to seep into voice.

Potter stopped a few feet from him, Lupin following behind him, and gave him a grin that set Sirius immediately on edge. "We were just admiring your jewelry," the other boy informed him.

Sirius was confused for moment and was sure that Potter was just trying to set him up for something stupid. He was determined not to fall for anything, so he was sure to keep the disinterested mask on his face. Then Potter held up his hand and Sirius saw what he was holding. Hot, blinding rage bubbled up inside of him, and he knew that it showed on his face because Lupin took a step back and shot a worried glance at his friend.

"Give it back," he growled.

Potter paused for a moment, perhaps because of the look on Sirius's face or the tone of his voice, but he quickly recovered. "I don't think so," he said. "No Gryffindor should have it anyway!"

"Give it back!" Sirius repeated, his voice rising this time.
They were drawing an audience now. People all over the common room were abandoning their own pursuits to see what was happening between the two first years, and Sirius's friends were moving across the room to join him.

"You put on a good show, but if you were a real Gryffindor you wouldn't want this," Potter insisted. "Prove that you aren't a Dark wizard! Throw this piece of trash into the fire!"

Sirius's fury bubbled over, and he couldn't contain it anymore. "IT DOESN'T PROVE ANYTHING!" he roared. "IT'S JUST A TIEPIN!"

"IT'S SLYTHERIN!" Potter yelled back. "IT'S PROBABLY GOT ALL KINDS OF CURSES ON IT!"

"IT WAS A GIFT FROM MY GRANDFATHER!"

Potter's face was red now, but Sirius knew that his own was probably stark white, drained of any color.

"James," came a voice from somewhere nearby, "just give it back!"

Potter gestured towards the fireplace, and Sirius leapt forward out of instinct to stop him from throwing the silver tiepin into the flames. His hand collided with Potter's arm, and Potter's other arm came up between them to shove him away. Sirius's fist had collided with the other boy's face before he even realized that he'd moved his other arm. They struggled for several more seconds until James landed a blow on Sirius's nose. He heard a crunching sound and felt hot blood spurt down his face, but he was too enraged to feel the pain.

He staggered back a step and whipped out his wand, the square handle feeling perfectly at home in his hand. The wood seemed to hum in anticipation for what Sirius would do to their enemy.

Potter thrust the tiepin towards Lupin so he could take out his own wand. Sirius watched almost as if he was outside of himself as Lupin let out a yelp and the silver serpent fell to the floor at his feet.

There was a horrible sound as it collided with the stone. It probably wasn't noticeable or significant to anyone else, but to Sirius the sound reverberated in his head as if someone was playing drums in his ears.

"EXPELLIARMUS!" he screamed.

Potter flew backwards into Lupin, and the two of them stumbled and fell. Sirius was too intent on his tiepin to either notice how powerful his spell had been or to pay attention to what happened afterwards. Potter's wand flew into the wall behind where Sirius had been standing and clattered to the ground, as Sirius was already moving forward even before the spell had fully left his mouth and hadn't even tried to catch it.

He knelt next to the small snake and felt relief course through his body as he scooped it into his hand. His fury at Potter's theft of the tiepin and his relief at having it back were not necessarily tied up in the trinket itself. It wasn't the most expensive thing he owned. Indeed, Sirius was sure that his family ring was worth many times more. The value to him was emotional; the tiepin was the last thing he’d received before his entire world had turned on its axis, and it was likely the very last thing he would ever receive that would make him feel like he was really the same as the long line of Blacks before him. He was too different now, and his perception of how his family was viewed and how his family viewed him was so altered that he would never feel entirely at peace with himself again, not like he had that morning before his sorting.

His relief was short-lived, for when he turned the serpent over in his hand he realized that it was
no longer whole. The emerald eye was gone, no doubt knocked loose by its impact with the stone
floor. Sirius stared in disbelief for several long seconds before he fully registered the empty space
where the gem used to be. He looked around frantically for a moment, but of course he knew that
the chances were almost zero of finding the small emerald among all the crevices of the stonework
and the feet of the crowd.

Tears welled up behind his eyes, but Sirius immediately stamped down the urge to cry. There was
still pandemonium all around him, and he barely had time to compose his expression before he felt
hands on his arm pulling him back to his feet.

"Come on, Black," said the Head Boy. His voice was kind, and Sirius focused on that like a
drowning man clinging to a lifeline.

They were led to the hospital wing, where Sirius was directed to a bed so Madam Pomfrey could
heal his broken nose. His entire world had narrowed down to the kind boy, who was now sitting
next to him on the bed, and the empty eye socket of his serpent, so he didn't hear what kind of
damage he'd caused to Potter.

Soon enough, Professor McGonagall swept into the infirmary, her usually stern face set into even
grimmer lines than ever, and Sirius couldn't stay in his own small world anymore.

"Never in my time here," she began, her nostrils flaring in anger, "have I ever witnessed anything
as disgraceful as this! Two Gryffindors—two classmates!—dueling in the middle of our common
room!"

Sirius had been in trouble with his parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles enough times in his
life to know that anything he said now would just make things worse. It was best, in situations like
this, to just let the professor rant herself out before he tried to speak up for himself or apologize.

Apparently Potter had never learned that lesson. He looked up at the professor with large,
innocent eyes and began, "But Professor—"

"Mr. Potter!" Professor McGonagall spoke over him, just as Sirius had known she would. "Don't
take that innocent tone with me! I expected better from you of all people!"

The way she emphasized her formerly good opinion of Potter grated on Sirius's already-frayed
nerves in entirely the wrong way. He couldn't help himself. He sneered and asked, "Oh, so you
didn't expect better of me, did you? Because I should have been in Slytherin or just because I'm a
Black?"

He knew that he had made a mistake as soon as the words had left his mouth. If he hadn't already
known it himself, the way that the Head Boy rose from the bed as if to put distance between
himself and Sirius and the way that their professor was staring at him in open astonishment would
have clued him in. But he refused to back down now, and whether it was more out of the vestiges
of his anger or out of his ever-present pride, he maintained his angry sneer at the professor.

Her voice was carefully controlled when she spoke. "Mr. Black, you are adding disrespect to your
already long list of crimes this evening. Instigating a duel—"

"Instigating?" Sirius interrupted incredulously. "I never would have looked at him twice if he
hadn't started it!"

"I did not! He cursed me for no reason!" Potter cried.

Sirius turned on him, gray eyes flashing black. "I didn't curse you, you tosser! You're nothing
more than a common thief and a liar!"
"QUIET!" yelled Professor McGonagall. The two boys glared menacingly at each other but remained silent. After a few heartbeats, the professor turned to the seventh-year and asked, "Can you shed some light on what happened, Shacklebolt? Apparently Mr. Abercrombie didn't give me the full story."

Shacklebolt shook his head. "I'm not surprised, Professor. He only came downstairs from the dorms in time to catch the end of it. I just thought I had better escort them to the hospital wing myself, and he was the only other prefect in the common room I could send to you." McGonagall nodded her understanding, and her senior-most prefect continued, "It's true that Black landed the first blow, but from what I heard, Potter had stolen something of his and was threatening to throw it into the fire."

Potter protested at that, and Professor McGonagall was forced to cut him off again. After several more starts and stops and after she had heard from Kingsley, Sirius, and Potter, everyone was more or less satisfied that McGonagall had his side of the story.

Her face was still set into a frown when she made her pronouncement. "Mr. Potter, taking another student's possessions without permission is never allowed. I don't care what you thought about it," she preempted him as she saw his mouth open to protest. "If you thought Mr. Black's tiepin was dangerous, you should have come to me immediately and not taken the situation upon yourself. You will have detention for the next two Tuesday nights, and perhaps I can come to understand why you think so poorly of your classmate."

Potter looked like he might argue again, but at a stern look from the professor, he let out a miserable, "Yes, Professor."

"Mr. Black, it is never acceptable to instigate physical blows with another student, either through fisticuffs or magic. It does not matter what he's done. Therefore, you will serve detention on the next three Thursday nights."

Sirius's mouth dropped open in pure shock at the unfairness of it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Potter grin triumphantly. No doubt he thought his own two detentions were well worth it in order to get Sirius in even more trouble than himself.

"Furthermore," continued Professor McGonagall, either not noticing or pretending not to notice their reactions, "I am appalled at the complete lack of respect with which you treated me earlier. You will serve a fourth Thursday night detention for that."

Again, he simply couldn't help himself. "I wonder if you would care a bit more if one of Potter's family heirlooms was completely ruined!" His voice cracked on the last word.

"MR. BLACK! You have earned yourself another detention!"

"I DON'T CARE!" Sirius yelled, all of the emotions pouring out of him now. "JUST GO AHEAD AND EXPEL ME! AT LEAST THEN NO ONE COULD ATTACK ME AND MY FAMILY AND GET AWAY WITH IT!"

Shacklebolt and Potter were watching the scene unfold with looks of wide-eyed disbelief. Professor McGonagall's lips were pursed into a thin, white line. There was absolute silence for several long moments.

Then Professor McGonagall spoke, her voice measured, "You will spend your Thursday nights with me for the rest of the year, Mr. Black. Now, all of you, go back to Gryffindor Tower immediately."
She spun on her heel and marched out of the infirmary, obviously leaving Kingsley to make sure that the two younger boys got back to their common room without killing each other.

The walk was accomplished without another word from any of them.

It seemed like everyone was still talking about the fight in the common room weeks later. The details had been embellished so many times through the retellings that most of the students who hadn't witnessed it for themselves, and even some who had, seemed to think that there had been a massive duel that had nearly destroyed the Gryffindor common room. Whether someone believed that Potter had soundly defeated Sirius and that Madam Pomfrey had to spend all night healing his face, or whether someone believed that Sirius had single-handedly blown both Potter and Lupin across the tower, depended entirely on whose side the person was on.

Sirius had still been debating whether or not he should tell his parents about the tiepin when the choice had been virtually removed from his hands by the arrival of his father's massive black owl. The letter had begun without any greeting:

What in Merlin's name are you doing at that school! I came home from abroad only for your mother to present me with a letter from school informing us that you have detention until the end of the year for fighting and disrespectful behavior! You had better write back immediately and tell us exactly what happened. You're lucky your mother is too embarrassed to have sent you a Howler immediately. Love, Father.

Sirius had spent quite a long time wondering whether his father really still loved him or if he had just written that out of habit. His mother still hadn't written him directly.

He had taken the opportunity to write a long letter to his father outlining everything that happened that term, finally ending with the confrontation in the hospital wing. He had added a few lines asking his father to please have the tiepin repaired if he could and had put the snake into the envelope to send along with the letter. Aquilina had been given very specific instructions to wait to deliver the letter until his father was alone, just to make sure that his mother didn't throw it into the fire without reading it like she had done to Snape's mum's letters. Sirius wasn't entirely sure that she would do that with his letters, but he hadn't wanted to take the chance since she was so angry about the detentions on top of his sorting.

He had already served most of his detentions with McGonagall, and although at first he and the professor had been tiptoeing around each other both in class and in his detentions, now he didn't mind going so much. Well, except for the fact that Potter had long since finished his own detentions, and that still tore at Sirius so much that he could barely resist taking out his wand and cursing the other boy whenever he saw him. Other than that, he didn't mind the detentions so much anymore, because sometimes he got to perform Transfigurations tasks, and sometimes he got to watch Professor McGonagall do more advanced work.

Currently he was watching her untransfigure slippers back into rabbits.

"Professor," he ventured to ask, "is it easier to untransfigure something than to transfigure it?"

She looked over at him sternly for a moment, but then seemed to decide that there was no harm in discussing it with him instead of insisting that he continue writing his lines.

"It is easier for most people. It isn't as complex as transfiguring something in the first place, but it isn't nearly as easy as removing the effects of a charm or a jinx," she answered. "You are not transfiguring the object again so that it is in the same general form in which it started. Rather you are removing the effects of the transfiguration so that the object is exactly the same as it was when
you began."

"So you don't want a rabbit transfigured into a slipper transfigured into another rabbit. You want the original rabbit back," Sirius confirmed.

"Yes, Mr. Black. Exactly."

Sirius eagerly leaned forward in his seat. "And some people have trouble imagining that they're undoing the transfiguration instead of accidentally imagining that they're just transfiguring it into another rabbit?"

A pleased look crossed over the professor's face, and her voice was full of enthusiasm when she spoke next. "Were you taught to conceptualize the transfigurations?" Sirius's wariness must have shown on his face, because she made a dismissive gesture and said, "I am not asking to get you into trouble, Mr. Black. I know very well that many wizarding families begin teaching their children before they're old enough for Hogwarts. I just wonder if you chose those words by accident or if you are actually conceptualizing the process."

"I think about what would have to happen to the object for it to turn into what I want it to," replied Sirius, deciding to answer in such a way that he didn't actually admit that anyone had taught him to do that.

"That's very impressive in one so young," said Professor McGonagall. "Most wizards have trouble with Transfiguration because they are only willing the object to look like what they want it to, not thinking through the process the object would have to go through in order to change more fundamentally."

That made sense to Sirius on one level, but he remembered that the professor had told the class on the very first day that they had to think through the process. They would have to imagine that their matches were becoming thinner and pointier, and transforming from wood into metal, in order for their transfigurations from matches to needles to work. He reminded her of this, and then asked, "Since you told us we had to do that, shouldn't everyone know?"

"The problem, Mr. Black, is that they are just thinking about their matches changing from looking like wood to looking like metal," she answered. "They are not really thinking about the more fundamental process of changing the wood into metal."

She watched him process this information without saying another word, though she was staring at him as if she expected him to say something. Sirius recognized the look from his father and grandfather. Finally, after spending several seconds thinking through what she had said, he thought that he understood what she was trying to make him understand.

"If you only think about the things you can see and not the deeper things that you can't see, you'll only manage a—a—" he searched for a word for a moment "—a surface transformation, not a complete transformation."

Professor McGonagall offered him the first smile he had ever seen on her face. He wasn't sure whether or not it was an improvement over her usually pursed features.

"You can't teach people how to think about the underlying changes, no matter how many times you tell them they must. It is something one either grasps naturally or does not. Now why don't you come over here and see if you can untransfigure these. I see no reason for me to do it as long as I have a perfectly good student in detention."

It turned out that Sirius was pretty good at untransfiguring slippers back into rabbits, after he got
the hang of it. He'd had a few unsuccessful attempts, but McGonagall had shown him the kind of patience that a teacher only shows to students she knows will completely get it. And get it sooner rather than later.

He was in a very good mood when he finally got back to the Gryffindor common room, and even Potter and Lupin's presence in their dormitory couldn't dampen his spirits. He ignored them completely and went to sit on the edge of his bed facing Peter, who was sitting in the middle of his. The other boy had one book propped open in his lap and another one closed on the bed beside him so that it could function as a makeshift writing desk. He had a streak of black ink up one side of his face and through his fair hair.

"Having some trouble?" Sirius inquired.

Peter glanced up in momentary surprise, obviously having been so caught up in his essay that he hadn't noticed his friend had returned until Sirius had spoken to him. Then he shrugged, tossed his quill to the side, and flopped down onto his back in the middle of the bed.

"Flitwick is killing me!" he spoke to his canopy. "I don't know why he thinks I'll get better at doing a charm if he makes me write a foot on it. I already know what it's supposed to do."

Sirius shrugged, though Peter couldn't see him. "He probably wants you to write about how it's supposed to work, not what it's supposed to do."

"What's the difference?" Peter cried to his canopy.

"Well, everyone knows that a Levitation Charm is supposed to make things levitate," Sirius said, thinking back to his conversation with Professor McGonagall and how it would apply to Charms, "but it's just as important to know how it makes things levitate."

Peter lifted himself onto his elbows and stared at Sirius in utter confusion.

"It works through magic, mate," he said as if he were explaining it to a Muggle.

Sirius laughed. He decided that trying to explain it to Peter using Charms, the other boy's absolute worst class, as an example was probably never going to work.

"Never mind," he told the blond. "I'm going to take a shower."

Sirius gathered his things and walked by James Potter without acknowledging him once.

Chapter End Notes

The line about the buffalo comes from an excerpt of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1 from Pottermore.
Christmas, 1971

Chapter Notes

I would like to take the opportunity to make it clear that I realize some of the things these pure-bloods say are offensive and objectionable. Arcturus Black or Abraxas Malfoy or whoever else speak for themselves as characters, not for me as the author.

Updated 8/20/2014 to fix some typos

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been a relief to board the Hogwarts Express to return home for the Christmas holiday. Despite his new friendships and the passage of time, Sirius was still not entirely comfortable with Gryffindor house. And Gryffindor was not entirely comfortable with Sirius. Even though many people had witnessed the confrontation between Sirius and Potter in the common room and should have remembered exactly what had happened, the gossip was much more interesting than the facts. The speculation was not in Sirius's favor, because he had been in detention for the rest of the year and Potter hadn't.

Sirius had never thought that he would be so happy to go home for a couple of weeks, especially not when his family still seemed less than completely welcoming. He would find out what kind of reception he would receive soon enough, as soon as he managed to get off the train. He was currently standing in his compartment doorway watching the large crowd of first and second years who were stuffing up the corridor, some of them trying to drag heavy trunks.

Sirius didn't understand why they were bringing their trunks home for the short break. Surely they had enough clothing and supplies at their homes to last them for a couple of weeks? Sirius had more clothes and toys at home than he knew what to do with. Or surely they had bags like his where they could pack some of their things without bothering with their whole trunks? He had stuffed the few things he felt he couldn't live without in his leather book bag with the Undetectable Extension and Feather-Light Charms. Failing that, why they didn't just cast Moving Charms or Feather-Light Charms on their trunks instead of trying to drag them along like common Muggles would have? When Sirius had first started lessons with his grandfather, the patriarch had made sure that he had a good foundation in practical everyday spells before he'd been allowed to start trying his hand at the Charms and Transfigurations he'd been reading about.

Sirius inwardly sneered when it became clear that Mary was going to try and drag her trunk along like everyone else. Stupid Mudblood, he thought, but he kept his face carefully neutral and his thoughts to himself.

"Let me help you with that," he said instead, more out of impatience than altruism. "Locomotor trunk."

Mary's trunk hovered a few inches above the ground, and when the corridor finally cleared a few minutes later Sirius directed it in front of him as his friends trailed along behind him. The platform was still crowded with students and parents, though they had mostly moved to the end of the platform which contained the exit to King’s Cross Station. There was a bottleneck, as only a few people could pass through at a time, and the platform was left full of those waiting in the queue to exit platform nine and three-quarters and those who were standing in groups catching up with other families until the crowd thinned out.
He spotted his father standing with his cousins and the Malfoys. They were standing near the far wall, apparently as far apart from the crowd as they could manage. His father was deep in conversation with the elder Malfoy, and his cousins were conversing with the younger. None of them noticed Sirius across the platform.

"Oh, there are my parents!"

Sirius felt a hand land harshly on one of his shoulders as Mary's other hand came up on his other side to point. Sirius turned his gaze to follow the direction of Mary's finger. There was a middle-aged couple who looked about a decade older than Sirius's parents standing in quiet bewilderment as witches and wizards buzzed around them.

Mary used the hand on his shoulder to give him a little shove, and he quickly stepped to the side, out of the way of the steps leading down from the Hogwarts Express onto the platform. His friends filed down next to him.

"Come on," said Mary excitedly, her hand patting Sirius's shoulder. "I'll introduce all of you!"

Sirius was less than pleased at the idea of meeting two Muggles, but he couldn't very well say that if he wanted to maintain the new friendships and the reputation he was building for himself. Besides, he had to admit that he was a bit curious, even if it was distasteful; he'd never met an actual Muggle before. He was also levitating Mary's trunk, and he supposed that he couldn't just abandon her beside the train without seeming unpardonably rude.

"Oh, sure. My parents are just over there." Emmeline indicated the direction with a tilt of her head instead of by pointing, which Sirius thought must be a reflection of her more refined pure-blood upbringing. "Let me just go and get them, and they can meet all of you, too!"

Peter said that he would do the same and darted off into the crowd to find his mother, and Sirius was left standing awkwardly with Mary.

"Er..." he paused, glancing again at his family. "It looks like my father is talking with Mr. Malfoy, so we'd better not bother them. I had better just say hello to your parents and then go join them."

Mary happily agreed, not seeming to find anything suspicious about it at all, and Sirius gave an internal sigh of relief as they started walking towards the Muggle couple, glad that at least he wouldn't have to convince his father to come meet a couple of Muggles.

Mr. MacDonald was a portly man of average height. He had hair of the same chestnut shade as Mary's, though his was streaked through with gray and thinned so much on the top that the crown of his head showed through. It repulsed Sirius and gave him the urge to run his hand through his own thick locks just to make sure they were still there. His wife was an attractive woman with an average build and the same oval face as Mary. Half of her brownish-blonde hair was arranged in a large mound on top of her head, while the other half was arranged in enormous curls that fell down around her shoulders. Sirius could only assume that this very large hairstyle must be common among Muggles, and he did his best not to stare at it.

They seemed ecstatic to see their daughter, and the family reunited with exclamations of delight and hugs all around. Sirius watched from several feet away, feeling quite awkward at the physical and very public display of affection. His family had certainly never behaved in any such way.

After a minute or so of chattering happily with her parents about Hogwarts, Mary seemed to remember that he was there. "Oh! Mum, Daddy, this is Sirius Black," she introduced him. "He's my housemate, remember?"
"Yes, dear, he's one of the friends you wrote about," said Mrs. MacDonald with a smile. "It's nice to meet you, dear. I understand that we should thank you for helping our Mary acclimate to the magical world."

Sirius noticed that she stumbled a bit over the word magical, but he ignored the slip and gave the couple an easy smile and returned their greeting. As he was doing so he quickly directed Mary's trunk in front of the family and set it to the ground, to the clear astonishment of her parents.

"There's your trunk, Mary. I had better go and join my own family now."

Sirius turned to excuse himself from her parents, but just then Emmeline and her family joined them and he found himself being introduced to her parents, too. Soon afterward Peter wandered over with his mother in tow, and they repeated the ritual again. Before he knew it, a few more minutes had passed before Sirius found another opportunity to excuse himself politely. He was on the verge of inserting himself into the adults' conversation to make his apologies when the group suddenly went quiet and directed their attention in his direction.

When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he knew why. The hand was carefully placed, firm yet comfortable and nothing like the rough treatment Mary had subjected him to earlier, and Sirius instantly recognized the touch.

"Son," greeted Orion from behind him, "were you planning to join me anytime soon?"

If they hadn't been in public, Sirius would have outwardly sighed in relief at the teasing undertone in his father's voice. Even though his grandfather had sanctioned his friendships with the other Gryffindors, Sirius had still been nervous about his father's reception.

"Mr. Black, it's lovely to see you again! Everyone, this is Orion Black," Mr. Vance said rather formally. "Mr. Black, this is Henry and Jane MacDonald. Henry was just telling us how he's a—"

He broke off abruptly and looked to Mr. MacDonald. "What did you say it's called?"

"A judge," agreed Mr. Vance jovially.

Mrs. Vance explained, "From what Henry has told us, I think it's rather like when members of the Wizengamot hear trials."

"Archibald, Margaret," Orion returned the greeting, and Sirius had to bite the inside of his lip to keep from smiling at how his father addressed them by their given names without permission, as if he was greeting children. Then his father turned to face the Muggles. "I am obviously unaware of the workings of the Muggle judicial system, although my family holds several hereditary seats on the Wizengamot which my father currently fills."

Sirius appreciated his father's ability to seamlessly blend his disdain for all things Muggle and information about the Blacks' high position in society together into one seemingly innocuous comment. He felt the corner of his mouth turn up into a smirk that he couldn't repress this time.

"Father, this is Peter Pettigrew and his mother," he introduced the remaining members of their group, as much to cover up his own slip of expression as to be polite.

"Pettigrew?" echoed Orion. "My sister is very close with Enid Pettigrew, who was Enid Avery, but I don't recall ever having been introduced to you."

Mrs. Pettigrew's mouth tightened, making her rotund face even less attractive than previously. "I'm Catherine Pettigrew. I was married to Peter, God rest his soul. My son is named after his father."
"I see," replied the elder Black. Nothing in his tone was the least bit friendly, and Sirius knew that Mrs. Pettigrew's explanation, not to mention her Muggle turn of phrase, had revealed that she was a Mudblood. If there was anything the Blacks hated more than Muggles, it was Mudbloods.

Oblivious to the sudden tension amongst the magical members of their group, Mrs. MacDonald smiled brightly at Orion. "It's so lovely to meet Sirius's father! I can see where he gets his good looks!"

Orion laughed, though Sirius could tell that it was a bit strained, and the other adults joined him much more genuinely. Sirius barked out his own laugh, not at all embarrassed by the woman's comments about him. Emmeline, on the other hand, tried to bow her head to hide the rosy blush that covered her cheeks, and Mary quickly looked away from him and focused on some distant point behind Mrs. Pettigrew.

Once the laughter had died down, Orion checked his goblin-forged pocket watch. "We must be off," he announced, and strode away without further pleasantries.

Sirius offered the group a smile. "I'll see you next term, girls. Peter, I'll owl you."

Then he turned and trailed after his father, who was walking briskly toward the exit. He hadn't quite got out of hearing range yet when Mr. Vance turned to address the astonished and offended MacDonalds. He caught snippets of the explanation ("—old pure-bloods… noble… quite hereditary…") and couldn't contain the sneer that crept onto his face at the Muggles' ignorance.

After the first uncomfortable afternoon at Grimmauld Place, Sirius realized that being at home proved almost as uncomfortable as being at Hogwarts. There was an underlying current of disappointment surrounding Walburga whenever she was near her eldest son. Sirius couldn't have failed to notice it, though she did attempt to hide it. Arcturus had returned to Germany the week prior on Wizengamot business and had yet to return. Regulus didn't even attempt to hide the air of superiority that surrounded him whenever he interacted with his older brother.

The battle lines were drawn at dinner on his first evening back. Bolstered by the accepting reaction of his father, Sirius chattered happily about his first semester at school.

"Peter isn't really that bad," he was explaining. "He's a natural in Potions, so he takes the lead in that class in return for my help with his wand work in other classes."

"He's a nasty little Gryffindor," put in Regulus.

Sirius ignored him. "The girls are okay, too. Emmeline's from a pure-blood family at least, and Mary is sweet even if she's a Muggle."

Regulus raised his voice louder. "Well, I would certainly never get close enough to a Mudblood to find out how nice she is."

Before either of their parents could speak, Sirius turned to glare at Regulus across the table and told him, "Yes, you would, if you had to maintain appearances."

"I would not!" defended Regulus. "I'd never have to maintain appearances with a filthy little Muggle, because I'm not blood traitor like you!"

"Enough!" broke in Orion. He didn't raise his voice, but his tone was frigid and both of his sons immediately snapped their mouths shut. "If you feel that way about your brother, Regulus, then I'll arrange for you to stay home with Kreacher when we go to the league final next week."
Regulus's mouth dropped open in shock. "Father!"

"Silence!" Orion yelled this time, his face as white as a death mask except for the great red splotches on his cheeks. He visibly swallowed and then continued in a carefully controlled tone, "Being a Black transcends Hogwarts houses and petty disagreements. It is fortunate for you, Regulus, that your only punishment is missing a Quidditch game. I cannot protect you from your grandfather if he hears such filth coming out of your mouth."

His younger son stared at him, his pale face mottled in a strange mix of anger and terror. Neither of the Black children had ever been subjected to anything more than a sharp reprimand from Arcturus, but they had grown up on the horror stories about how he used to punish his own children. Regulus looked to his mother for help, but, rather uncharacteristically, Walburga looked down at her plate and studiously avoided everyone's gazes.

Sirius had to bite down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning, and for once he was glad for all the practice he got not reacting to Potter's behavior when professors might see.

The next morning, Sirius addressed the adults at the breakfast table. "Do you think I might see my cousins before Christmas Eve?"

Walburga spared him the briefest of glances and then turned back to her plate as if cutting her sausage demanded her full attention. Finally, after long seconds, she replied, "Certainly not. Druella is entertaining the Lestranges and won't want you underfoot."

"I imagine you'd spoil her formal teas and stuffy dinner parties!" Orion offered Sirius a grin from over the top of the Daily Prophet.

Sirius gave him a weak smile in return before turning his eyes downwards to his own plate. Despite his father's attempt to make him feel better, Sirius knew that he had been welcome at formal occasions before. He knew how to behave (when he had to, and usually when he'd been bribed to do it), and his female relatives had always enjoyed parading him around in front of their friends before. He supposed that his aunt and cousins were just as embarrassed by him as his mother, now that he'd been sorted into Gryffindor.

After that he spent most of his time in either the library or his room, only joining the rest of his family for meals. His mother was right: He didn't get to see his cousins over the next few days. Instead he managed to read through Curses and Counter-Curses and halfway through Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed, jotting down notes on things he found particularly interesting or helpful. He figured that he'd better take the opportunity to study things like this during break, since he'd already spent so much time on his schoolwork while at Hogwarts. Besides, he'd have done anything to avoid seeing anymore of his mother's disappointed looks.

Unfortunately, on the evening of Christmas Eve he could no longer avoid the rest of his family. Every year his mother's side of the family gathered at Grandfather Pollux and Grandmother Irma's house for dinner. Although Sirius desperately wished that he could stay home and wait for Grandfather Arcturus, who was supposed to arrive home from Germany that evening, his parents wouldn't hear of him staying behind. Thus, he avoided it as long as he could, but as the clock chimed six o'clock he finally had to reluctantly trudge to the entrance hall so they could leave.

"You're late!" cried Walburga when she finally caught sight of her son coming down the stairs. Her dark purple robes complemented her dark hair, and both made a striking contrast to her porcelain skin and made it appear even paler. "As if there won't already be enough attention on you as it is, you just had to make sure that we'd arrive last!"

Sirius winced and looked down to study the pattern of the marble floor. He hadn't thought of that
when he'd dallied in his room.

His mother's approach made him look up, and he thought he detected worry in her black eyes. She reached out suddenly and grabbed his tie. "Here, maybe Father will notice if you wear this and won't be so hard on you."

As he watched his mother pin the repaired silver-colored snake into the black silk, Sirius felt warmth spread from his chest outward to his extremities. When Walburga finally smoothed the fabric back into place, he recognized the feeling as relief. He took his mother's hand before she could pull back, though he had no plan beyond that. They stared at each other in silence until Orion broke in with forced joviality.

"Well, we'd better go before Pollux has our places removed from the table out of spite!"

Walburga squeezed Sirius's hand, and he had a moment of peace, as if the past months had never happened, before his body was suddenly stuffed into a tube the size of his fist. After a few unbearable seconds, he landed hard and stumbled, pulling his mother off balance along with him.

She straightened and immediately brought her hands up to make sure that the smooth, delicate curls of her hair were still in place.

"I had forgotten why your father usually Apparates with you."

"Sorry, Mummy," he replied, immediately seizing the opportunity to affect a bashful, apologetic demeanor. He supposed that he was taking a bit of a gamble that her behavior over the past few minutes meant she had gotten over being bothered about him, but honestly he didn't have much to lose by laying it on a bit thick.

Her head snapped up at his form of address, and her eyes immediately softened at the expression on his face. Then suddenly it was like no time had passed and nothing had ever happened to cause discomfort or awkwardness between them.

"Oh, my darling," she said, reaching out unnecessarily to straighten his robes yet again, "there's nothing for which to apologize."

"YOU'RE LATE!" bellowed Pollux Black, unceremoniously interrupting the moment that Sirius had been waiting for since his sorting last September first.

"Dinner was supposed to begin three minutes ago!" chimed in Grandmother Irma.

After one last pat to her son's shoulder, Walburga turned to greet her parents. She moved aside only to reveal Regulus watching Sirius with a positively furious expression on his face. Sirius glared right back at him until Orion walked between them, shooting his own glare at his younger son as he went past. "Behave," Sirius heard his father hiss at his brother. He bit back the grin that threatened to spread across his face.

Regulus stalked past him a moment later to join their cousins on the other side of the room. All of the girls were watching him curiously. Even Bellatrix had managed to pry her attention away from her fiancé for long enough to watch him from under hooded lids and thick lashes. Sirius shifted his weight in indecision, trying to determine whether he would be welcome to join them.

Grandmother Irma spared him the decision. "Well, let's not dally!" she declared. "Dinner is waiting!"

Everybody moved all at once towards the double doors that led into the dining room, crowding each other as much as their restrained, formal manners would allow. Sirius stayed back on the
edge of the group, too nervous to mingle with his family when their reception of him was as yet unknown. He was the last to enter the room, and he hung back in the doorway as he watched everyone else choose their seats. Even though Bellatrix and Aunt Druella and Grandmother Irma usually squabbled over his attention, this time they all filled in the seats around the table without looking at him. Embarrassed and hurt, he hung his head and dutifully trudged further up the table to sit in the only empty seat, which his mother had clearly saved for him next to her.

Everyone chatted amiably around him as the food was magically carved and served. Sirius was, as with every other year, pleased by the rich selection of perfectly prepared venison, roast beef, and duck at his grandparents' Christmas feast. However, this year his mood was far too dreary for him to really enjoy it.

"Druella, dear," Walburga spoke over the top of his head, and the slight tone of disapproval mixed with inquiry in her voice drew him back into the conversations around him, "I thought that you were going to invite the Malfoys to dine with us."

Sirius and Andy both turned to look at Aunt Druella, who was sitting two seats down from him on the other side of his cousin.

"Oh, I desperately wanted to invite them!" she exclaimed, either not noticing or choosing to ignore her sister-in-law's less-than-friendly tone. "Just think how lonely it must be in that manor during Christmas, with just Abraxas and darling Lucius all alone with the memories of their dead wife and mother! However, Narcissa was adamant that they not be invited, the silly girl."

At that she turned a cross look on her daughter, who had been drawn into the conversation on hearing Lucius's name.

"Mother!" Narcissa hissed, but it was too late. Everybody else was now listening in.

"Anyone would think that you aren't taking your relationship seriously!" her mother scolded her in a tone that Sirius knew meant she had already repeated herself on this subject many times over. "Don't you want to marry him?"

Narcissa's smooth cheeks blushed pink, and she opened her mouth to respond but was cut off by their grandfather.

"Is that the way of things, girl?" he boomed from the head of the table. "Is there something wrong with the boy?"

"No!" she cried. "Lucius is—is… lovely!"

Rodolphus snickered from his place beside Bellatrix, and everyone turned as one to look at him.

"I apologize," he said not at all convincingly, apparently unworried by the scrutiny of the Black family. "It's just that Malfoy would absolutely die of embarrassment if he knew anyone had said that about him."

Sirius's mother jumped on the chance for more gossip. She leaned around Sirius to get a better look at her future nephew. "Do you know him well, then?"

"Oh, sure," Rodolphus responded readily, heavily placing a thick arm on the back of Bellatrix's chair as he leaned around to see Walburga better. "Our fathers were in the same year at Hogwarts, and my younger brother is good friends with him. He's a good sort, very cunning. My father is impressed by him and keeps telling Mr. Malfoy that he should introduce him to our L—" He broke off suddenly and looked at his fiancée in surprise, and Sirius thought that she must have kicked him under the table.
"To a political ally," she finished his sentence. Rodolphus looked chagrined but nodded his agreement. Sirius sensed his mother go tense beside him, but he quickly pushed it aside when Bellatrix continued more smoothly, "Mr. Lestrange thinks that Lucius has the potential to be a very successful politician one day. I think that he will come as close to being good enough for my sister as anybody could."

"No one will ever be good enough for our Cissy," declared Uncle Cygnus with a tone of stark finality.

In a rare display of ill manners, Narcissa stabbed her fork into her duck rather more harshly than necessary. "No one ever gives Bella or Andy any trouble about who they want to see."

Uncle Alphard laughed merrily. "My dear, that is the curse of being the baby. I should know; my parents and my brother and sister think that they ought to run every aspect of my life for me."

"If you would just settle down with a nice girl…" Grandmother Irma mused aloud. "I don't know why you're so set against marrying!"

Sirius watched curiously as Uncle Alphard turned a bit red and Walburga pursed her lips in the way that meant she disapproved of something. But both of them kept their silence on the subject.

"Well," said Walburga instead, "at least we have one wedding to look forward to in the family. I'm glad that Rodolphus, at least, was able to join us tonight."

Bellatrix beamed at her aunt, her glamorous diamond earrings jingling around her neck as she nodded. "We thought that it would be fair to spend Christmas Eve with my family, since we have this dinner. We'll split the day tomorrow and then spend Boxing Day with Roddy's family, when they have a small celebration with their French cousins."

"It's always difficult for new couples to combine their families' celebrations," put in Grandmother Irma sagely. "Why, we used to have this dinner on Christmas Day, many years ago, but then—"

"Bellatrix, did Orion tell you that he saw his sister while he was abroad last week?" cut in Walburga. Sirius knew that she had wanted to interrupt before her mother could say that Grandfather Arcturus had unilaterally demanded that his son's family spend the whole of Christmas Day with him at Grimmauld Place.

Her husband started in surprise, causing his knife to cut through his venison more harshly than he intended and scrape against the china. A second later he had recovered, and he turned to his niece with a grin.

"Lucretia is very sorry that she can't make it back to England to help you ladies design a wedding gown. They can't even make it back to the country to celebrate Christmas with family, you know. However, she was delighted with the invitation, and she told me to tell you that she will send an owl soon with some continental fashion magazines for you to look over."

"Aunt Lucretia isn't coming home for Christmas?" cried Sirius. His aunt's husband was a Ministry ambassador to France, and they rarely ever had time to come back to England. However, they had never missed a Christmas before, so Sirius was too surprised to stop himself from speaking before he remembered that he didn't want to draw any attention to himself.

He sunk back into his seat, but it was too late. His grandfather's piercing gaze bore into him. "Well, if it isn't the dragon in the room! Or should I say the Gryffindor? What have you to say for yourself, boy?" He said Gryffindor as if he was talking about having a Muggle at his table.
Sirius stared mutely at his plate, unsure what he could possibly say.

His mother leaned forward, blocking her son partially from her father's gaze, whether intentionally or not.

"The situation isn't as bad as we had imagined," she informed the table.

"No, it isn't," echoed her husband.

"To be sure," she continued, "the Vances aren't exactly upstanding pure-bloods, but they are pure. That Pettigrew woman is the Mudblood whore Enid Avery's brother-in-law got himself disowned over, but it could be worse. There is only one Mudblood in his class, and even Slytherin gets one of those occasionally."

Sirius didn't think it would be a good idea to point out that there was at least one other Mudblood in his class besides Mary—Lily Evans, whom they had met on the train but he had never mentioned to his parents again because she wasn't his friend.

"Is Gryffindor very different from Slytherin?" asked Aunt Druella.

She seemed genuinely curious and not upset, and Sirius supposed that she must feel sorry for him because she knew what it was like not to be entirely accepted by the family. Then he thought of Mr. Rosier and his Greek wife and their son Evan, who had studiously ignored Sirius ever since their Sorting, and he couldn't help the scowl that spread across his face.

His family must have taken his expression as proof that he was just as displeased with his House as they were, because the tension around the table relaxed somewhat.

His courage bolstered, Sirius finally said, "Well, the Gryffindors are a bit uncouth at times—I think their parents must never have made them take etiquette lessons—and don't seem to know the most basic things about magic… but I've been able to get along with most of them the same way I would with Slytherins, by making sure they know I'm important to have around. Peter likes me because I'm more useful than Potter, and Vance started taking my side after I offered to help her with some of her assignments. I've been able to gain influence in the house even though Potter's family are all Gryffindors. Mary has a lot of strange Muggle habits, but she's okay to be around most of the time."

Bellatrix frowned. "It's regrettable that you have to be around the Mudblood at all. I'm sure we'd all prefer you not pick up on any vile Muggle habits."

At their cousin's words, Regulus shot a triumphant look at Sirius as if to say that he had been right all along.

Sirius shrugged and pointedly ignored his brother's look. "It's mostly just things like her using strange words, but I don't know what they mean so I won't start using them."

Bellatrix's frown stayed firmly on her face. "Well, I have given it some thought, and I think that it might be useful to have someone in with the Gryffindors, as long as you don't let them infect you with their poisonous ideas."

She said the last as if she wasn't entirely sure it was possible, and Sirius puffed up with indignation, even though he had no idea what she was talking about when she said it could be useful.

"I'm a Black," he reminded her, his voice and eyes equally as steely as hers, threatening her to contradict him.
The others took a moment to absorb this, and then Orion laughed humorlessly. "And that puts an end to it. Sirius is a Black, and associating with Gryffindors isn't enough to change that."

"Yes, yes, we've had Gryffindors join the family before, though we've never had one sorted there." Pollux flapped an impatient hand in his son-in-law's general direction as he turned back to his grandson. "You've been fighting with the Potter boy, you say?"

Sirius related the story of his first term sharing a dorm with James Potter. Having saved the best for last, he concluded by explaining the source of Potter's ire. "He said that his mother wouldn't want him associating with me because I'm a Black and a Dark wizard. I told him that his mother is also a Black, but he said she doesn't consider herself one."

There were murmurs and outcries from all around the table. Even Rodolphus seemed offended on behalf of such an ancient pure-blood family. Grandfather Pollux, though, looked absolutely apoplectic.

"THAT BRAZEN LITTLE BITCH!" he yelled, slamming his fist on the table and rattling the plates and silverware nearest him. "HOW DARE SHE! SHE—I—!"

He seemed too overcome with anger to articulate his thoughts further, and Grandmother Irma leaned over to pat his arm comfortingly. "My dear," she reminded him, "you have barely spoken to your sister in years. No doubt she has given her loyalty to her husband's family, just like I have given mine to your family and Druella has given hers to Cygnus's family. We can't all be as lucky as Walburga and stay in the same family!"

Pollux opened and closed his mouth several times, but no words came out. Probably for the first time in his life, thought Sirius.

Bellatrix bristled with anger. "Well, she chose to marry a Potter, even though they aren't one of the purest families. I might be a Lestrange after next summer, but I will still be the same person and believe the same things my family raised me to know are true. It'll be the same when Cissy marries Malfoy and when Andy finally gets around to finding a suitable man."

Cissy blushed violently, and Andy paled and looked down at her plate.

The rest of dinner was pure pandemonium, with all of the family at turns expressing their outrage at the treatment of the Black heir and making suggestions about how Pollux should deal with his wretched, ungrateful sister. Sirius, however, was in a fantastic mood, since everybody had united behind him and turned the disappointment with his sorting into fury towards anyone who dared treat him as anything less than a Black deserved. The rest of the family was too angry or too busy making suggestions to enjoy dessert, but Sirius returned home stuffed to the gills with pudding and sherry trifle.

The next morning, the atmosphere at Grimmauld Place was as if nothing had ever changed. True to what he had said in his letters, Arcturus, who had arrived home the previous night, treated Sirius exactly the same as he would have had his grandson been sorted into Slytherin, and Walburga's improved attitude from the previous evening was still holding strong. She was doting on her eldest son as she had before he'd left for Hogwarts, and Sirius was preening under the attention like he always had. Orion was as happy as ever, especially since he loved Christmas.

In fact, the only person in the whole house who seemed unhappy was Regulus. He was furious that nothing seemed to have changed since Sirius had been sorted into Gryffindor, even though he had been sure that such a fall from grace would finally gain him some attention. Maybe his elder brother would even be disowned, and then he'd be the heir!
Regulus had tried to hex Sirius by setting up a jinx on his door that morning, but Sirius, the undisputed king of pranks in their household, had noticed it immediately.

"Kreacher!" Sirius had cried.

The elf popped into his room and genuflected at the handsome boy's feet. "Master Sirius, sir! Kreacher's Mistress is so happy you're home!"

"Yes, yes," snapped Sirius impatiently, having heard the same thing repeated at least twice every time he'd seen the elf since he'd been home. "Walk through my bedroom door, and then go tell Mother that you got caught in a trap on it. I order you not to tell anyone that I told you to do that!"

The elf had unwillingly edged himself through the door, then squealed in pain as he was covered in boils and itching powder. He had popped out of the room, sobbing for his Mistress, and Sirius had been listening at his door a few minutes later when his father had appeared on the landing and bellowed for Regulus to come downstairs immediately.

Sirius wasn't sure exactly how his brother had been punished, but now Regulus was sitting stiffly in a chair in the corner of the drawing room, glaring daggers at him. Sirius happily pretended that he did not exist and instead examined the massive piles of presents under the tree.

There were colorful packages of all shapes and sizes, most of them with Sirius or Regulus's name on them, and it took most of the morning to carefully open and examine each one. Arcturus and Walburga didn't agree about many things, but they were certainly of one mind about opening presents. They agreed that each gift should be opened separately (in a civilized manner, none of that tearing into the paper like common Muggles), so that each member of the family could appreciate and enjoy each other's good fortune.

Sirius waited impatiently as the adults opened their gifts, first Arcturus and then Orion followed by Walburga. Walburga in particular took far too long for Sirius's tastes, because she had received a magnificent fur coat from her husband and had spent absolutely ages admiring it and trying it on and receiving compliments on it and thanking Orion profusely.

Finally, it was his turn, and he eagerly catalogued his bounty of toys, books, clothes, pranking supplies (snuck into the pile by his father, no doubt), and new Gryffindor-themed sheets and scarves. Finally, just when he thought that he had opened everything and it was his nasty brother's turn, Orion Summoned another package the size of a large book.

"Your mother and I had these commissioned when we had your tiepin repaired," Orion informed him.

Sirius raised an eyebrow in inquiry, but of course the easiest way to find out what was inside was to open the present, which he did as soon as his father placed it in his hands. He carefully removed the gold-colored paper to reveal an ebony box with a simple border engraved around the lid. He opened it to find the inside divided into several compartments lined with red silk, and nestled in several of the compartments were gold and red pieces of jewelry. Sirius let out a breath of surprise and looked back up at his parents, who were uncharacteristically silent.

Walburga was looking at him with a soft expression, but her voice was hard when she rhetorically asked, "We can't let that Potter brat outdo a Black, can we?"

All of the jewelry was done in yellow gold, as opposed to the white gold or platinum of the Black jewelry, including Sirius's signet ring and Slytherin tiepin. The gemstones were either rubies or red diamonds—Sirius wasn't sure, and he wasn't about to ask, as it was rude to inquire about the value of gifts. He reached into the box and pulled out the largest piece of jewelry, a ring. It was a lifelike
representation of a lion's head, with a glorious mane, roaring mouth, and glowing red eyes. The Gryffindor tiepin and cufflinks were done in a similar style, but they weren't as ornate as the ring and were clearly intended for everyday use.

Sirius couldn't help the tears that sprung to his eyes, and he gave his parents a shaky but genuine grin.

"I can't believe you're okay that he got sorted into Gryffindor!" cried Regulus, breaking into the perfect moment. Sirius spun around to tell his brother off, his fingers itching to call his wand into his hand and curse Regulus all the way to next Christmas, but his father's hand landed hard on his shoulder and stopped him short.

"REGULUS!" yelled Orion, his fingers digging hard into Sirius's flesh. "WHAT DID I TELL YOU?"

Regulus scowled. "I DON'T CARE! HE'S A BLOOD TRAITOR AND EVERYONE IS STILL TREATING HIM LIKE A PRINCE!"

His father's fingers were almost painful on his shoulder now, and Sirius felt Orion take a deep breath to reply. He was cut off, however, by the calm, quiet inquiry from the other side of the room.

"What did you call your brother?"

The three younger Blacks all froze together for a moment of terrified solidarity before they turned as one to face the patriarch. Arcturus had leaned forward in his armchair and was staring fixedly at his youngest grandson. From her place on the adjacent sofa, Walburga was pale as a ghost and watching her father-in-law with wide eyes. Sirius hadn't seen her so frightened since the time he had wandered away from her in Diagon Alley when he was five or six.

"I asked you a question, boy!" Arcturus snapped, his frigid voice louder now than the previous terrifying whisper.

Regulus gaped at him and looked around the room for help, but the rest of the family were silent as the grave. Finally, he stuttered, "I—I don't—Grandfather, ple—"

"WHAT WAS IT?" roared Arcturus, rising from the chair and seeming to tower over the entire room and everyone in it all at once. Sirius had seen his grandfather angry plenty of times, not the least of which was when he had accidentally infested the Wizengamot chambers and his grandfather's underwear with Bulbadox powder that past summer, but he had never seen Arcturus like this.

The youngest Black looked at the floor in front of him. "A blood traitor," he whispered in defeat and shut his eyes as if that would make it all go away.

"Get out!" his grandfather ordered. "I don't want to see you for the rest of the day!"

"Arcturus, what about Christm—?" began Walburga, but her father-in-law turned his glare on her and she cut herself off mid-word.

"Keep your peace, woman. The boy deserves neither gifts nor dinner."

Sirius expected his mother to argue, as she usually did on behalf of her children, but this time she stayed silent. Orion's fingers would surely leave bruises on his shoulder.

Regulus seemed frozen in place, and Arcturus brandished his wand. Sirius half expected his
grandfather to curse his brother right there, as he himself had wanted to do only moments ago, but
instead he Vanished the rest of the presents that were under the tree. Regulus started trembling
with repressed tears when all of his Christmas gifts disappeared, and even Sirius startled in barely
suppressed surprise that his brother's things had been taken away.

"Kreacher!" Arcturus called. When the elf popped into the room beside him, he ordered, "Take
Regulus to his room. Do not let him leave until I say so, and do not bring him any food."

After Kreacher popped out of the room with a tearful Regulus in tow, the rest of the family
adjourned to the dining room. Dinner was a stilted affair. Walburga in particular was as quiet as
Sirius had ever seen her, even quieter than Sirius's first few days home, and Orion wasn't as
raucous and jovial as he usually was on Christmas. He and his father had a tense conversation
about politics while Sirius and Walburga listened with varying degrees of disinterest.

Afterwards, Arcturus rose from the table, his son following after. Sirius stayed seated with his
mother, until his grandfather said, "Come, Sirius."

Sirius was momentarily surprised. He had never before been invited to join the men after dinner,
or to join a serious conversation between them at all. However, Sirius Black was not going to look
a gift horse in the mouth, so he strode confidently out of the room without questioning the
opportunity.

His grandfather's private sitting room was done in green velvet and a particularly dark ebony, and
it managed to exude masculinity despite the delicate antique furniture. Sirius chose a seat on a
gold-colored sofa across from his grandfather and beside the fireplace, where Kreacher had laid
out a silver tea set and coffeepot.

Both of the adults prepared drinks for themselves, but Sirius declined. He was too anxious to be
thirsty.

"What are you going to do?" Orion finally broke the oppressive silence.

Arcturus leaned back regally in his chair, charming his saucer to hover beside him. He turned a
steady gaze on his son. "When you were a child, that would have earned you magical lashes in
addition to the solitary confinement, at the least."

Orion nodded slowly. "Yes, Father."

He glanced at his young son uncomfortably, as if he wished Sirius weren't there to hear this. Sirius
was sure that was the case. Although he had once been confined to his room for an entire
afternoon, he wouldn't want anyone to hear about it. He imagined that he especially wouldn't want
anyone to know if he had been whipped, although he never had.

"It was an effective punishment that left no lasting damage to you… or to me or my father before
me. You have done much worse to others, yet you have spared your own son a well-deserved
punishment."

Orion winced and stared down into the swirling liquid in his teacup. "I could kill another man, a
child even, with little remorse, but… but it would hurt me to harm my own son, even a little."

"Orion," said Arcturus sharply, and when his son looked up the older man held his gaze with a
peculiar, soft expression in his eyes. "It did hurt me to harm you, son. You've experienced holding
your own children, and watching your sons grow to look more and more like you every day. You
cannot seriously think that I never felt the same for you?"

Sirius fidgeted in his seat, uncomfortable to be witnessing this moment. His family had never been
one for displaying affection, beyond his mother's occasionally affectionate touches and his father's protective, guiding hand on his shoulder. His grandfather in particular had never been one to display his affection, though Sirius knew that he loved his family. He remembered the hug Arcturus had given him before he left for Hogwarts, though, and he had to acknowledge that the older man rationed out love whenever one needed it the absolute most.

Arcturus's son looked at him for several seconds with his mouth agape, obviously as astonished as Sirius. Finally, he managed to say, "I know, Father."

Arcturus set his coffee cup on the floating saucer with a clink.

"It hurt me, but I did it for your own good. You needed to be corrected before you went down a dangerous path, and soft corrections weren't working."—Sirius was insanely curious about what his father could possibly have done that was so bad, but he daren't ask—"This jealousy and spite that Regulus has for Sirius is dangerous, and if you don't correct it, it will fester and cause even greater problems down the road."

"I don't understand him," sighed Orion. "We've always tried to treat them the same, but we can't change the fact that Sirius got to go to Hogwarts this year or that Regulus's birthday falls after the cutoff date for next year."

"You also can't change the fact that Sirius is the heir," Arcturus told him. "Regulus knows that he will always have everything he wants materially, that he will be taken care of and can pursue anything he wants to do in life, but the one thing he wants that he can't have is his brother's position."

Sirius huffed. "I won't take care of him if he keeps treating me like—"

"Hush, Sirius." Sirius closed his mouth with a pout and sulked back into the cushions, and Arcturus continued on as if he had never been interrupted. "I've seen this too many times: with my own brother, with my uncles, with my friends' families.... This is why we stopped with you, you know. Your mother wanted more children, and I believe it is the only time I was ever able to tell her no about anything. Her people often have large families, but then again they don't have much to pass on to the next generation except their blood."

"Walburga wanted a girl," Orion mused, obviously speaking as much to himself as to his father, "and I admit that I wanted another child, boy or girl, so I wasn't opposed to trying."

Then he let his head fall onto the backrest of his chair in an uncharacteristic display of weakness. "You think that lashing him will help, Father?"

Arcturus shrugged, though his son couldn't see it. "Nothing you do can make him love his brother or stop being jealous of what he can't have, but you absolutely must stop him from acting out this way. You've warned him and you've taken away material things, so what's left?" He stared at his son's upturned chin for a few moments, and then offered, "I can do it."

Orion's Adam's apple bobbed for a moment under perfectly shaven skin. "No, he's my son. I'll do it.... You never let Grandfather give me a lashing, even when I deserved for him to do it."

"Wonderful, it's settled then," said Arcturus, though they all knew that there was nothing wonderful about it. "Now we can enjoy the rest of the day until the threat of insurrection hangs back over our heads tomorrow."

Despite his conflicted feelings, Orion snorted in amusement. "Having a tough time at the Ministry?"
"That blasted Bones woman has been trying to get her insane law passed to allow Mudbloods to reveal magic to more than just their most immediate family members. The only way it could possibly pass is to have a vote called without me or the other hereditary Warlocks present, but no doubt they will try to do just that before the New Year."

Orion tilted his head back down, his expression wrinkled into one of pure disgust. "Well what can you expect from the daughter of a blood traitor and a Mudblood? Most Half-bloods are little better than Mudbloods when it comes to respecting our traditions and protecting our community."

Arcturus's expression was little better than his son's. "Indeed. I say that if Mudbloods are so eager to maintain contact with the Mundane world, then they are welcome to stay there instead of polluting our world. The full Wizengamot would never give that Half-blood bitch enough votes to pass her law, of course, but as long as Diggory is Minister they will try all sorts of shenanigans to call a vote without us hereditary members present."

Sirius felt that he should get to have his share of the conversation, so he asked, "Didn't you say at dinner that enough of the Muggle sympathizers lost their elected seats this time around that you'll be able to get a new Minister?"

Arcturus gave him a pleased look. "Yes, indeed. However, Diggory will be Minister until after the New Year, when the new Wizengamot convenes and votes on the position."

"Since he's so interested, maybe you should train Sirius to follow in your footsteps and skip me altogether. You know that I have no interest in being on the Wizengamot," declared Orion.

His father pinned him with an inscrutable look. "Well, he's handsomer and smarter than you, so it isn't a bad idea."

Sirius grinned, and his grandfather spared him an amused look, the skin around his eyes crinkling just enough for Sirius to note his good humor even though his mouth maintained a perfectly dour frown.

"I beg your pardon!" cried Sirius's father. "You know that my son gets his good looks from me!"

"Piffle!" exclaimed Arcturus, his tone as serious as if he was addressing a full Chamber at the Ministry, and Sirius couldn't contain himself anymore and broke into peals of delighted laughter. "He gets his good looks from me," declared his grandfather, speaking over Sirius's noise. "You tried to take after me, you really did," he told his son. "But your mother, as pretty as she was, had that brother with those eyebrows, and you thought it a good idea to choose that of all things to inherit from her…..

Orion raised one of said brows, which of course was as perfectly groomed now as Sirius remembered them ever being, and that sent his son into another round of guffaws as he imagined his father meticulously tweezing them in front of his magic mirror. The two older Blacks soon followed him, all relieved beyond measure to think about something other than the heavy conversation of earlier.

The day of the British and Irish Quidditch League Final dawned cold but clear, and everyone would have thought it an absolutely perfect day if Sirius hadn't been bouncing all about Grimmauld Place like an overexcited Puffskein. Everyone, that is, except Regulus, who had refused to come down for breakfast that morning.

"Let him go on a hunger strike if he pleases," Arcturus had commanded the boy's worried parents. "If you give into children every time they decide to starve themselves, they'll ride roughshod all
over you." At Walburga's horrified look, he had added, "If he doesn't give this up by the time his brother leaves for Hogwarts, we can always Imperius him to eat."

That hadn't comforted Regulus's worried mother, but nonetheless they had all donned their Tutshill gear and headed to the stadium, leaving the inmate at Grimmauld Place to carry out his sentence under Kreacher's watchful eye. If the adults' Quidditch gear merely consisted of their usual high-quality robes done in the team's sky blue, Sirius didn't comment on their lack of team spirit. He was too pleased with his own official Tornados uniform, which his Grandfather Pollux, the team's owner, had acquired for him.

"Those are brilliant!" Peter had exclaimed the first time he had seen what his friend was wearing.

Sirius had looked at his friend's attire in disgust. "Well, I'm not sure you're actually allowed to wear a Puddlemere badge in the Tutshill owner's box."

"Only because you're so afraid that Puddlemere will stomp you!" retorted Peter.

He and Sirius carried on bickering good-naturedly the entire way to the box, even Sirius barely pausing to catch his breath after they Apparated from Peter's home to the stadium. Peter was too thrilled by the prospect of seeing his first live professional Quidditch game—the league final at that!—to even notice that Sirius's family and their other guests were eyeing him with evident distaste.

"That's the one whose father was disowned for marrying a Mudblood?" Bellatrix asked her aunt, and her sister Andromeda turned to get a good view of him.

Walburga pursed her lips. "Yes. It was quite shocking to poor Enid when her brother-in-law announced his engagement."

"Ah, well," responded Aunt Druella, "there are some in even the best families."

"The Pettigrews were never one of the best families to begin with," said Adolphia Lestrange, who was standing from the railing as she could get, looking stiff and extremely displeased to be there at all. "Although that's no excuse for Pettigrew Senior marrying a Mudblood."

Bellatrix turned a critical eye on Peter, who was with her cousin on the other side of the box, both of them enthusiastically leaning as far over the railing as they could go. "If the son's appearance is any indication of the father's, then it's likely that a Mudblood was the only woman who would have him."

The women all erupted into giggles at her cruel remark.

Sirius and Peter were blissfully ignorant of the conversation, as they were too busy watching people fill the stadium below them and chattering excitedly about the upcoming game. Sirius's attention was drawn, though, by the sudden greetings all around the box that accompanied the entrance of the Malfoys, Abraxas and Lucius. Orion motioned once with his fingers, and Sirius sighed as he left the railing to answer his father's summons.

"You can stay here if you like, Peter," he told his friend, although he couldn't tell if the other boy actually heard him, since he had leaned out past the railing to get a better look at the referees who were hovering near the ground on their broomsticks. "I'll be back after I say hello to my parents' friends."

At that, he walked sedately over to the group of adults that had formed around their newest guests. Abraxas Malfoy was a tall man, perhaps as tall as Arcturus but not as tall as Orion, with long blond hair pulled back from his face and sharp, pale features. Lucius appeared to have only
recently begun growing out of his gangly phase and was not yet as tall or broad as his father. His face had likewise not filled out and matured like his father's, but the resemblance between the two was still remarkable.

"Thank you for inviting us," Mr. Malfoy said after he had been introduced to Sirius and the others he didn't know. "We had not planned on purchasing an entire box for just the two of us, since we don't support either of the teams this year. You quite saved us another dull day at home."

"Who do you support?" inquired Aunt Druella.

It was Lucius who answered, though he never actually looked at Druella. He never lifted his gaze from Narcissa, who was standing a step behind her mother with a shy blush on her normally porcelain cheeks.

"Wimbourne, Madam."

It seemed that all of the men present already knew this, which wasn't surprising since the Lestranges and the Malfoys were quite close, and the Blacks made it a habit to follow Quidditch closely.

Pollux Black gestured imperiously in his daughter-in-law's direction. "Women," he said with an exasperated flourish, "they don't know the first thing about Quidditch."

"Your granddaughter seems to be an exception to the rule, sir," Lucius contradicted him, though in the politest of tones imaginable so that not even Pollux could have taken offense. "If she had tried out for the house team, I'm certain that she could have ousted me from my position at Seeker."

Narcissa blushed pinker than before, but she gave her beau a winning smile.

"Which granddaughter is that?" demanded Pollux. "I have a surplusage of granddaughters."

Sirius didn't know if he was really that obtuse or if he just found the interaction between the young couple amusing.

The corner of Abraxas's mouth turned up ever so slightly, and Sirius was sure that he would have missed it had he not had so much experience with his father and grandfather's expressions. "That would be the ever lovely Narcissa Black, about whom I have heard a never-ending stream of praise and various trivia facts nonstop since at least last summer."

Now it was Lucius's turn to flush, but Sirius had to give him credit for acting as if nothing had happened and he was perfectly fine, despite the red tinge on his cheeks. Everyone else laughed pleasantly, and soon enough the couple was able to escape to the dubious safety of a corner where the women could interrogate them without the men interfering.

The men soon separated into their own smaller groups, leaving Sirius alone with his Grandfather Arcturus, who avoided Pollux like the plague whenever possible, and Mr. Malfoy, who had been in a discussion with his grandfather about the Bones situation at the Ministry.

"I will never understand why some of our number cannot see the danger in allowing Mudbloods more access to their vile Muggle traditions," scowled Abraxas. "Why, Lucius has told me that the Mudblood girls are free with their affections even at Hogwarts! The Muggles have apparently had some sort of 'sexual revolution,' whatever that means…"

Arcturus actually grinned, though Sirius thought that it was more intimidating than open or humorous. "In my experience, it has always been the case that Mudblood girls are loose and
immoral. When I was a boy we all knew that we weren't allowed to take liberties with pure-blood girls before we were married, and I even had to knock some sense into my son after he got attached to some little Mudblood tramp when he was about Lucius's age."

Abraxas grinned back, baring some of his teeth. "That is true enough. Although I don't recall quite so many liberties in my school days as my son has described to me. I had been quite worried that I would have to knock some sense into Lucius as well, but then he turned his attention to Narcissa and seems to have settled down on his own."

"Narcissa is a good sort of girl, and I know that Cygnus and Druella have raised her to be a respectable pure-blood lady." There was a slight warning in his tone, and Abraxas glanced over at his son and Narcissa for a moment before inclining his head to indicate that he had received whatever message Arcturus had given him. Sirius wasn't quite sure what had happened between the two older men, but it was quickly forgotten when his grandfather said, "Perhaps so many of our number fall prey to these insidious Mudblood attacks because they don't have anyone to knock the sense into them before it's too late?"

Both men chortled, though Sirius had no idea what was so funny about being attacked by Mudbloods.

Then his grandfather glanced around them for a moment, as if to ascertain whether anyone was close enough to hear what they were saying. He was pleased that his grandfather apparently trusted him enough to let him hear the conversation, although he didn't pretend to actually understand most of what they were talking about.

Finally, Arcturus said in a low voice, "My daughter-in-law informed me that you, Lestrange, and her brother-in-law have a political ally whom Rodolphus and Bellatrix are quite taken with."

Abraxas's face was suddenly hard and wary.

"Rastaban, William, and I were classmates. We share many acquaintances," he said slowly, and Sirius could tell that he was being careful about what he chose to say.

"I haven't brought this up to get information from you," Arcturus told him calmly. He placed a large hand on Sirius's shoulder, and his grandson glanced up in confusion at the icy mask of his face. "However, Bellatrix and Rodolphus implied that there might be some speculation about how to make Sirius useful, and I want to make it clear to you that my grandson is not old enough to be useful to anybody."

Sirius wanted to protest that he was plenty old enough to be useful, but his grandfather's heavy hand made the words evaporate off his tongue before he could say them. Arcturus and Malfoy stared at each other for several long seconds, then finally the younger man inclined his blond head in deference.

"None of us is in the habit of using children. Bellatrix's wishful thinking is just that."

Arcturus's stare penetrated Malfoy's polite mask for a few seconds longer, but finally he inclined his own head in acknowledgment.

The sound of a whistle broke them all out of the bubble they had formed, and immediately the inhabitants of the box were bustling around to claim their seats before the game began. Sirius jumped in surprise and spun around to see what his friend had been doing all this time, only to find that Peter had saved him a seat right in the center of the front row. He was far too excited to remember to excuse himself, and he all but ran across the box to join his friend, the conversation between his grandfather and Mr. Malfoy all but forgotten.
Author's Note: Rastaban is the more proper name of the star, although J.K. Rowling chose to switch it up and name the younger Lestrange Rabastan instead. I have decided that in my own little head canon Adolphia Lestrange dislikes her husband’s name and therefore her argument carried the day when she wanted to name her firstborn after her (Rodolphus is, as you might be able to tell, a feminine form of her name). Then by the time the second son rolled around, Rastaban had convinced her that he really should have a son named after him, and the Rabastan version was much more palatable to his wife so she finally agreed.

I deeply appreciate the comments, bookmarks, and kudos I've received. Thank you!
Walburga decided to accompany her son to King's Cross Station on January third. She acted as if it was a perfectly natural occurrence—that she hadn't failed to come to the station to pick him up mere weeks earlier—and Sirius was too afraid to bring up the subject himself and decided that he would also act as if nothing had ever been amiss between them. Thus it was that Sirius's party drew the eye of nearly everybody on platform nine and three quarters as his mother walked gracefully on her husband's arm, donned in her new, glorious nundu fur coat. Her husband was dressed elegantly and she had made sure that her son was well put together (as always, of course), and together she thought they presented the perfect picture of ancient, pure-blood wealth and sophistication.

She walked in the middle, her hand tucked delicately into the fold of her husband's strong arm and with her handsome son on her other side, and she subtly tugged Orion along to where she wanted them to go.

"Ah, Malfoy, Lestrange, and Rosier," he greeted when they approached the group of haughty pure-bloods, all of whom were keeping a disgusted eye on the unwashed masses around them even as they talked amongst themselves.

Rosier was facing them as they approached, and he offered a stiff, polite nod to Orion and Walburga, more out of social obligation than any desire to greet his sister's in-laws when they had never approved of Cygnus Black's marriage to Druella Rosier in the first place. The remaining adults, one tall man and a shorter man and his wife, turned around to see who had joined the group. Abraxas Malfoy offered a small smile as he greeted them, just a brief upturn of the corners of his mouth, but Rastaban Lestrange grinned widely and reached forward to claim Walburga's free hand.

"Mrs. Black!" he exclaimed and kissed her hand. "You look utterly ravishing. For a moment I thought that no time had passed at all, and it was us about to board the Hogwarts Express!"

Internally Walburga was delighted and wanted to beam her pleasure at him, but externally she only allowed a polite smile. She had once considered marrying Lestrange, when she was sixteen and Orion was too young to consider marriage. Orion laughed and offered his hand to the other man for a hearty handshake, and she thought to herself that she had made the right decision, not only because she was still a member of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black which she had been born into, but also because Orion Black was much handsomer than Rastaban Lestrange. The man's namesake, his son Rabastan, was standing beside his father, and a quick glance assured her that her own darling Sirius had more striking features and would surely be much taller when he was grown.

Adolpha Lestrange looked less than pleased by her husband's assessment, and Sirius noticed how she raised her hand reflexively to smooth her own perfect, obviously magically-created curls while she glared at Walburga's thick, natural curls, which she had pinned back with emerald-encrusted combs and allowed to flow down her back all the way to her dainty waist.
Mr. Malfoy kissed Walburga's gloved hand next, and she smiled pleasantly and made a show of looking around. "Where is Lucius? Since the league final I have thought of a few more embarrassing, intrusive questions to ask him."

Abraxas's lips quirked up at the corners, though he mostly maintained his cold public mask. "He told me that Narcissa planned to meet him in the prefects' compartment, and he ran off in that direction as soon as we crossed the barrier."

"I don't believe you have ever met my daughter, Lucilla," Mrs. Lestrange said as Orion kissed her hand, gesturing with her free hand to indicate the prettyish short of girl standing next to her son. "She's in her third year."

Walburga surveyed the girl with a critical eye, taking in her pleasing yet unremarkable features and her straight brown hair before looking down to briefly examine the quality of her coat and shoes. *A Lestrange would do quite nicely for Sirius*, she thought to herself. *She's a bit plain for him, but her blood and her fortune make up for that.*

For his part, Sirius didn't think at all about how Lucilla Lestrange looked or how she was dressed. He was much more interested in the girl's older brother, whom he had heard tons about from Bellatrix and her fiancé Rodolphus. He happily separated himself from his parents and moved to join the group of children. The older boy was dressed in the same sort of Muggle-friendly attire as the rest of them, but he was also wearing a snake-shaped cuff that slithered around his wrist and hissed a bit when Sirius shook his hand.

"Don't the Muggles notice that?" he asked.

Rabastan grinned, baring his teeth in a way that edged right up to the border of unfriendly. "Muggles are as stupid as trolls."

His sister giggled and inclined her head. "And only half as attractive. Look."

Sirius looked in the direction she had indicated and saw Mary and her parents standing some distance away, her father's balding scalp catching the light and her mother's ridiculously large hair bobbing in time with her head as she talked. He laughed aloud and offered the Lestrange siblings a smile full of all the cruelty he'd had to restrain while actually in the Mudblood's presence.

"I could barely keep myself from staring whenever I had to talk to them."

"You actually *talked* to them?" asked the fourth member of their group, incredulity clear in his voice.

Sirius had ignored Evan Rosier rather well up until that point, and he had no intention of changing that now. He spared the other boy a brief glance, taking in the way that his rich brown hair had grown longer and his hazel eyes sparkled with curiosity, then he turned back to the Lestranges and spoke directly to them as if his former friend wasn't standing there and hadn't asked the question.

"The Mudblood is a Gryffindor in my year, so I've been playing nicely with her. I had to levitate her trunk for her when we got off the train at Christmas, because she was planning on dragging it behind her! Can you imagine?"

Brother and sister shared a glance. It seemed that Sirius had passed some sort of test, because Rabastan's laugh spread over the group like a winter frost. "Mudbloods are just as stupid as their parents."

The boarding whistle of the Hogwarts Express sent the children and adults into a sudden flurry of
farewells and handshakes, and Sirius found himself embraced in a rare, if brief, one-armed hug from his mother before he was whisked away with the other children. He glanced back over his shoulder for one last look at his parents and caught the angry eye of Severus Snape, who was standing next to a sallow, angry-looking woman dressed in threadbare cotton who was glaring sourly at his mother's fur coat, but then he lost sight of them through the crowd.

They clambered up the steps onto the train, Rabastan laughing even more coldly than before as he stepped around Mr. MacDonald, who was struggling to heft his daughter's trunk onto the train. He knocked the trunk with the side of his boot as he moved past, sending it sliding back off the train and into the Muggle's gut, and then kept walking with his laughter ringing down the narrow corridor. His sister joined his mirth with her own high-pitched giggle, and she clasped Sirius's gloved fingers and pulled him up the steps behind her.

"I don't think Sirius's friend is too happy with him," said Evan once they had all come to a stop in the narrow hallway, but if the Lestrange children heard him they didn't acknowledge it.

"Come on, Sirius," said Lucilla, tugging on his hand. "We always sit in the first compartment of this car."

He was surprised enough that he didn't move immediately. Maybe he should have expected to be included since his family and everyone else he had met over Christmas holidays had seemed to accept him, but his pride was still smarting from the way he had been ostracized during the previous school term, so he didn't entirely expect this acceptance from the Slytherins.

Evan had no such hesitancy and began moving in that direction, until Rabastan's arm shot across the corridor to block his path. "We didn't invite you," he told the younger boy. "You can sit with that Half-blood slime ball you like so much."

The olive tone of Evan's face paled to a sickly yellow, and he stared between the Lestranges and Sirius with his mouth half opened. For some strange reason Sirius wanted to apologize to him, but then he remembered how his friend had been the one to abandon him last September and his heart hardened. This time when Lucilla tugged him by the hand, he allowed himself to be pulled down the narrow corridor.

The train ride to Hogwarts and the carriage ride up to the castle were several hours of bliss for Sirius. Then they entered the Great Hall and he was forced to separate from his cousins, who had joined them halfway through the ride after fulfilling their prefect duties, and his new friends and head in the opposite direction towards the Gryffindor table. There he had received the silent treatment from everybody except Peter, and the same had continued once they returned to Gryffindor Tower.

During their first class he tried to talk with the girls, but Emmeline's first words were, "I thought you were different! I can't believe how you just stood by as your father and your friends treated Mary and her parents so horribly!"

Sirius was at a loss about how to respond. On the one hand, he had spent months fighting his way into some semblance of respectability in Gryffindor, and if he fought with Emmeline and Mary then he would lose significant ground. On the other hand, the Muggles deserved even worse than anything Orion or Rabastan had done, and he certainly didn't understand how a pure-blood like Emmeline Vance could fail to understand the elevated position his family and the Lestranges held over Mary's and even her own.

The Slytherins were listening in on the conversation, though, so he neglected to respond either way, instead raising an arrogant eyebrow in her direction and making his way to his own table just
before Professor Slughorn bustled into the classroom.

Peter chose to take Sirius's side in the fight, no doubt because the girls didn't help him with his homework or take him to Quidditch games like the wealthy boy did. Unfortunately, his friend seemed to get as much enjoyment out of rehashing what had happened at the game the hundredth time as he had the first time. Honestly, Sirius was just as into Quidditch as any other wizarding boy his age, and he understood his friend's excitement at his first real Quidditch game—Really he did!—but it wasn't long before he wanted to hex Peter's mouth closed. By the second week of classes, he was so sick of Peter that he actually sought out Janice Edgecombe just for an excuse to get away from the other boy, who avoided his study sessions with the Ravenclaw girl as if his life depended on it.

He approached the girl at the Ravenclaw table, braving the curious stares and excitable tittering of the gaggle of first and second-year girls sitting around her. He tapped her on the shoulder, his fingers sinking through her thick curls to reach the flesh of her shoulder, and she jumped in surprise and turned around on the bench.

"Sirius!" She smiled and gazed up at him from under light eyelashes.

He looked down at her directly, trying to avoid looking at the other girls, though he would have never actually admitted aloud that he found a group of little girls intimidating. "Do you want to meet up in the library this afternoon?"

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed quickly, then bit her lip and blushed as her friends giggled. She began again in a more restrained voice, "I mean, that sounds great. Do you want to meet at the usual place at four?"

He agreed with an easy grin, glad to have an excuse to get away from his Quidditch-obsessed friend, and turned to walk back to the Gryffindor table. Emmeline was glaring at him from her place several seats down, although Sirius wasn't sure why she bothered anymore.

"Oi, Black!" cried Potter as Sirius swung his leg over the bench. "When I didn't see you at the table I thought you hadn't realized you aren't wanted here!"

Sirius turned so that no one else could see and rolled his gray eyes, although that was the only outward sign he gave that he was annoyed. Potter always particularly focused his attention onto Sirius whenever he was alone and bored because his friend Lupin was sick, which seemed to Sirius to be an awful lot of the time. He managed not to retaliate during all of their classes, even as Emmeline and Potter both treated him worse than usual, and was finally able to escape Professor Flitwick's classroom after their last lesson.

He deftly avoided a Tripping Jinx as he went. He wasn't sure who had cast it—after all, it might have been Emmeline or Potter or Evans or even Mary—but his money was on Potter, as he didn't think any of the girls would be brave enough to cast something where a teacher might see.

He beat Janice to the library, as the Ravenclaw girl had to come all the way from the Potions classroom in the dungeons. He made his way to their usual spot in the back of the Muggle Studies section and tossed his book bag carelessly onto a chair as he made his way around to the other side of the table. He didn't really have anything to work on. He just would rather spend a couple of hours doing nothing in the library than spend the same time having Peter chat his ear off in the common room. He plucked a book off of the shelf nearest him and was halfheartedly reading about Muggle motor vehicles when Janice came around the corner of the stacks a few minutes later. He greeted her less enthusiastically than she greeted him as she plopped down gracelessly onto the seat next to him.
"What are you reading that for?" she inquired curiously, leaning over him to look at the page he'd been perusing.

"Oh, no reason." He shrugged and flicked the book closed. "I don't really have any homework to do."

"I don't either, really," Janice told him. He wondered when exactly she had time to do her homework, since in his experience from last term she was always either giggling with her gaggle of girls or distracting him from his own work whenever he saw her. "I was wondering why you invited me to the library, since we don't have any big essays due."

She leaned her head onto her hand, and the light caught the natural blonde highlights in her brownish-blond curls as they spilled over her arm and the table. Sirius turned a bit in his chair to see her better, and she smiled brilliantly up at him.

He quirked the corner of his mouth up in return. "Honestly? Peter is the only person talking to me at the moment, and I really need a break from talking about Quidditch."

He realized belatedly that she might be insulted that he'd all but admitted he only wanted to spend time with her because he couldn't spend time with anyone else, but she didn't seem to have taken that implication at all. She laughed quietly, sure to keep the noise down so the librarian wouldn't overhear them.

"I heard Pettigrew say at dinner the other night that you had taken him to the league final. And then I heard it again at breakfast the next morning, and at lunch after that!"

Then Janice's expression turned suddenly, and Sirius couldn't tell exactly what she was thinking. She seemed a mix between happy and anxious but not exactly either one. "So..." she began, drawing it out as she twirled a curl around her finger. "You're fighting with Vance, then?"

It wasn't exactly a secret that he was, and he supposed that what she really must be asking was why. He sighed. "She's upset that my family and some of my Slytherin friends weren't nice to Mary's family."

"Oh, that's silly! I don't believe that blood has anything to do with power, of course," she said as if it was self-evident, "but obviously old pure-blood families like yours have such high status that Muggle-borns can't honestly expect to be treated as total equals!"

Sirius didn't really agree with her about power; he had seen the evidence of Peter's lack of wand skills, after all, and he was sure that wouldn't be the case if he'd had two pure-blood parents instead of a Mudblood mother. However, he appreciated the rest of what she had said, so he chose not to argue that relatively minor point. Instead, he gave her the first real smile he could remember giving anyone for quite some time.

"Well, Emmeline doesn't think that way at all."

The Ravenclaw tutted in sympathy and patted his arm. "Well, like I said, she's just being silly."

He thought that Janice seemed a bit too pleased about his fight with Emmeline. Her grin had returned in full force, and for the rest of their time in the library she seemed as bubbly as ever. However, Sirius could honestly say that their time spent together that afternoon was the most he had ever enjoyed her company, and he actually found himself seeking out her company several more times over the next few weeks. He never did get anymore of his homework done when he was with her than he had during the first term, but that was okay with him because now the purpose of their time together was for the companionship he was missing in Gryffindor, not for a
study partner. If Emmeline appeared even more annoyed with him anytime she saw him talking to or walking with the Ravenclaw, that was just a nice bonus.

It was when he was walking with Janice back from the library after one of their many afternoons together that they ran into the group of first-year Slytherin boys, who must have been on their way in the direction Sirius and Janice had just come. Snape was leading the group, with Evan walking slightly behind him and William Avery and Nigel Mulciber next to each other in the back. He reached down to grab Janice's hand and guided her over to the edge of the corridor, hoping to avoid the confrontation. That didn't happen.

"Black!" spat Snape, his thin lip curling in disgust.

Sirius resisted the urge to sigh in frustration, as the other Slytherins were watching and that would be an undignified reaction for a Black.

"Hello, Snivellus," he said with forced pleasantness, purposefully using the nickname that Evan had made up for Snape on their first train ride to Hogwarts. Evan's wide hazel eyes shot over to his housemate nervously as he took a step back from the confrontation.

As expected, Snape's composure slipped even further. "I'm surprised to see you with anyone other than your lapdog," he said cruelly. "I thought everyone else had come to their senses about you."

Janice's hand tensed in his, but he gave hers a squeeze in warning and she kept her silence.

He gave an easy smile that totally hid the annoyance he felt and raised an eyebrow in the direction of Avery and Mulciber. "I'm surprised that any of this lot can stand to be seen in public with a Half-blood, much less one as greasy and poor as you."

Mulciber looked partway between insulted and amused, and his broad face twisted with indecision about whether to scowl or laugh.

Avery laughed. "It's better than the relationship you have with the people you sleep next to."

Snape didn't seem to have heard his housemate. His black eyes were trained on Sirius with a loathing intensity that seemed to take his entire focus. He reached for his wand so quickly that Sirius wouldn't have been able to draw his in time if he kept his wand in his robes. Luckily, however, he had his wand in the holster on his arm, and with a quick flick of his fingers it was in his hand and ready to go.

"Expelliarmus!" he threw out as soon as he felt the square handle in his grip, and Snape's wand flew out of his hand when the boy was only halfway through his own incantation, which Sirius recognized with surprise. "A Blistering Hex? Isn't that a bit much?"

Snape watched, hatred burning in his eyes, as Sirius twirled the two wands carelessly between his fingers. "For you? It wasn't enough."

Sirius surveyed the group of Slytherins as he considered what to use in retaliation. Snape was standing his ground despite not having a wand, still glaring as though he wasn't defenseless. Avery and Mulciber were standing apart from the group and watching the proceedings with rapt attention, as if they were at a Quidditch game. Evan, who was still standing several paces behind Snape, had drawn his own wand, though he was holding it loosely at his side. It was the last that set Sirius's blood boiling for the first time since they'd encountered the other boys. His silver eyes darkened enough to almost match Snape's, and he raised his wand again with purpose.

Snivellus's eyes crossed as he stared at the tip of the wand pointed almost directly at his face, but Sirius's dark green jet of light flew inches past his head. It hit Rosier right between the eyes.
The other three Slytherins spun around to stare as Evan's features distorted and his face swelled to several times its normal size. The pain and shock had caused him to topple over onto his backside on the cold stone floor, and Sirius stepped around Snape and glared down at his former friend.

"There," he told him, "now your outside matches your ugly insides, you traitorous piece of filth." He gave Avery and Mulciber a hard look. "You'd better not trust this one. He's liable to turn on you at any minute."

He tossed Snape's wand carelessly in Avery's direction and then turned on his heel and stalked off down the corridor, pulling Janice along with him. They walked for a while in complete silence, her hand still in his, until they finally had to stop when the staircase they were on began to move. He let go of her and ran the fingers of his free hand through his thick black hair in frustration. His wand was still in his other hand just in case the Slytherins decided to run after him.

"I wish you hadn't had to see that," he finally said, shooting the Ravenclaw a sidelong glance. She stared at him without responding, and as soon as the stairs stopped moving he started walking again, cursing himself for having managed to turn his only other friend besides Peter against him. Then Janice caught up with him and used both of her hands to grab his arm and halt his retreat.

"Snape's a greasy git," she declared with solemn finality, "and Rosier shouldn't have stopped being your friend just because you didn't get sorted into Slytherin."

He stared down into her blue eyes, and she smiled at him warmly. Finally, he smiled back in relief and started walking again at a slower pace, this time with her next to him. He escorted Janice all the way to Ravenclaw Tower. He told her it was just in case the Slytherins decided to retaliate and came after her. Even though the excuse was flimsy at best since surely they would have come after him first, she didn't call him out on it. The truth was that he was loathe to separate from her for fear that as soon as she was free of his presence she would rethink still being his friend after what she'd seen.

In the end, he had to watch her disappear through the door to her common room and then head back to Gryffindor Tower alone. He spent the rest of his otherwise entirely peaceful evening agonizing over the possibility of losing yet another friend, though he refused to tell Peter what was bothering him. The next morning at breakfast, though, Janice noticed his eyes on her as she entered the Great Hall, and she must have sensed his trepidation because she briefly squeezed his shoulder as she walked past him to sit with her friends at the Ravenclaw table.

That caught the attention of the Gryffindors sitting around him, and one of the older girls had the audacity to coo at him and say, "Oh, is she your girlfriend now? That is so sweet!"

Sirius didn't dignify such a load of hippogriff dung with a response, but all of the girls seemed to take that as a confirmation because they all proceeded to giggle. Except for Emmeline, who glared at him in seemingly renewed anger, and Mary, who looked back and forth between the two of them with an expression that Sirius couldn't read.

"There must be something wrong with her then!" declared Potter, whose glare didn't match the ferocity of Emmeline's no matter how hard he was trying. "All the Gryffindor girls have come to their senses and noticed that Black's a bad seed."

Sirius had to repress the snort that threatened to make its way out of him. "I didn't realize that you cared so much about my love life, Potter. How does your boyfriend feel about that?"

Potter spluttered in indignation while his friend blushed to the roots of his limp hair. Sirius calmly
chewed his mouthful of bacon as the students surrounding them waited to see how the other boy would respond.

"Why you—you—" began the messy-headed git, but Sirius cut him off in a voiced laced with just a hint of his underlying scorn.

"Yes, we all know how obsessed you are with me, Potter."

Then, as the owl post had arrived and no letters seemed to be addressed to him, Sirius rose from the bench and made a quick exit before Potter could recover from his shock and start a real fight right in the middle of the Great Hall. He knew from experience that the other Gryffindors would take Potter's side, and the professors would assume that Sirius had been the one to instigate things. He would probably pay for his words to Potter later, but he supposed it wasn't any different than the way he had to constantly watch his back already.

Classes passed for the next few days without any of the professors mentioning the incident with the Slytherins. Sirius had half expected that they would rat him out at the first opportunity, but after he got through Transfiguration with the Deputy Headmistress and Potions with the Slytherin's Head of House without any mention of the fight, he began to relax just a bit. He still expected that they would try to retaliate somehow, of course, but at least he wasn't worried about getting detention for the rest of this term, too.

When days went by without any hint of retaliation, though, Sirius started to go from comfortable to downright suspicious. He was sure that they must be planning something and that this was just the calm before the storm. He was so on edge that even Peter noticed and began to get a bit jumpy, and things probably would have continued on that way if the older Slytherins hadn't set him straight.

"Black!" came from behind him as he and Peter were making their way from their Astronomy lecture, their last class until their practical at midnight, to an empty classroom that Professor McGonagall had told them they could use to practice casting.

Sirius had spun around with his wand in his hand before he'd really had time to process it, only to see Rabastan Lestrange hurrying down the corridor towards him. Lucius and Narcissa were walking side by side behind him at a much more respectable pace. Sirius sighed with relief and let his wand go back into his arm holster as he relaxed his stance.

"Hello, Lestrange!" he greeted the older boy with a genuine smile.

"Merlin, were you expecting someone to curse you in the back?" Rabastan asked as he came to a halt right in front of the smaller boys. Then he seemed to rethink what he'd asked, and a crooked smile made its way onto his face. "Well, I guess you are at that."

Narcissa and Lucius had reached the others in time to hear his remark, and the blonde girl sniffed disdainfully. "I don't know who those little flobberworms think they are, attacking a Black!"

Rabastan raised a teasing eyebrow in her direction. "Flobberworms, are they? Well, if Cissy Black is using swear words then they must have really crossed a line."

Sirius couldn't repress a smirk, but he knew better than to laugh outright at his cousin. She might be the quietest of the Black sisters, but she could be almost as vicious as her sister Bellatrix if she put her mind to it. She turned a withering look on Rabastan, and Malfoy speared his friend with his own glare.

"Watch it, Lestrange," the tall boy said coolly.
Rabastan held his hands up to signal his defeat.

"Sorry, Narcissa," he said not at all contritely. "Anyway, from what Avery and Mulciber said, Black showed them who's the better wizard."

From Narcissa's expression it was clear that she considered that a foregone conclusion.

Lucius, on the other hand, hitched up the two book bags on his shoulder into a better position as he gave Sirius an assessing look. "You're just lucky that Mulciber has a particular affinity for curse work and knew how to quickly reverse what you'd done well enough to bring Rosier to me. Otherwise a teacher might have found them."

Sirius returned Malfoy's assessing look. "Well, are you going to give me detention then?" he asked challengingly.

"Of course not!" snapped Malfoy, but then his cool mask fell back into place almost immediately when his girlfriend shot him a quelling look. He sighed. "I'm just warning you to be more careful, Black. You don't want to draw attention to yourself by going around using Dark Arts on other students in the middle of the corridors."

He was aware of the gasp that came from Peter, who was standing partially behind him as if he expected his friend to protect him from the frightening older Slytherins, but Sirius ignored it. Instead he shrugged and offered the older students a wry grin.

"I guess that's the Gryffindor brashness coming through."

Rabastan slung his arm around the smaller boy's shoulders, and Sirius stiffened for a moment in surprise at the casual touch.

"I don't think you need much of an excuse, being a Black and all," the Slytherin informed him with a sidelong smile. "I didn't believe that nutter my brother is marrying when she said that you take after her, but now I believe it well enough."

Narcissa looked like she might protest at that characterization of her eldest sister, but then she seemed to think better of it. Even a loyal little sister couldn't deny the fact that Bellatrix's hold on sanity was tenuous at best. Instead, the blonde pointed her dainty nose up in the air as if she was addressing someone far beneath her. "That's rich coming from a Lestrange of all people."

Sirius could feel Rabastan's shrug against his own body.

"They're a perfect match, my psychotic brother and your nutter sister," he said agreeably. "The only person who'd be a better match for her is probably me, so it's a good thing that I prefer her protégé or else I'd be heartbroken that my brother got her first." He gave Sirius's shoulders a squeeze, but at Narcissa's alarmed expression he said more coldly, "Oh, sod off, Black."

He removed his arm from around the younger boy, and Sirius was confused and thought for a moment that Lestrange had been addressing him. But then he looked at the venomous expressions passing between his friend and his cousin, and he realized that Rabastan was angry with Narcissa. He wasn't really sure what had caused the sudden change in the atmosphere around them, but he found it really uncomfortable.

Malfoy apparently shared his discomfort, because he broke in with, "Well, Sirius, you don't have to worry too much about Rosier and Snape. None of us took kindly to that Half-blood upstart attacking one of our own after we'd been kind enough to take him in"—Sirius vaguely remembered through the haze of his own Sorting that Lucius had been the one to greet Snape when he was put into Slytherin, so he thought that maybe that last comment was more personal
than the tall boy was making it out to be—"or to Rosier taking his side. We've let them know how
disappointed we are, and if they attack you again they'll have Lestrange and me to deal with."

"And I doubt Evan's father would be happy to hear that he'd sided with a nasty piece of Half-
blood filth over the Black heir," added his cousin with her haughty brow raised in Sirius's
direction to emphasize the seriousness of her threat to tell her Uncle Rosier.

Sirius's first reaction was to inform them that he didn't need their help dealing with the greasy git
and the traitor, but immediately after that initial impulse he realized that his older friends were well
aware that he could take care of himself. Malfoy had healed Rosier's injuries and had the story
from Avery and Mulciber, after all. They were offering him their support not because they thought
he was weak but just because they thought he was one of them. More one of them than either
Rosier or Snape, despite the fact that he was in Gryffindor, and that thought caused a triumphant
smirk to flit over Sirius's face before he could get it under control.

"My father would be proud to hear that I cursed that little traitor," he told them, "but all the same, I
promise to try to keep it private in the future."

The fifth years laughed. With that, Narcissa rubbed his shoulder affectionately and watched with a
critical eye as Rabastan squeezed his other shoulder, then the three of them continued down the
corridor.

Sirius was left alone with Peter again. The shorter boy was staring up at him with an expression of
awe that Sirius hadn't seen him wear since the first few days of their friendship, when he had
heard that Sirius would be going to the league final. He didn't seem like he was planning on
saying anything for the moment, though, so Sirius kept walking towards the classroom. He didn't
look to see if his friend was following, but by the time he had reached their destination and hoisted
himself on top of a desk, Peter came through the door after him. The other boy tossed his bag onto
a chair and struggled to pull himself on top of the desk in front of Sirius's, as was their usual
position.

"Have you been practicing?" Sirius asked as he prepared two of the mice that Professor
McGonagall had left in the room.

The professor set aside several classrooms where students could practice transfigurations outside
of class time, and this room for the first and second years was equipped with mice, bunnies, and
birds. Sirius had already mastered all of the transfigurations they had learned in class—some of
them before he'd even come to Hogwarts, when his grandfather had tutored him—but Peter was
struggling with their recent Transfigurations work. Sirius was still willing to help Peter with these
classes as long as Peter did most of the work for him in Potions, which his friend was actually
very good at.

Peter, however, was not the least bit focused on homework. He was staring at Sirius like he'd
never seen him before. His small eyes were wide as he asked, "Is it true?"

"Is what true?" Sirius responded with his own question, though he knew very well what the other
boy meant. He just wasn't going to give anything away until he'd gauged how his only remaining
friend in Gryffindor was going to react.

"That you cursed Evan Rosier, of course!" Peter exclaimed in exasperation.

"Keep your voice down!" hissed Sirius, gray eyes darting up to the doorway.

They were sitting in the middle of the Transfigurations Corridor in one of the Deputy
Headmistress's classrooms, and it wasn't exactly the best place to discuss this. However, he could
tell that his friend wasn't going to be the least bit productive until he got his answers, so he sighed in resignation and leaned forward so that he could whisper and lower their chances of being overheard.

"Snape tried to hex me, but I was quicker and Disarmed him. Rosier had drawn his wand, and it made me so mad that I cursed him."

"You cursed Rosier and not Snape?" his friend asked with evident surprise.

Sirius pushed back the silky hair that had fallen into his eyes with his movement. "I expect Snape to try to hex me. We didn't get off to a good start, and it was mostly my mother's fault, to be honest," he explained to the other boy, though he was loathe to admit it. "But Ev—Rosier used to be my best friend until I wasn't placed into Slytherin, and it burns me up inside that he turned his back on me."

Peter looked somber for a moment at Sirius's admission of his feelings, but then he leaned forward until he was perched precariously on the edge of his desk and Sirius could feel the other boy's breath on his face. "It was a real curse?"

"Yes..." Sirius replied, drawing the word out in his confusion.

Peter's normally dull brown eyes glittered like Sirius hadn't seen since the Quidditch match. "It's true then, what Potter says? You're a Dark wizard?"

Sirius blinked at him. "Well, I—I mean... Would it bother you if I was?"

Peter reared back in surprise, and he had to scramble to grab the edge of the desk as if shifted under the sudden movement and he nearly toppled off it.

Once he'd righted himself, he cried, "No! My father was—Well, I mean, I don't exactly know for sure, but—but he left all of these textbooks about Dark potions, and he'd handwritten notes into the margins and everything, and of course my mother hasn't been able to teach me because she's just a Muggle-born and hasn't ever been taught the Dark Arts, and my father's family doesn't want anything to do with me so they can't answer my questions—"

"Peter!" Sirius interrupted him, afraid that he would keep rambling until he passed out from lack of breath unless he was stopped. "I guess it makes sense.... Your father was a pure-blood, after all. Was he in Gryffindor?"

"No, Hufflepuff," replied his friend.

Sirius raised an eyebrow but otherwise he was able to keep the surprise off his face. "Well," he said finally, "I'm not a Dark wizard. I'm far too young to be one yet; it takes years, you know, to really deserve to be called one. My family are all Dark, though, and I've been taught a thing or two."

Peter grinned. "Enough to curse Rosier from here to Hogsmeade!"

Sirius forced out a laugh, though he still didn't find the situation with his former friend to be funny. Then he pinned his classmate with a stare, his glacial eyes hard with warning. "We can talk about it in private and maybe I can show your father's books to my grandfather, but we can't let anyone overhear us, especially not the other Gryffindors."

Peter nodded, his eyes wide again. Sirius held his gaze for a few more moments, then he leaned back casually onto the desk.
"For now we'd better focus on Transfiguration, though. If you don't master making mice inanimate then you'll be completely lost when we start transfiguring them into other objects next week."

At first Sirius had just thought that his friend didn't concentrate enough on his wand movements and incantations, but he had improved his awareness of those two things so much that Sirius was now sure that Peter's real problem was his mental focus. He had tried to engage the other boy in discussions about magical theory, but Peter had failed to pick up any of it. He had particularly tried to explain to Peter that to cast effective spells he should be mentally focusing on what he wanted to happen and on how it should happen, but he had been unsuccessful thus far.

Sirius blamed the boy's Mudblood mother, because he was sure that no pure-blood child would be unable to understand how magic works. He sternly reminded himself about the Potions essay that he needed Peter to help him with, as he hadn't bothered to actually read the chapters himself. Then he drew his wand and started trying to explain it again.

The next couple of weeks passed by slowly. Sirius spent most of his free time with his two remaining friends in his own year. Since their talk in the Transfiguration classroom, Peter had been less inclined to talk about the game they had attended and was more willing to get Sirius alone so that they could discuss the Dark Arts. Sirius didn't know a lot, but compared to Peter's complete lack of knowledge he was a veritable expert.

He didn't mind spending as much time as possible away from the Gryffindor common room, especially the angry eyes of Potter, Emmeline, and Mary. Plus Snape had obviously told Lily Evans about the confrontation in the corridor, as the redhead had taken to glaring at him with accusing eyes and muttering under her breath about how certain people shouldn't be able to get away with things. (Sirius was just glad that Snape had obviously taken Malfoy and Lestrange's warning seriously and had passed on the importance of discretion to his annoying little girlfriend.) All in all, Sirius was perfectly willing to let Peter drag him off to abandoned classrooms all over the castle in order to have their discussions as long as it meant leaving the tower.

The Gryffindors all seemed to think that his frequent absences must have something to do with his supposed girlfriend from Ravenclaw, but to Sirius's relief most of them had moved onto a new topic of gossip by now. He was very close to admitting that he genuinely enjoyed Janice's company, now that he wasn't so annoyed by her lack of studying skills, and he would have been a bit disappointed to have to cut back on their time together just to avoid his housemates' teasing.

At breakfast one Friday morning in late March, a wave of murmuring passed through the Great Hall when the owl post arrived. Sirius looked up to see what the reaction was about and saw two enormous owls carrying an even more enormous box between them. They flew carefully towards the Gryffindor table, and Sirius perked up with recognition when they were close enough for him to tell that one of the owls was his own, Aquilina, and the other was his father's eagle owl.

The two owls hovered over the table for a moment, but Sirius stood up in alarm and waved his arms to stop them. "Not on the table, girls!" he cried. "Put it on the floor!"

The package wobbled for a moment in midair as they fought to abort their landing, but luckily they were able to manage the extra few feet. Sirius had to duck to avoid being hit in the head as they passed over him, but the box landed heavily on the stone floor with two exhausted owls finally coming to a rest on top of it. Sirius's plate full of breakfast, and that of the students on either side of him, was saved. He reached down quickly to release the birds from their burden, and he let them hop onto his arms so that he could transfer them to the table, where he prepared them their very own plate of sausages and eggs with a goblet of water.
Nearly everybody in the Great Hall was watching the whole thing, so Sirius was a bit self-conscious as he opened the huge box. He didn't let his discomfort show, of course, and he soon found out that there was no need to have been worried. The box appeared to be filled with all of his favorite desserts and candies, as well as a large stack of books and several assorted items of clothing.

There were three letters placed on top of the goodies, and Sirius plucked them out and studied the handwriting in which his name scrawled across each one. They were from his mother, father, and grandfather. He ripped into his mother's, which was at least three times thicker than either of the other two.

My darling son,

I'm sorry that you haven't written me since you've been back at school. It is my fault, I suppose, for not having instilled good habits in our correspondence last term.

Sirius would have snorted if he hadn't been in public. She might as well have said that she was sorry for not having replied to any of his letters last term, if she had wanted to be honest about it. He scanned several more paragraphs with similar types of statements until he finally got to the good part of the letter.

Your cousin Narcissa has written to me about your altercation with the Muggle's son and that dreadful Rosier boy. I cannot say that I am surprised that either of them would dare to challenge you, and I am so proud that you showed the Rosier boy his place, as I have told you time and again that you ought to have done. A foreign mother who works like a Mudblood pauper, imagine—but you have heard me say this all before. I do wish that you had done the same to the Half-blood. I have no doubt that you are up to the task, my darling, and assume that you must have been distracted before you could complete his punishment. I am sure that you will have plenty of time to devise something for next time—There is always a next time, you know, with these common people. They never learn.

Your father purchased you a lovely pair of loafers when he was in Italy. They will go wonderfully with the sweater woven from black yeti fur that you received for Christmas, or the

Sirius stopped reading as his mother went on for another long paragraph about the clothes he already had and the ones she had included for him in the package. He skimmed again until he found a subject more to his liking.

Last time we were in Diagon Alley, your father insisted on buying enough sweets to undoubtedly last you until this time next year. Although I dislike the idea of you eating unhealthily, I remembered what you said about the Potter boy receiving care packages from home every week. Therefore, I had Kreacher make you all of your favorite homemade desserts, which are under the proper Heating and Stasis Charms to last until next week at least. I wasn't sure what you would like, darling, so I included everything I could think of. You may write to me before next week to request what I should put in your next package.

Love,

Mother

P.S. I remember that Andromeda and Narcissa are particularly fond of Kreacher's Bakewell pudding, and Lucius said at the game that his favorite is carrot cake. I have
SIRIUS thought that it was just like his mother to disapprove of him eating sweets but then to send him all of the desserts he liked best just because she wanted to outdo Dorea Potter, plus more for other people just to drive the message home. He wouldn't complain, though.

His father and grandfather's letters were much shorter and mostly contained advice about what he should do in the event of another altercation. He finished reading them and stuffed all three into his book bag. When he looked up he saw that most of the other students had gone back to their own friends and letters, except for a few eyes at the Gryffindor table. Peter in particular was staring into the box as if Christmas had come all over again, and Sirius laughed and told him that they could go through the contents of the package after classes.

"Mr. Black," came the strict voice of Professor McGonagall, who was walking briskly up the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, "I do hope that you aren't planning on carting that around to all of your classes."

Sirius glanced up at her as he finished digging around for the two smaller packages inside his larger one. "No, Professor. I was just about to take it to the dormitory before class begins."

She nodded her acceptance and kept walking, and Sirius levitated the box in front of him and carefully made his way down the aisle and around the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables until he reached the fifth-year Slytherins sitting near the end of their table. Narcissa smiled at him as he approached, though Malfoy maintained his cool mask so that it was impossible for Sirius to know if the older boy was pleased or displeased to see him. At the others' looks, Lestrange, who was sitting across from Malfoy, turned around to see what the fuss was about. When he saw Sirius he gave a genuine grin.

"These are for you and Malfoy, Cissy," Sirius told her, testing out her nickname for the first time since last summer.

She didn't seem to mind, as she accepted her package with her smile still in place. "Oh, do you know what it is?"

"Mother sent you and Andy a Bakewell pudding," he replied. Then he handed Malfoy his box. "Yours is a carrot cake."

Lucius accepted his with a slightly bewildered look coloring his normally unreadable features. It took Sirius several seconds to remember that the older boy's mother had passed away a couple of years ago, and no doubt this was the first care package that he had received since then.

"Why does Malfoy get something and I don't?" demanded Rabastan in probably as serious a tone as Sirius had ever heard him use, and Sirius turned to see that Lestrange was glaring at him. He would have been sure that the older boy was actually angry if his dark blue eyes hadn't been sparkling in mirth.

Sirius pursed his thin lips together as he had seen his mother do so often and narrowed his eyes at the other boy. "Some of us still have standards, you know."

"Oh, and I don't meet these lofty Black standards?"

Sirius curled his lip in disgust for good measure. "Certainly not."

There were a few beats of complete silence from the Slytherins and Hufflepuffs who could hear the exchange, no doubt because they thought from what they could hear that the two were in earnest and a fight was about to break out. Then Rabastan burst into laughter; his laughter always
sounded cold and cruel as a rule, but Sirius could tell that he was actually amused. Sirius followed his example a second later, and even Malfoy chuckled.

Finally, Sirius gained control of his laughter and said, "I might consider letting you have a taste or two of my treats, but you'll owe me."

Lestrange eyed him curiously for a few moments, obviously weighing the pros and cons of owing Sirius a favor, before he replied, "Deal. But I want some choice selections, not just your castoffs."

"Deal," Sirius agreed. "Now I really need to get this box up to Gryffindor Tower or I'll be late for Potions."

He was, in fact, not late for Potions, although he very nearly was. He met Professor Slughorn at the door and entered the classroom along with the man's ruminations for at least the hundredth time about what a disappointment it was to him that he hadn't managed to get the full set of Blacks.

"Well, you still have my brother coming, Professor," Sirius told him. "He's determined to be in Slytherin."

That seemed to please the portly man, and he nodded jovially as he made his way up to the front of the classroom to begin the lesson.

Double Potions was the only class that day for both the Gryffindors and Slytherins, and after lunch Sirius planned to meet Janice in the library as he had nearly every Friday afternoon for the past several weeks. He took his usual route from the Great Hall to the library, and though he was as aware as always of what was going on behind him, he was not prepared to be grabbed suddenly and dragged sideways. He stumbled and felt himself be dragged several feet before he recovered enough to struggle. He began to summon his wand into his hand, but his captor's arms wrapped firmly around him and pinned his arms to his sides so that his wand wouldn't have been useful anyway.

"It's me!" cried his captor. "Calm down, it's me!"

Sirius stopped struggling when he recognized the voice, and the other boy loosened his grip and tentatively took half a step back. Sirius took the opportunity to shove Rosier away from him and watched as the Slytherin stumbled backwards and fell against a desk he'd collided with. He didn't pull his wand immediately only because he was curious about what exactly Rosier thought he was doing. He said as much.

Rosier looked up from underneath his now-shaggy brown locks. "Would you have come if I'd actually asked you to meet me somewhere to talk?"

"No," Sirius replied shortly.

When he didn't offer anything else, the other boy sighed and nodded his head in understanding. "I knew you wouldn't, so I had to get creative."

Sirius snorted inelegantly. "Fine. I'm here. What do you want?"

"I want to fix this," replied Rosier, gesturing between the two of them to illustrate his point. "If your cousins and Malfoy and the Lestranges don't have a problem with you being in Gryffindor, then I shouldn't have a problem with it either."

"I don't hear an apology in there anywhere," Sirius observed coldly. "All I hear is that you're ready to be my friend now that you know people more important than you wouldn't have a
problem with it."

Rosier stared at him as if he'd grown another head. "You know that it would have been social suicide for me to choose you over the Slytherins! You would have done the same thing!"

Sirius knew that he probably would have under most circumstances, and he distinctly remembered having that exact thought about all of the people in Gryffindor who had avoided him just so they wouldn't incur Potter's wrath. He would rather die than admit that to Rosier, though. He liked to think that he wouldn't have abandoned someone who was already his best friend, even if he wouldn't have taken it upon himself to make new friends with a perfect stranger if it would be social suicide.

He crossed his arms stubbornly and demanded, "Would you even be here right now if the older Slytherins weren't mad at you about me?"

Rosier flushed in anger. "It isn't fair!" he declared. "I was accepted by the Slytherins because of my blood and my father's alliances, and now suddenly rich little Sirius is the favorite again and it's like I'm nobody! They would have ostracized me if I'd been friends with you last term, but this term they're ostracizing me because I'm not friends with you!"

"How do you know they would have?" cried Sirius, ignoring most of the tirade. "My father and grandfather supported me last term! It isn't as if I was disowned!"

"When you were sorted into Gryffindor, my mother said that your mother would surely—"

"Your mother!" Sirius interrupted him with an indignant shout. "Do you know how many absolutely horrid things my mother has told me about your mother over the years? Do you know how many times my mother has told me that she didn't want me to associate with you because of who your mother is? Did I listen to her, Evan?"

Rosier gaped at him. "What did she say about my moth—?"

But all of the feelings of betrayal and hurt and anger had bubbled to the surface of Sirius's mind and heart, and he plowed ahead single-mindedly. "No! I didn't! Do you know why I disobeyed my own mother?"

Evan didn't seem to have an answer to give, but that was okay because Sirius wasn't really interested in his guesses anyway.

"BECAUSE YOU WERE MY BEST FRIEND!" he bellowed at the Slytherin.

The other boy's hazel eyes were wide and he was breathing heavily, as if he had been the one who was shouting. Sirius, for his part, was panting and flushed with anger, pinning his former friend with a stormy gray glare. They stared at one another for long moments that might have only been seconds or might have been minutes, and then Sirius scowled and straightened his posture with a definitive exhale.

"I won't forget how you turned your back on me," he told the wide-eyed Slytherin. "Don't talk to me again or I'll curse you worse than I did before."

With that, he spun on his heel and stomped out of the room. The letter from his mother was burning a hole right through his book bag and cashmere robes and right into his skin. He had wanted so badly to toss it in Rosier's face and let him read for himself how much Sirius's family disapproved of their friendship. Only the fact that his mother would kill him if her private words were made public had stopped him from yanking the parchment out of his bag and thrusting it into Rosier's hand.
The rest of the day he could barely keep the thunderous expression off of his face, and he soundly failed at keeping the outrageous thoughts out of his head. Janice actually got some of her homework done during their time at the library, because she recognized his need for silence. Peter had given up on taking an inventory of the desserts in Sirius's care package about halfway through, after the second time Sirius nearly hexed him where he stood. Even Rabastan had refrained from teasing him too much when Sirius had stopped at the Slytherin table to give him a piece of pound cake.

Sirius refused to tell any of them what was wrong, instead opting to hole himself up in his dorm room so that he wouldn't have to field the questions. For once he was momentarily glad that he only had a handful of friends, because if he'd had more he would have had to avoid questions from even more people.

At dinner on Monday evening, a trill went down the Gryffindor table, and when Sirius looked up he saw Rabastan coming down the aisle between his table and the Ravenclaw table with quick, confident steps. He stopped in front of Sirius and glared at Peter and a third-year girl, who were on either side of him, until the girl finally got the message and she and her friends shifted down the bench to make room for the Slytherin. He slid down gracefully and landed with his back against the table and his long legs sprawled out across the aisle.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asked, not exactly impolitely but certainly not invitingly.

Rabastan let out a surprised laugh. "What's wrong with you?"

Sirius turned and looked at him with blank silver eyes, only to find that Lestrange's sapphire gaze was full of worry and not teasing. He inhaled deeply and exhaled a breath that might have been called a sigh if he had been anyone other than a noble and most ancient pure-blood.

"I talked to Rosier," he said. At the older boy's dangerous look, he hastened to add, "He was trying to make up with me. It was just for the wrong reasons, and it made me angrier more than anything."

The Slytherin sat up and pulled one of his legs over the bench so that he was facing Sirius directly. "Are you sure that you aren't just covering for him?"

"I wouldn't cover for him!" Sirius insisted, turning an insulted glare on Lestrange. They had drawn some looks from the people sitting nearest them, and Sirius lowered his voice so that only Rabastan and Peter, who was on his other side, could hear him properly. "It just… Well, it hurt, hearing him admit that the only reason he wanted to be friends again is that his social status has taken a beating now that the rest of you have decided to accept me."

It wasn't lost on either of the pure-bloods that he was confiding in someone who had only wanted to be friends with him after it was clear that the Black family had fully accepted him despite his unfortunate Sorting. There was an uncomfortable beat of silence between them, and then Rabastan decided that it was better to bring it out into the open than to pretend that it didn't exist.

"If you don't hold it against me that I didn't speak to you last term, why do you hold it against Rosier?"

Sirius set his fork down on his plate with a clink and turned to fully face the fifth year. "I didn't know you. He was my friend before, but he turned his back on me at the first sign of trouble."

"Ah," replied Lestrange, understanding clouding his gaze. "What about Avery and Mulciber?"

"What about them? I've only briefly met either of them over the years. Merlin knows that
Malciber's family isn't ranked high enough to merit my mother's social attentions."

Rabastan was clearly pleased by that. "So you wouldn't hold last term against them?"

When Sirius nodded his assent to the idea, the other boy smiled briefly and settled his elbow on the table.

"I'm here for some of that cherry tart I see."

It took Sirius a few beats to realize that Rabastan was answering his original question. Then he barked out a laugh, glad that the previous subject was behind them, and slid the aforementioned tart towards the Slytherin.

"You'd better take some and go back to your own table before there's a revolt."

He let his gaze travel over the Gryffindor table, where many of the older years were watching them with expressions mixed with confusion and anger at the sight of a Slytherin at their table. The fifth years seemed particularly bothered, and Sirius supposed that must be down to some personal animosity they had with Rabastan, since they were all year mates. The most furious person, though, was James Potter, although he was glaring daggers at Sirius and not at his Slytherin friend. Sirius had no doubt that if it was possible to cast spells through the eyes that Potter's stare would have him convulsing on the floor in pain.

Rabastan took some dessert for himself and another piece for his sister Lucilla and removed himself to his own side of the Great Hall, and for Sirius the rest of dinner passed by without further incident. He felt much better after finally explaining to someone what was bothering him, and he spoke more freely with Peter than he had for the entire weekend previously. Without apologizing for his behavior—because Blacks don't apologize—he made amends by asking his friend if he'd like to finish going through the contents of the package after dinner, and that was more than enough for Peter to forgive and forget.

It was later that evening when Potter finally confronted him. Sirius and Peter had finished their inventory and were lounging on Sirius's bed playing chess, though Peter wasn't very good. They both looked up when the door slammed heavily against the stone wall and saw Potter stalk in as if he had a herd of hippogriffs on his tail.

"You!" he cried when he saw Sirius. "How could you invite your snake friend to sit at our table?"

Sirius finished moving his knight and watched it viciously behead Peter's queen. Then he graced the fuming boy with his attention.

"I didn't invite him."

"Then why was he sitting with you?"

With a sigh, Sirius swung his legs off the bed and stood to face the other boy. "He happens to be my friend."

Potter clenched his fists at his sides and all but growled out, "You're a Gryffindor. We don't have Slytherin friends."

"So let me make sure I have this right," responded Sirius, ticking off the points on his long fingers. "You refuse to be friends with me because I'm not a 'real' Gryffindor. You accuse me of being a Slytherin no matter where the Sorting Hat placed me. You refuse to accept that I might not be all bad, even though your mother is a Black just like me. You do your best to sabotage my ever being accepted by most of the other Gryffindors. But notwithstanding all of the above, it's my fault that I..."
accept friendships from Slytherins instead of spending time with Gryffindors."

The other boy gaped at him, and Sirius could tell that he hadn't thought of it that way before. However, from the stubborn look that appeared on his face a second later, he wasn't about to accept it as true now that he had heard it either.

Before Potter could form a reply, though, the mousy boy at his side said, "Sirius, I'm sure James didn't mean—"

"I think he's meant everything he's said and done to me," Sirius cut him off sharply, "and I don't need you of all people trying to defend him, you cowardly little worm. You've stood beside the big bully for all of it."

Lupin looked as if Sirius had slapped him, and even Potter looked surprised at how the situation had been turned against him when he had clearly intended for the confrontation to go the other way. Sirius, though, was not in the mood to continue, so he slipped by them and made his way to the showers before either could recover fully.

It turned out that he might have been better off had he stayed to finish the fight, because at breakfast a few mornings later he found that the first bite of one of the wonderful scones his mother had sent him caused him to break out into boils that painfully burst with every slight movement. Even if he hadn't felt them break out all over his body, the disgusted and pitying looks from all around him would have clued him in almost immediately. He snapped his head to give Potter a glare, but he regretted it immediately when several of the abscesses burst at the movement.

A few seconds later, Professor McGonagall was at his side, carefully helping him to gingerly rise from the bench with the least amount of ruptures and pain possible. His book bag was handed off to Peter, as Sirius couldn't very well carry it on his shoulder himself without causing himself serious injury, and he was more than grateful when the professor opted to levitate him to the hospital wing rather than have him walk under his own power. He even had boils on the bottoms of his feet.

"Do you know how this happened?" asked the Deputy Headmistress some time later, after Madam Pomfrey had administered the antidote and tended to all of the wounds.

"It was Potter," Sirius told her immediately. "We had an argument a few days ago, and he tampered with the scones my mother sent me… Probably with some other things in the box too, now that I think about it."

Professor McGonagall's thin eyebrows rose higher on her forehead, accentuated by the tightness of her bun. "You shouldn't make accusations without being sure, Mr. Black. How do you know that it was Mr. Potter?"

Sirius pursed his lips into a thin line. "The box is kept in our dormitory. Peter has been eating out of the box as well, so I doubt he would want to poison any of the contents. Lupin might stand by without saying anything when Potter is a bully, but he's never done anything himself. Only Potter has ever done something like this before."

But the professor insisted that she couldn't punish a student without hard evidence that he had been the one to commit the deed. She left the infirmary with a promise to conduct a thorough investigation, and Sirius couldn't help the biting remark that flowed from his mouth at that.

"Oh, I'm sure it will be an entirely fair, impartial investigation, Professor."

That had earned him a strict glare from the woman, but his tone had been polite, and even though
Sirius remembered Will Avery's words from weeks earlier: *It's better than the relationship you have with the people you sleep next to.* He knew what Avery had meant now, even if there was nothing he could do about it at this point.

When days passed without Potter or Lupin or any other Gryffindors receiving detention for the incident, Sirius concluded that no one was going to be punished. He had thought on one occasion that Lupin must have received a detention, because he wasn't in either the common room or the dormitory one evening, like he usually was. However, Peter told him that he had heard that the other boy was ill again.

"Sickly little thing, isn't he?" asked Sirius rhetorically.

Peter nodded as if it had been a real question. "Oh, yes. He's been out at least once a month since we got here, almost like clockwork."

Sirius didn't reply, but he did consider the remark at some length afterwards. He wondered if his roommate had some sort of chronic illness to justify the professors allowing him to miss class at least once a month. He wasn't really worried about it being anything contagious, since he assumed that the adults never would have allowed Lupin to come to Hogwarts if he posed a danger to the other students, but he was quite curious about what exactly the problem could be. Something niggled at the corner of his mind, but even after several minutes of thinking it over, he couldn't think of any wizarding illnesses that worked quite like that.

*It must be some disgusting Muggle disease,* he thought viciously. *I hope that the headmaster knows what he's dealing with, because if I get sick my family will have his head.*

It was perhaps that line of thinking that made Sirius less receptive to the other boy when he approached the back of the Muggle Studies section when Sirius was there with Janice a few weeks later.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry," Lupin said, sincerity shining through his moss green eyes. "I've never really had any friends before, and I know that I was willing to let James get away with murder just because he was my first friend."

Although Sirius had claimed before that he didn't hold it against perfect strangers for not going against the crowd and making friends with him, for some reason he was entirely unimpressed by Lupin's apology. He raised one perfectly formed eyebrow and pinned his fellow Gryffindor with an unforgiving stare. "Oh, and where is Prince Potter? He didn't want to witness your heartfelt confession to me?"

Lupin dropped his gaze to his tatty shoes. "He's in the common room. I, ah… Well, I—that is to say, I, ah… snuck out to come find you."

"You snuck out," he repeated in a flat tone. "I see. I'm worth an apology to heal your guilty conscious, but only if it doesn't cost you anything."

"No, it isn't like that!" the gaunt boy denied. "James kno—I mean, I can't just—I mean… Please, you don't understa—"

Sirius cut him off with a cold laugh. "I don't want to understand."

He turned back to the essay in front of him, completely ignoring Lupin. Janice giggled as if she found his rude dismissal amusing, and after a few long seconds and a disappointed sigh, the
smaller boy turned and left.

However, Lupin didn't stop his attempts at reconciliation at that. He took to trying to speak to Sirius and Peter whenever James wasn’t around, and sometimes when he was if Lupin thought that he could get away with it. Some time later in Transfigurations class, when Sirius had long since managed to turn his mouse into a snuffbox and was dividing the rest of his class time between watching his classmates’ attempts and reading ahead in the second-year textbook, Lupin approached his desk. Sirius felt the shadow fall over him and looked up from his chapter on more complex animate to inanimate transfigurations to find Lupin shifting his weight nervously in the aisle.

"Erm…” began the other boy when it was clear that Sirius wasn't going to do anything more than stare at him. "You've done really well with your snuffbox, and I was wondering if you could help me with mine." At Sirius's blank look, he rushed on, "I mean, I've got the basic transfiguration down all right, of course. It's just that your snuffbox is so complex and all I've been able to manage is a simple one….”

Sirius was considering exactly how harsh of a rejection he could risk with Professor McGonagall liable to come within earshot at any moment as she walked around the classroom checking the students' progress, but it turned out that he didn't have to say anything at all.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you'd ask him for help instead of me," said Potter from the desk across the aisle.

Lupin turned to face his friend, and Sirius could just make out the wary expression on the half of the boy's face that he could still see. "It isn't like that, James. You were still working on your transfiguration, and Sirius had already finished his."

"No, no, you don't have to explain it to me," said James in what Sirius assumed was meant to be a sickly sweet voice, though it was so loud and full of animosity that it utterly failed. "It's a perfect match made in heaven, isn't it? A Dark wizard and a—"

"James, please!" cried Lupin loudly.

The desperation in the boy's voice piqued Sirius's curiosity, and he sat up straighter to get a better look at the two friends. Potter was glaring hard at Lupin, but the smaller boy had such a pale, frightened expression on his face that Sirius was sure he might pass out any second. Unfortunately for Sirius, the confrontation ended there, as Professor McGonagall came to a halt right beside Lupin, her robes swishing around her legs as if she had rushed over from the other side of the classroom.

"MR. POTTER!" she shrieked, a bit more loudly than the situation called for, in Sirius's opinion. "DETENTION!"

Of course Sirius was pleased to see Potter getting into trouble, especially from McGonagall of all people, but that didn't help slake his curiosity any. Over the next few weeks he tried to observe his two roommates more closely, but he suddenly found that, where before he had wanted nothing more than to stay away from the two, now that he wanted to spy on them it was nearly impossible. Lupin didn't try to speak to him again, not even when Potter wasn't around, and besides that the entire school was soon revising for exams.

Sirius didn't see very much of his older Slytherin friends towards the end of term, as they had OWLs that year and spent the last month studying furiously for them. He did have a couple of encounters with Lucilla Lestrange, though, as his mother had sent the girl a beautiful Slytherin sweater for her birthday in May and directed Sirius to give it to her. Her letter had been nothing
short of baffling to her son.

_I heard from Bellatrix that it is dear Lucilla's birthday on the fifteenth. I do hope that you have been spending some time with her this term, as the two of you seemed to get along so splendidly on the platform in January. Please tell her that the sweater is from you for her special day._

Sirius had modified the message just a bit, as he had no idea what his mother was playing at but he did know that he wasn't about to make himself look like a fool in front of an older Slytherin he hardly knew. However, she had thanked him sincerely for the gift, and since then she had taken to speaking to him for a few minutes in the corridors or in the Great Hall whenever they encountered each other.

His own revisions for exams had gone particularly well, he though, and he was sure that he would be among the top of his class in most subjects. He was a bit iffy about Potions, as he had grown accustomed to reading Peter's notes on specific potions before brewing during regular class time, and it turned out that it was a bit difficult to prepare for the practical portion of the exam when he had no idea what potion they would be expected to brew. However, as far as he could tell his Forgetfulness Potion had turned out only a couple of shades off of the pure white it was meant to be, and the written portion of the examination had gone pretty well.

He knew that he had done much better in Charms and Transfigurations. In Charms they had to navigate a ball through an obstacle course including tight corners and floating hoops, and Sirius had managed to complete the course without bumping his ball into anything and then had made it perform a little spinning flourish to celebrate completing the practical.

In Transfigurations they had to transform a mouse into a snuffbox; they had been working on the transfiguration for the last weeks of class, with Professor McGonagall pushing her students to create increasingly elaborate snuffboxes. Sirius had watched Potter create a lovely box in Gryffindor red and gold with a drawing of a lion on top, and then he had one-upped his rival by modeling his own snuffbox after his new Gryffindor ring, complete with the color and texture of real gold and genuine-looking red gemstones set around a lifelike roaring lion's head which was protruding from the lid. It was much easier to transfigure something when one had a clear picture of the result in mind, and Sirius had spent enough time studying his ring to be able to almost perfectly replicate the lion from memory. Professor McGonagall had said that they would be awarded extra points for the beauty of their snuffboxes, and Sirius was quite sure that he must have managed the highest marks on the practical exam.

Astronomy was a breeze for him, of course, as the stars and constellations were considered quite important to the Black family in particular, and Herbology went well enough even though Sirius found it utterly boring. Janice quite enjoyed the subject, and since they were partners in class and often studied together in the library (with more studying and less chatting getting done the closer it got to exam time), Sirius felt that he had received a leg up without having to put in too much extra effort himself.

All in all, the end of term passed in much the same way as it had begun. He did determine that next term he would do his best to solve the mystery of what was going on between Potter and Lupin, and he was equally as determined to try and make friends with some of the Slytherins closer to his own age since it wouldn't be long before his fifth-year friends finished school. However, the anxiety of their first proper examination period as Hogwarts students had left enemies and potential allies alike just as busy as he had been, and there hadn't been any time for either arguments or introductions. Even Emmeline had seemed too distracted to always remember to glare whenever she saw him, even when he was walking with Janice.

Thus he boarded the Hogwarts express to return home for the summer holiday with a lot more
regret than he'd had about going home for Christmas. However, as he was sure of his acceptance from his family this time around and was excited about Bellatrix's wedding later that summer, he was a bit torn between wanting to stay at school a little bit longer and wanting to return to Grimmauld Place.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is having trouble visualizing Sirius's new ring or the snuffbox he created, this is the kind of lion I'm thinking of when I write about it, except as a ring, not a pendant:

As always, I appreciate the kudos, bookmarks, and comments, and the reviews in particular are what drove me to get this chapter out so much faster.
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay. This chapter gave me a bit of trouble, and I had a new job and moved apartments and so forth. Plus, as I told one reviewer, I keep getting distracted by things that I know are coming later, and they won’t leave me alone and let me write what I need to write for this chapter first.

But enough about that. I hope you enjoy the chapter!

Again, thank you to everybody who gives kudos, bookmarks, or, especially, comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day after Sirius returned from Hogwarts, he was still asleep at lunchtime, only a few strands of his silky hair visible from underneath the sheet he'd pulled over his head to block out the sunlight. Orion sent Kreacher to wake his son up at noon sharp, and the wake-up call earned the house-elf a nasty Pimple Jinx for his trouble. Orion quickly cured the elf of his boils and came upstairs to fetch his son himself.

Sirius wasn’t quite annoyed enough to risk raising his wand to his father, so he reluctantly got out of bed amidst a wild tangle of hair and a mass of grumbles.

Lunch was a relatively lively affair as far as meals at Grimmauld Place usually went, because everybody was excited to have Sirius home. Even Regulus seemed to have put aside his animosity in his eagerness to ask Sirius questions about Hogwarts, as if he had never heard about it from their older cousins. "But they're girls," he had said, as if it explained everything. But soon enough they all turned to their various pursuits, and Sirius could eat in relative peace.

Walburga had taken the seat next to his and was very nearly hovering over him as he ate, her own plate nearly untouched.

"Oh darling, you're so thin!" she fretted. "Do they not serve anything you like at Hogwarts? I will have to send a letter to that headmaster..."

Sirius hurriedly swallowed the bite he'd been chewing. "But Mother, I eat just as much as I always have."

"Probably more, I daresay," said his father, who had already finished his lunch and was peering at them over the top of a lengthy letter he was trying to read.

"But he's so thin, Orion! Just look at him!"

Orion smiled affectionately at her from across the table. "My dear, he is just at that age. Surely you remember how gangly I was, but I think you'll agree—and do correct me if I'm wrong, wife—that I filled out all right eventually."

Walburga blushed, and Sirius exchanged a disgusted look with his brother, who was sitting across from him.
"Oh, that age..." she echoed. She looked at her son with an expression he couldn't quite read.

Arcturus let his gaze travel speculatively over his eldest grandson. The boy had grown at least another two inches since he'd last been home at Christmas, and indeed both his body and face already seemed to have a little more definition than that of the spoiled, well-fed child they had sent off to Hogwarts last September.

"Son, I do believe that Sirius will take after your height, after all. Of course he was sensible enough to take after me in everything else..."

Orion made a sound of protest from behind his boring letter. "One of these days you will just have to admit that my children get their good looks from me."

The old argument made Sirius smile. The resemblance between his father and grandfather was striking, almost as striking as that between Mr. Malfoy and Lucius, and anyone else who had heard them talk as if they looked completely different from each other would think they were barmy.

After lunch Orion and Sirius headed to the foyer where they could Apparate to Diagon Alley. They appeared with a crack, but none of the patrons of the Leaky Cauldron paid it any mind. It seemed like most people were just now making their way to the pub for lunch. They had made their way through the throng all the way to the turnoff to Knockturn Alley before the crowd thinned enough for them to speak to one another.

"Ah, I hate the weekends. All the riffraff are about," the elder commented.

Orion sneered as they made their way around a family that appeared to have too many young children for the parents to handle. Sirius followed him into the narrow archway across from Gringotts that led down into the Dark alley. When they reached the bottom of the haphazard stone steps, Orion turned to give him a glance filled with warning.

"Now, you had better not mention to your mother that I brought you down here."

Sirius had no intention of doing any such thing. He also had no intention of mentioning to his father that his cousin Bellatrix had brought him down here last summer before he left for Hogwarts.

He shot Orion his most beautific smile. "Of course not, Father."

They continued down the rapidly narrowing alley past dimly lit shops and a few street vendors. They passed by a shop that had a display of what looked to be human body parts, then another with snakes slithering in the window. There was a large sign outside a classier looking shop advertising its stock of virgin's blood. Sirius couldn't help the sneer that curled at the corner of his lips when a tatty witch who appeared to be selling poisons out of a cart grinned at him as they walked by, revealing blackened, rotting teeth.

Then they rounded a sharp corner and found themselves in front of a relatively impressive window display. The sign advertised the shop as Borgin and Burkes, his Great-Great-Uncle Herbert's shop. Orion led Sirius towards the shop, sending a group of exiting young wizards scattering at his approach.

Sirius didn't want to stray too far from his father, if only because he was determined to hear what sort of errand they were on, but there were plenty of things to investigate nearby. There was a sarcophagus standing upright near the door, and Sirius attempted to peer into it through a small crack. He thought he might have seen bandages, but there wasn't enough light to be sure, so he quickly lost interest and wandered nearer the counter where his father was waiting. On the dusty
counter rested a crudely constructed doll nestled in a box that looked like a miniature coffin. A shelf behind the counter contained rows and rows of phials filled with liquids of various colors and consistencies. Sirius supposed they were poisons, and he strained his eyes and tried to read the labels in the dim lighting.

"May I help you?" rasped a voice from deeper in the shop, and both Blacks swiveled their heads around to see a stooped man appear around the corner of one of the shelves. He stopped short when he recognized them. "Ah, Mr. Black, how nice to see you again. And this must be young Mr. Black."

He peered at Sirius intently, and Sirius was distinctly uncomfortable under the watery gaze. He nodded politely anyway.

He was spared actually having to speak by his father's reply. "Yes, Mr. Borgin, this is Sirius. He's just returned home from his first year at school."

"You've decided to bring him along, have you?" said another voice. "You Blacks always did start them out young."

They both turned again to see another elderly man now arriving behind the counter from a door leading further back into the shop. He stood straight and proud, unlike his business partner, but he wasn't anywhere near as tall as the men in the Black family. He surveyed Sirius with curious brown eyes, and Sirius stared frankly back with his gray.

"Good afternoon, Uncle Burke," greeted Orion.

Mr. Borgin brushed past Sirius, causing him to take an involuntary step backwards when the man's oily black hair and bad breath came level with his face. The man didn't seem to notice. He shuffled around the counter and through the door to the backroom without further comment to anybody. They all watched him go in equal silence. Finally, when Uncle Herbert had closed the door behind his associate with a wave of his wand, he turned back to his visitors with a serious expression on his face.

"I hope you aren't here about that blasted Acromantula venom, Orion." Sirius watched his father raise one perfect, arrogant eyebrow in response. Burke hastily added, "You must have passed my owl in mid-flight on your way here. I had written to say that it will take at least a few more days to track it down in such high quantities, perhaps as long as a week or two."

The traces of anger in Orion's expression melted away as his features smoothed back into the icy hauteur he maintained in public. "Ah, well, no harm no foul, I suppose."

"But perhaps you'd be interested to see some of the new inventory? In particular, I have just obtained a beautiful necklace that my dear niece might be interested to own." Orion nodded his assent and Burke ducked so low that Sirius couldn't see him over the counter, then he popped back up and set a box on the glass surface, which he opened so gingerly that Sirius couldn't help leaning forward in anticipation. "Opals set in goblin-wrought platinum, as you see. It's cursed to kill anyone without pure blood who touches it. Fifteen people so far!"

Sirius peered at the necklace curiously. It didn't look like it had killed fifteen people, although certainly the sharp edges of the design gave off a sinister air even as they were beautiful.

Orion leaned over his son to get a good look at the piece for himself. "It certainly is lovely, and my wife would find it amusing to wear something that has killed so many of the impure..."

"I was planning on setting the price at 3,000 Galleons, but for you I think I could bump it down
... but Walburga isn't fond of the color blue," he continued as though Uncle Burke hadn't interrupted him.

Sirius took another look at the shimmering blue stones. "But Father, Cousin Belley likes blue. Perhaps she could have it as a wedding present."

He thought that Bellatrix would appreciate the sinister, dangerous beauty of the necklace, even if it hadn't had a curse on it that would kill anyone who wasn't a pure blood.

Uncle Burke looked a bit hopeful at Sirius's words, but Orion's laugh quickly wiped the expression off his face. Orion laid an affectionate hand on his son's shoulder.

"Sirius, 2,600 Galleons is a bit much for a wedding present. I'm afraid Bellatrix will have to depend on her own husband to buy her expensive ornaments like this." Uncle Burke did not look the least bit amused, but Orion turned to him with a grin and said, "Children have no sense of the value of a Galleon."

It was true, of course, in Sirius's case that he had never been unable to have whatever he wanted on account of price, so he did not know the value of a Galleon. If that was less true in the case of Herbert Burke's own children and grandchildren, and for the vast majority of wizarding children who would not inherit ancient Gringotts vaults of which only the goblins probably bothered to know the exact value, then he certainly would not have said so to Orion Black's face.

Orion stepped back from the counter, his hand still on his son's shoulder. "Now, if there's nothing else—"

"Is that a real Voodoo doll?" Sirius burst out, afraid that his father would drag him out of the shop before he could ask. "If it is, may I have it?"

"A Voodoo doll," echoed Uncle Herbert, incredulity leaking into his tone. He raised his head and looked at Sirius as if he didn't quite know what to make of him. "Yes, that's what it is. What possible use could you have for it, boy?"

"There are a few people at school I wouldn't mind torturing a bit."

If it was possible, Herbert Burke's already incredulous expression became even more openly surprised, but he managed to keep his voice reasonably neutral. "You wouldn't be able to use it against more than one person."

Sirius shrugged. "I'm sure I can narrow it down to one person."

Although Burke was usually not one to argue himself out of a sale, he found himself explaining, "It's a very crude kind of magic—just underdeveloped aboriginal hocus pocus, really. It will work poorly unless you manage to get some of the target's blood to soak into it. Hair and fingernails and personal items aren't as powerful as you would think."

"Oh," said Sirius, deflating a bit. He bit his lip for a moment, then mused, "Well, I'm sure I could manage to—"

His father's bark of laughter cut him off. "Really, son, semester-long detentions are bad enough. Just imagine your mother's reaction if you were expelled for forcible bloodletting!"

Sirius found himself propelled out of the shop before he had time to formulate a good argument in protest. He pouted as much as he could without being undignified about it, until they were finally
alone enough that he could inform his father in his most petulant tone, "I already had a lot of plans for that doll."

Orion laughed again in response, affectionately squeezing Sirius's shoulder again before he dropped his arm back down to his side.

"While your enthusiasm is commendable, you could hardly have managed to steal the Potter boy's blood without being noticed."

"Potter?" Sirius spat out in surprise. "Actually, I had been planning to use it on Rosier, and I'm sure Cissy or Belley would have helped me get some of his blood while he's at their house this summer."

"Rosier?" Orion echoed incredulously. "You don't mean Evan? I know your mother was pleased to hear that you had cursed the boy, but I had supposed he just got caught in the crossfire between you and that Snape creature. I thought you were friends."

Sirius scowled. "We were friends, but then he avoided me like I had Dragon Pox after my sorting."

Sensing that his son's good mood was rapidly failing, Orion decided that dropping the subject of Evan Rosier would be best for now. Instead he said, "Well, if you're really determined to cause trouble, you had better be more careful than carrying around a Voodoo doll in your school trunk. Perhaps you should ask your mother's advice on curses that are a bit less obvious."

By the time they had completed the rest of their shopping it was teatime. They settled down at an outdoor table in a posh little cafe located across from Twilfitt and Tattings, where they were soon interrupted by a happy, "Hello, Sirius!"

Sirius jerked in his seat, surprised to hear his name used so familiarly by a voice he didn't recognize. Not many of his friends and acquaintances actually used his given name, and certainly not many of the male ones. He almost immediately recognized William Avery weaving his way through the crowd, which was fortunately much sparser in this area of Diagon Alley than the main section, an attractive blond man following a few steps behind him.

Orion rose to his feet and held out his hand to the blond man. "Avery, how long has it been? And this must be William, Jr."

The boy smiled charmingly and held out his own hand to be shaken. "Please, sir, call me Will." He turned his smile on Sirius. "Father, Sirius is the one who cast that flawless Swelling Curse on Rosier's face, if you remember."

Sirius highly doubted that Mr. Avery would have forgotten once he'd been told. It wasn't as if there were multiple Blacks in Gryffindor who went around getting into fights with Slytherins. However, the man turned to assess Sirius as if he was just learning about the incident.

"The Swelling Curse is a nasty business, you know." Although the words were quite serious, the tone was conversational, almost light.

Sirius was not quite sure whether the man was praising him, scolding him, or just making a neutral comment, and therefore he was not quite sure how to respond. He settled for remarking, "So is betrayal, sir."

Mr. Avery's shrewd eyes bored into his for a few more seconds before he offered a tight smile.

"It is quite impressive that you were able to effectively cast it as a first year." He turned back to
Orion, who had been watching the exchange with just as much confusion as his son, unclear whether he should jump in on his son's behalf. "You must be proud."

Once it was clear that the man's intentions were friendly, Orion retook his seat and gestured for the Averys to join them.

"We are all very proud of Sirius," he said matter-of-factly. "Of course he must get his affinity for curse work from his mother."

Mr. Avery gave him a significant look. "Yes, it must be a family trait. Your niece, Bellatrix, is one of the most naturally talented practitioners I have met in recent memory."

Orion met the pointed stare with one of his own, but the younger Avery was in no mood to respect the tension between the adults. "It wasn't only the curse, though!" he reminded them, giving Sirius a genuine grin. "I thought for sure that Snape was going to get that hex off on you, but then you pulled your wand and Disarmed him out of nowhere! I've been wondering how you did it."

"Really?" asked Orion, turning his stare onto his son, a speculative gleam lighting his gray eyes. Sirius would have shrugged in response if they had not been in public. Will, for his part, was looking between father and son in complete confusion, and Sirius realized that he probably could not think of why Sirius would not have written to his parents to brag about the details at the first opportunity. It wasn't that Sirius didn't want his family to know what had happened; it was just that it had never really occurred to him before that he could have used the details of the encounter to impress people.

_I suppose the Sorting Hat was right_, he thought ruefully. _I'm really not a Slytherin._

He was saved from having to actually respond by Mr. Avery, who clearly had some sort of agenda for coming over to speak with the Blacks and was not in any mood to allow his son to ruin it.

"Son, weren't you nagging me all morning about looking at the new Nimbus 1001 prototype? Why don't you ask Mr. Black if Sirius can go with you?"

Sirius was not particularly keen on going anywhere with Will Avery, but he was even less keen on sticking around while the adults talked business when he could be looking at a new broomstick instead.

"Father, can I go?" he asked eagerly.

Orion nodded his assent, but a look passed between father and son as they silently agreed that he would absolutely not mention this to his mother under any circumstances, not even under the severest torture.

Quality Quidditch Supplies was on the other end of Diagon Alley, almost all the way to the Leaky Cauldron. Avery chattered away happily most of the way there; if he was bothered that Sirius wasn't responding, he never let it show. Finally, when he couldn't take it anymore, Sirius stopped and turned to face the other boy.

"Look, Avery—"

"Call me Will," the Slytherin interrupted with an insistent grin.

Sirius ran a frustrated hand through his thick black hair. "Look, Will, I don't know what your
game is here, but you can stop acting like we're best mates."

Avery looked momentarily taken aback. Then Sirius continued walking and left him standing there, and by the time he had caught up his usual grin was back in place.

"I'm not playing with you. I wish we had been able to get to know each other last year—Lestrange said that he would properly introduce us, you know, but then we all got caught up in exams—and I'm just taking the chance now."

"Why do you want to be friends now?" Sirius asked skeptically, although with less venom than before. He knew that Rabastan really had intended to introduce them sooner or later, since he had indicated as much after Sirius's confrontation with Evan Rosier in an empty classroom on the way to the library.

"Well I certainly don't want to be on your bad side!" Avery exclaimed with a laugh. "That hasn't worked out too well for Evan."

Sirius allowed the corner of his mouth to quirk up. "Just admit that you only want to get close to me to get close to Lestrange and Malfoy."

Avery laughed again. "I'd rather get close to your cousin. I'm half in love with her already and she's never even said a word to me."

"Don't let Malfoy hear you say that."

"Oh, he isn't half as intimidating as Narcissa. In fact, I'm pretty sure that he's scared of her."

Sirius's barked out his own laugh. "Don't let Malfoy hear you say that either."

He was sure that they could have continued, but they suddenly encountered a crowd that seemed to be at a standstill, and he realized that they had reached their destination. Witches and wizards of all ages were trying to press closer to the window display of Quality Quidditch Supplies, and the oohs and aahs from nearer the window could be heard clearly even over the loud chatter from the rest of the crowd. Sirius despaired that they would never be able to fight their way through and get a look at the prototype, and he was about to suggest that they go get ice cream or visit the joke shop instead of standing there being pressed against all sorts of who-knows-what-kind of people.

Then Will shouted from beside him, "Oi! Flint!"

Sirius's attention was turned to a group of large young men who had entered the fray from his and Avery's right. One of them, apparently Flint, was tall and pretty well built, but the other three were absolutely enormous. They appeared to be quite successfully (and brutally) shoving their way through the crowd towards the window. At Avery's shout, the group had turned to look in their direction.

"Flint and Brutus Goyle were seventh years last year," Avery explained as he lifted his hand in the air and waved furiously in the older boys' direction. "The younger Goyle and Crabbe will be fourth years next year."

It seemed like they had changed course to come nearer to where Sirius and Will were standing, and Will grabbed his arm suddenly and pulled him towards the group. It was slightly easier going sideways than it had been trying to go forward, and soon they were close enough that Sirius could make out Flint's large teeth and the coarse masses of hair that he supposed were meant to be the Goyle brothers' eyebrows. Suddenly Avery was wrenched from his grasp, and he gasped in surprise and—though he would never admit it in a million years—just a bit of fear at being left alone in such a large crowd.
Before he had time to worry too much, a large hand closed around the front of his robes and he found himself suddenly in midair. He flailed for a moment before he was planted rather firmly back on his feet right in front of a smirking Crabbe. He had been forcefully carried through the remaining crowd to join the rest of the Slytherins.

"Ah, thank you, Crabbe," said Will, who did not appear as shaken by the ordeal as Sirius was. He straightened his robes with one hand as he gestured towards his new friend with the other. "You all know Sirius Black."

Halfhearted grunts were offered in what Sirius assumed were meant to be greetings, but the older boys were clearly more interested in seeing the Nimbus prototype than in making new friends. He supposed it must have been some sort of Slytherin rule about sticking together that had inspired the older boys to help them, not any sort of sociability or real friendliness.

It turned out that it was immeasurably easier to make one's way through the crowd when following closely in the wake of four rather gigantic and cruel boys who didn't mind a bit of pushing and shoving and skull cracking in the name of getting a good look at a new broomstick. As they got closer and the crowd denser Sirius felt the need to grasp a handful of one of the Goyle brother's robes so as not to be left behind, but soon enough he found himself able to press against the shop window with his hair and clothing relatively intact despite the ordeal.

The Nimbus 1001 was gorgeous, all slender curves and slick edges. Sirius was immediately in love.

"Wow," breathed Flint, and Sirius was surprised to hear that his voice was quite a bit softer than his appearance would lead anyone to believe. Though that could have just been a result of the lovesickness.

Avery wrestled his way under Crabbe's arm and pressed his nose against the glass. "Nought to sixty in ten seconds!"

"Top speeds up to 120 miles per hour!" joined Sirius.

The boys all seemed to sigh as one.

Will sighed again, the sound coming out as if he were somewhat in pain this time. "I wonder how much it costs. I would give up birthdays and Christmases for the next ten years if I could have one!"

Crabbe snorted. "Even if you gave them up for the next twenty years I doubt that'd cover it. Your parents would probably have to clean out their entire Gringotts vault to get one."

Sirius was sure at first that it was an insult against the Avery family and that he would have to back up his new friend in a fight against Crabbe, though he was reluctant to do so and had too big a sense of self preservation to fight if any of the other boys also got involved. However, Avery didn't look the least bit insulted, and all of the other boys seemed to agree with Crabbe's assessment, too.

His uncertainty caused him to bite back his own remark about planning to ask for one as his going away present before leaving for Hogwarts in the fall.

He was partly relieved when he heard his father calling him from the other side of the crowd, but he was also partly sad to have to come away from the window. He said goodbye to the Slytherins, although he wasn't sure if they registered it as their attention was fully on the beauty before them, and made his way back through the crowd. Fortunately it was much easier to leave than it had
been to arrive, though he got plenty of nasty looks from people who apparently were not happy about the boys who had shoved their way to the front, and soon he found himself next to his father, who quickly whisked him away towards the Leaky Cauldron.

In the following weeks the summer settled into a routine of dividing his time between his family, lessons, and correspondence with his friends. Whereas last Christmas he had only exchanged a few owls with Peter to plan their trip to the league final, this summer he found himself writing almost constantly to not only Peter but also Janice, Lestrange, Avery, and also his cousins Cissy and Belley. He also exchanged occasional letters with Mulciber, who had been introduced to him by Avery, and even one or two with Malfoy. He had been worried at first that Aquila would be exhausted by the constant deliveries, but she actually seemed extremely happy to have a lot of work to do.

One morning found the Blacks around a silent breakfast table as they all attended to their various pursuits. Arcturus and Orion were sitting close together at one end of the table with their plates surrounded by stacks of correspondence that Sirius had gathered was regarding some upheaval in the Wizengamot.

"They don't seem to have anything in the way of actual evidence..." Orion was saying as he tried to simultaneously read a letter in each hand.

Arcturus was bent low over a particularly lengthy piece of parchment, but he looked up long enough to give his son an annoyed glare.

"It hardly matters if they have actual evidence if they can make the public think they do. I told the damn fools not to walk out when that Mudblood was voted Minister, that we could take care of it quietly, but did they listen? No! And now ten years and two Ministers later, of course they want back in and have ended up putting those of us who stuck it out and worked to unseat that upstart Mudblood back under scrutiny..."

Sirius tuned them out and turned back to his own stack of letters. Rabastan had written several sheets about the ongoing efforts to equip the entire Slytherin Quidditch team with Nimbus 1001s, which apparently was not going very well. Cissy's letter fluctuated between minute wedding details for Bellatrix's upcoming nuptials and flowery descriptions of things Lucius Malfoy had done or said or worn in her presence lately. Avery and Mulciber, who were apparently staying together at Mulciber's house for the moment, had written a joint letter describing their adventures and asking Sirius's opinion about various things he was sure they didn't really need his help with.

Peter was apparently stuck at home with nobody but his Mudblood mother for company, though he wrote that they were planning to travel to Ireland with her family the following week. Sirius thought that sounded absolutely awful, but he wasn't sure from the tone of Peter's letter whether he was looking forward to visiting the Muggles or not.

I've been studying my father's potions books a bit more since I've been home, began the concluding sentences of the letter, which Peter was lucky had actually caught Sirius's attention before he had thrown the parchment down in disgust. Have you mentioned them to your grandfather yet? I'd really like to get someone's opinion on them.

Sirius had forgotten to bring them up, in fact, but now that he had been reminded it didn't seem like a particularly good time to bother his grandfather. At least not unless Peter's father's potions books contained instructions on how to mitigate political disasters. He would have to ask later.

As he was eager to go upstairs and write back to his friends, he was ready to ask to be excused from the table. His mother was diligently making notes and muttering to herself about floral
arrangements, and Regulus had his face hidden in a Charms book that Sirius recognized from the beginning of his own lessons with Grandfather Arcturus, so it wasn't like he would be missed.

Kreacher appeared next to Orion, wringing his hands in evident anxiety. "A Mr. Dolohov is here to see Master Orion, although Kreacher tried to tell him that my master does not accept calls before eleven..."

Orion threw down the pieces of parchment he'd been holding. "Kreacher, move these letters to the study. If you mess up the stacks I will mount your head next to your mother's."

Walburga glanced up briefly from her sea of bridal magazines and letters to shoot a halfhearted glare at her husband, but the floral arrangements drew her attention back almost immediately.

"Come, Sirius," said Arcturus as he and his son rose from the table.

Regulus was so engrossed in his book, and no doubt in his quest to prove to his grandfather that he was a better wizard than his older brother, that he appeared not to even notice that Sirius had been invited to leave with the men when he had not. The three heirs departed the breakfast room in a line from eldest to youngest and made their way towards the front of the house.

Mr. Dolohov was a burly, dark-haired man who had chosen to stand at the window rather than sit on one of the sofas in the parlor. He turned when Arcturus greeted him to reveal a long face dominated by dark eyes, prominent eyebrows, and several days' stubble.

Orion stepped around his father to offer his own hand to the visitor. "Dolohov, thank you again for agreeing on such short notice."

Dolohov sat when his host gestured to the sofa across from the one he and Arcturus had claimed. "Not at all," he replied in a strong voice with just a hint of an underlying rasp. "It is not often that my students have shown such promise at such a young age."

Orion held out his hand to his son, and Sirius stepped next to the sofa, staring frankly at the stranger.

"We would have owled you to engage your services sooner," continued Orion, "but Sirius did not see fit to share the details of his little adventure with his parents. We hadn't thought it was much more than a schoolboy scuffle until Avery's boy told me the whole story."

Dolohov stared right back at Sirius. "Really? Are you shy, Mr. Black?"

The corner of Sirius's mouth turned up into a half grin that he couldn't suppress. "Certainly not, sir."

It seemed obvious now why Mr. Dolohov was here, but Arcturus, helpful as always, confirmed it. "Dolohov here has been engaged as your dueling instructor, Sirius," he explained. "You'll meet with him from nine to noon three days a week. You will, of course, continue your summer lessons with me, but I believe that we can cut them back in light of your new schedule."

Sirius's grin covered his entire face. "I thought that I would have to wait until after next year to learn dueling?"

"Most instructors would not take a student below second year," replied Dolohov before either of the Blacks could respond. "However, most potential pupils are not at the top of their class in all of the necessary subjects and have not already engaged in duels in the school corridors. Your cousin also assures me that you are a natural in the Dark Arts."
"Belley?" clarified Sirius. "I mean, Bellatrix?"

Dolohov nodded in confirmation, and Sirius wondered how a man who appeared to be near his father's age knew his cousin well enough to discuss him with her. He didn't notice the pinched look that Arcturus sent his son at this revelation.

There was not much more to talk about after that, and soon Sirius found himself alone with his dueling instructor in a large, long unused drawing room on the first floor that had been cleared of furniture except for a lone sofa shoved against the far wall. An hour later he was already a bit exhausted from having demonstrated various spells at Dolohov's request and, when the man did not think he had performed them perfectly, being put through drills until he had.

"All right, first thing's first," his tutor declared, running a rough hand through his dark hair. Sirius almost gaped at him and blurted out that he had thought they'd already started, but he managed to keep it to himself. Either not having noticed his student's reaction or simply not caring, Dolohov continued, "You need to learn how to refine your wand movements, become more efficient. Usually people who are suited to long wands like yours have the tendency to be more flamboyant and add flourishes to their casting, but we need to stamp that out of you."

He pulled out his own wand and indicated that Sirius should watch his movements. Sirius saw what seemed like the smallest twitch of his wand.

"What spell was that?" demanded Dolohov.

Sirius racked his brain for any spells that required such a small wand movement, but he couldn't think of any. Dolohov was apparently sick of waiting for a response, because he flicked his wand again in the same way. Suddenly the cushion they had purloined from the sofa rose several meters into the air.

"A non-verbal Wingardium Leviosa!" Sirius exclaimed, truly surprised. "But that didn't seem like a swish and flick at all!"

The man smiled, although it was the kind of smile that Rabastan Lestrange often used, the kind that made the recipient wonder if he was actually pleased or if he was about to attack.

"It was a swish and flick," he insisted. "It does not have to be pronounced or flamboyant in order to work. Only the smallest swish and the barest flick is required, even for charms, where the wand movements are so important."

"Then it can be even smaller and even barer if you're casting something else, like a curse? Or even if you're doing transfigurations?"

Sirius's mind was whirling with the implications, and he wondered why on earth the professors at Hogwarts always demonstrated and encouraged such showy wand movements if they weren't really necessary.

Dolohov apparently did not mind being interrupted, at least not as long as the interruption was intelligent. He nodded, then gestured towards Sirius's wand.

"The real advantage of having a longer wand is that there is so much less movement required in your fingers and wrists to produce the wand movements you want. You can cast almost anything with a tiny flick of your fingers."

Although lessons with Dolohov also included the basics of dueling, such as offensive versus defensive stances, as the weeks passed by Sirius found himself learning more than he had ever thought possible about all sorts of practical things that he could never have learned in a classroom.
Dolohov spent the first weeks almost constantly correcting the bad habits he had already developed, and Sirius was so excited to see how much more effectively he could do things he already knew that he didn't even mind that his tutor had yet to teach him any new spells.

Sirius had his dueling lessons on top of his lessons with Grandfather Arcturus, spending time with his family, and keeping up with his friends, and time seemed to fly. By the end of July, all of his friends were pressuring him to spend time together, and after a flurry of owls it was finally settled that they would meet up in Diagon Alley.

His mother had been absolutely horrified.

"Alone?" she had asked, her voice going several octaves higher by the time she had got out the whole word. "Impossible! I forbid it!"

"Now, my dear, do be reasonable," Orion had begun, but he had quickly changed his tone when his wife had turned a glare on him hot enough to melt goblin-forged steel. "Sirius is nearly thirteen, and he will be with a large group of friends," he had placated. "None of the other parents are going, and it would be embarrassing to him for us to tag along."

"Well, then I must love my son more than any of the other parents love theirs!" she had retorted stubbornly.

In the end Sirius had threatened not to go at all if he couldn't go alone, and Walburga had reluctantly agreed. She insisted to anyone who would listen that it was against her better judgment and that if her son ended up being kidnapped by Mudbloods or werewolves then it would be entirely his father's fault. Regulus seemed particularly hopeful about the possibility.

The morning of his trip his mother stayed in bed, which sent poor Kreacher into such a state that anybody would have thought his beloved mistress was at death's door.

His father pressed a Gringotts bag into his hand just before he stepped into the fireplace. "A reward for your marks last year and your progress with Dolohov this summer," he explained with a smile, and then Sirius practically threw himself into the Floo in his excitement.

He landed in the sooty fireplace of the Leaky Cauldron and was immediately greeted by Avery and Mulciber. Will was grinning like usual, but Nigel did not seem very excited to be there.

"Thanks again for agreeing to put up with Edgecomb and Pettigrew," he reiterated after they had gone through all the formal greetings. "I'm really not sure my mother would have let me come if they were the only ones who would be here. She isn't as understanding about the whole thing as my dad."

Mulciber scowled in his general direction. "Well, Edgecomb's all right, even if she's a girl. Pettigrew, though..."

His friend clapped him on the shoulder. "He can't be as bad as Snape, mate! We don't have to go home with him at the end of the day, either."

There was a crack of Apparition nearby, and suddenly Sirius found himself with an excited girl wrapped around his neck. His hands came up automatically to brace her against him, as she was standing on her tiptoes and leaning so much into him that he was afraid they'd fall over. He had time to take in the sweet smell of her thick curls before she pulled away, chattering happily and claiming one of his hands in her own. He had resigned himself to her penchant for hand holding long before they'd left school in June.

"I'm so glad you invited me today. I've missed you so much this summer! Oh, those robes look so
handsome on you; are they new?” The witch who had accompanied her cleared her throat, and
Janice turned to look at her as if she’d forgotten the older girl was there. "Oh, Sirius, this is my
older sister, Patricia. She finished Hogwarts two years ago. Don't worry, she's just going to do
some shopping before she has to be at work, so she won't bother us.”

"Hello," said Sirius, when he thought he could get the word in edgewise.

Patricia Edgecomb eyed him with an expression somewhere between curiosity and amusement.

"Hello," she echoed with a smile, glancing down at his and her sister's joined hands. She gave her
sister a look that Sirius couldn't read. "It was nice to meet you, but I'd better get going if I want to
be at work on time. Janice, I'll see you at home."

She'd barely taken her leave before Peter stumbled out of the fireplace and their group was
complete. There was some confusion when they reached the brick wall in the back of the Leaky
Cauldron, as they realized that none of them had actually entered the alley alone before. There had
been laughter all around when they realized that none of them had quite memorized the pattern
their parents normally did. With their five brains together they were able to figure it out, but it had
been touch and go there for a minute.

The crowd around Quality Quidditch Supplies had thinned considerably since the last time Sirius
visited, but there was still a throng of not inconsiderable size trying to peer into the window.

"Is that the Nimbus 1001?" Peter exclaimed with about as much enthusiasm as Sirius had ever
seen from him. "Let's go have a look!"

Malciber shot him a dour glare. "We've all already seen it, thanks anyway."

Peter and Will both glared at the other boy, though surely for different reasons.

"Well, you can all stand out here arguing if you like, but I'm going in," Sirius declared, then he
and Janice made their way around the crowd and towards the door to the shop.

"Going in?" Will echoed incredulously.

The three boys exchanged confused glances and then turned nearly as one to catch up with Sirius
and Janice, who had already outstripped them by several meters.

Nigel came abreast of Sirius and shot him an incredulous sidelong look. "They're really strict, you
know. They're not going to let us inside just to look at the display."

But Sirius ignored him and approached the burly wizard who was guarding the door to the small
Quidditch shop. The wizard eyed him suspiciously, his dark eyes roving over Sirius and his
companions. "Paying customers only," he grunted.

"Of course, sir. I'm here to buy a broomstick."

He could hear his friends reacting behind him and could only imagine their expressions. It was
clear that the guard didn't believe him at all. He narrowed his eyes and glared hard at Sirius, who
smiled back confidently.

"Fine," he grunted again. "But if you don't buy anything, I'll toss you all right back out!"

He moved aside, and Sirius led the group through the narrow doorway. The inside wasn't
anywhere near as crowded as the outside, but there was still a fair number of customers. Most of
them appeared to be buying Quidditch gear or broomstick servicing kits, but a few were eyeing
the displays of broomsticks. He looked up to see James Potter standing next to the display of Comets, openly gaping at him in surprise. Sirius was able to control his surprise at seeing the other boy a little better, but he felt Janice tense beside him and tighten her grip on his hand.

She tore her gaze away from their classmate and looked up at him. "Is it true? Are you really going to buy a broom?"

In lieu of responding, Sirius tugged her towards the Nimbus 1001 display. His friends trailed behind like a row of ducklings. If ducklings were to elbow one another to try to get a better position to look at a racing broom.

The Nimbus looked even more beautiful up close, and Sirius reached out to run his hand lovingly down the slim handle. The crowd outside the window was following his every move with their eyes, and the other customers inside the shop had all stopped what they were doing to look over curiously.

"Now, children, if you only wanted a better look at the Nimbus then I'll have to ask you to leave," scolded the shopkeeper, who had turned away from the Potters and was rushing towards their group as if he expected them to turn into hooligans and destroy his window display any second.

His friends all looked to Sirius to respond, their faces all in various states of disbelief and awe.

He really ought to have put on his most haughty expression and made the man sorry that he had ever treated a Black any such way, but Sirius was so happy that he smiled. "Sir, I'm here to purchase one."

The man stopped short, his eyes taking in every aspect of Sirius's appearance, from his hopeful expression to the obvious quality of his robes and the expensive emerald clasp at his throat.

"Where are your parents?"

"At home, Sir," replied Sirius, his patience beginning to lapse just a bit. He held up his father's Gringotts moneybag. "They gave me more than enough money for the broom."

After that the transaction went very quickly. The other customers in the shop seemed extremely interested and listened as Sirius chose the features he wanted and instructed that it be delivered to Grimmauld Place when it was ready. All of the other children in the shop, with the exception of Potter, had left their parents' sides and wandered closer to the counter, and it seemed like the entire shop waited with baited breath until the Galleons finally exchanged hands.

"You're a hero, Black!" Will declared once they had left the shop. "You had better invite me over to ride it right away when it's delivered, or I'll never forgive you!"

Peter shoved his way between Avery and Mulciber to walk by Sirius's side.

"Did you see the look on Potter's face?" he crowed, his normally dull eyes shimmering with mirth and excitement. "You couldn't have upstaged him any better if you'd planned it!"

The rest of the morning wasn't nearly as exciting, but they still had a good time together. Will's parents had given him permission to buy a familiar, and they all had great fun helping him pick out a white cat with gray markings. Mulciber had lost some of his stiff upper lip in all the hullabaloo of the day, and he was perhaps the most eager of all of them to visit Gambol and Japes. He gravitated towards the particularly painful and humiliating pranks, and Sirius made a mental note that he would not like to give the Slytherin boy a reason to dislike him.

It was Peter who announced a couple of hours into their adventure that his mother expected him
home for lunch. Although the Slytherins weren't sad to see him go, they were much politer in their farewells than they had been in their greetings earlier that morning, which Sirius took as a good sign.

After he was gone, Janice leaned up on her toes to murmur in Sirius's ear, "Do you think we'll be able to spend any time alone together?"

"Alone?" Sirius repeated, not bothering to modulate the volume of his voice in his surprise.

"Oooh, Nigel, it looks like we aren't wanted here anymore," cooed Will, a teasing grin lighting up his features.

Janice blushed and Sirius opened his mouth to protest, but Mulciber waved him off. "No, no, we don't mind."

"We were about to head off anyway, no worries," said a still-grinning Avery.

"Have fun, kids," added Nigel as they backed away, both still smiling like loons.

Janice seemed embarrassed but particularly pleased with the results nonetheless. She asked him if he wanted some ice cream, but as she was already leading him towards Fortescue's by the arm it seemed to him that she would have done better to simply say, "I want some ice cream." Not that he would have said no, of course. It was just that he was a bit annoyed.

After they ordered, she made no indication that she was planning to reach for her own money. Sirius paid for them both, a quizzical eyebrow raised all the while, and allowed himself to be led to one of the small booths, where she sat right next to him even though the other side was completely free.

He was beginning to get the impression that she considered this to be some kind of date.

The next week there was a picnic planned for the young people to celebrate Bellatrix and Rodolphus's upcoming wedding. It seemed that Grandfather Pollux was anxious for his grandchildren to use the opportunity of Bellatrix's alliance to all become very close to the Lestranges. To set this melding of their families in motion (and no doubt to make the biggest impression possible), he offered them the use of the Tutshill Tornadoes' stadium for their outing.

Sirius and Regulus were waiting anxiously in the downstairs parlor for Belley and Andy to arrive, as they would be Apparating them to the stadium. Sirius had his nose stuck in a book that Dolohov had given him—*Self-Defensive Spellwork*, as his instructor insisted that the best offense was a good defense and that he would not be allowed to practice any advanced offensive magic until after he had proven that he could hold his own defensively—but he looked up when he heard his aunt mention his friend's name.

"What about the younger Lestrange boy? Rabastan, isn't it?"

Aunt Lucretia had come home from France a couple of weeks ahead of her husband in order to help the other women in the family with all the final preparations for the wedding, although it seemed to Sirius like all they'd been doing was gossiping.

Walburga set her teacup on the saucer that Kreacher was holding in his outstretched hands.

"Well, he is certainly under consideration, but it would really be preferable for Andromeda to make a match with an older son. Plus we already have one girl marrying into the Lestrange family, and it would be unfortunate to lose this opportunity to align ourselves with another family."
"Surely the pickings cannot be *that* slim," rejoined Aunt Lucretia.

"Certainly not!" cried Walburga. "It is just that she finds something wrong with every potential husband. The Flint boy's teeth are too large. The Goyle boy is too fat. The Selwyn boy is too short. As her mother has already told her, she had seven years at Hogwarts to find someone who suits her tastes, and it's no one's fault but her own if she squandered all that time."

Her companion hummed in agreement. "At least she *is* beautiful, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find her *someone*, even if he isn't as handsome or rich as her sisters' husbands."

Walburga reached for one of the biscuits that Kreacher had laid out on the coffee table, but before her arm was halfway extended the house-elf squeaked and one of them appeared suddenly in her hand. She retracted her arm and continued talking without missing a beat.

"At least her sisters have done very well for themselves. Perhaps Andromeda will meet someone at the wedding."

A thunderous crack came from the entrance hall. All of the occupants of the parlor jumped in surprise and turned just in time to see Bellatrix stalk into the room waving a piece of parchment in one hand and clutching her wand in the other.

"The NERVE of that woman!" she screeched. She thrust the parchment into her aunt's hand. "The GALL!"

Walburga read the letter calmly while her niece fumed next to her chair.

"Oh dear," she said when she had finished. "Well, it seems to me like she is making an honest inquiry. 'I *would* hate you to think that I am ignoring your invitation when it was most likely the result of a lost owl.' That seems perfectly reasonable if she really did expect to get an invitation."

Bellatrix's curls were flying wild around her, as if she had never finished her hair before storming to Grimmauld Place. "Why would THAT WOMAN think that she would get an invitation?"

"My dear, it is entirely possible that she simply doesn't know how her son has spread her opinions around so openly, and as your great aunt she otherwise would have no reason *not* to expect to attend your wedding," Lucretia tried to placate her.

"That probably is it, Bella," said her sister, who had appeared in a much more respectable fashion a few seconds after her sister. "Sirius told us about it at a private dinner, and we haven't publicly denounced her."

Walburga took out her wand, and with a few waves she had tamed her niece's curls into the arrangement the young woman usually preferred. Bellatrix seemed surprised, but the action must have calmed her temper somewhat, because she loosened her grip on her wand and seemed to let their words sink into her mind.

Her aunt took her hand gently. "Bella dear, you shouldn't worry about such things so close to your wedding. Take the boys and go enjoy your picnic. I will take care of this unpleasant business personally."

Sirius hadn't thought that the day could get any better, but after hearing that conversation he was practically floating as he walked back to the foyer clutching Bella's arm. Even the long Apparation couldn't dampen his good mood, though he was undeniably glad that his cousin had calmed down and hadn't Apparated as violently as she had when she'd arrived at Grimmauld Place. He was still grinning from ear to ear when they walked out onto the Quidditch pitch.
The first order of business was to join Rabastan and Lucius off on the edges of the group so they could compare their broomsticks. Of course they were all identical except for the different names engraved on the handles—"I can't tell you how annoying it is to share the same initials with your brother," complained Rabastan. "How are we supposed to know which things belong to whom?"—but that didn't stop the three from comparing them.

Sirius couldn't help but notice that Rodolphus kept looking over at them whenever Bellatrix was distracted, and he figured that the older man must wish desperately that he could join them and talk about broomsticks instead of having to stick around for whatever conversation his fiancée was having.

"Probably about wedding arrangements, poor sod," commented Malfoy.

Lucius himself appeared luckier in that regard, since Cissy seemed perfectly happy to let him go off and talk about broomsticks while she blatantly admired his form from afar.

Soon enough their comparisons turned into bragging, and their bragging turned into a challenge. Rabastan insisted that he hadn't been stupid enough to try to race Malfoy since at least their third year, but Sirius was eager to push his Nimbus to its limits anyway, so he easily let himself be cajoled into agreeing.

They circled the pitch at breakneck speed, and he knew that his mother would probably have a heart attack if she could see it. He had an advantage because he was much lighter than Malfoy, but the Slytherin had four years of experience as a Seeker so in the end it was really no contest. Sirius alighted a few meters away from the group perfectly happy to have lost, his pale cheeks still flushed with a mixture of exhilaration and windburn and his hair in absolute disarray. (Lucius's longer hair was in such a state that Sirius figured it would take two house-elves at least an hour to set it to rights, but Cissy seemed to appreciate it.)

The group began cheering and complimenting them as soon as they were within earshot.

"You were very good, Siri," praised Bellatrix. "You should definitely try out for the Quidditch team."

"Oi! Put a sock in it, you hag!" exclaimed Rabastan.

"Traitor!" joined Lucius, pointing an accusing finger at Bellatrix. "He's in Gryffindor, if you've forgotten!"

Bellatrix looked absolutely enraged. "Hag?" she yelled. "Traitor? How dare you call me that!"

The entire group tensed, and Sirius actually went so far as to take a step back from Malfoy so he wouldn't get caught in the crossfire.

She hit Lucius with a jet of silver light, and in the next second Rabastan's elder brother had hit him with the same. It happened so quickly that Sirius hadn't even seen them draw their wands, and they certainly had not uttered any incantations. Both boys doubled over in uncontrollable laughter, clutching their stomachs and struggling to catch their breaths. The entire group soon joined them, until a minute or two later when Cissy had had enough.

"Honestly, Bella, let them up before they asphyxiate!"

They lifted the Tickling Charms reluctantly.

Rodolphus helped his brother off the ground and clapped him hard on the back. "That'll teach you
to call my woman a hag, you ponce."

Both boys were rather red and had to wipe the tears from their cheeks (Cissy helped Lucius with this task, taking quite a bit more care than was strictly necessary), but they were none the worse for wear.

It was quickly determined that anyone who wanted to would be allowed to take the Nimbuses for a spin, and the afternoon was wiled away with broomstick races, delicious food, and happy chatter. Sirius had just plonked down onto one of the enormous magically cushioned blankets when Rabastan joined him, fresh from helping Andy properly mount his Nimbus and take off uncertainly into the air.

"Flying really isn't her strong suit, is it?" he asked rhetorically, flopping onto his back so he could watch the others flying above them.

"No," agreed Sirius. Then before he could stop himself, he blurted, "Do you want to marry her?"

"Morgana's tit, Sirius! Why would you think that?"

The older boy turned onto his side and propped his head up on his elbow in time to see his young friend blush. Sirius was just a bit shocked at the language the Slytherin had used, and he couldn't help the slight flush that suffused his cheeks. Rabastan looked at his flushed face in a way he couldn't read.

He rushed to explain, "My mother said that Andy's considering marrying you, so I thought you must have asked her."

Rabastan's eyebrows lifted high onto his forehead. "Really, she is?"

Then he bit his lip, though Sirius couldn't have said what the expression on his face meant.

"I'm sure your mother would be very unhappy that you told me that," he finally said. "They're probably just tossing around all the possibilities because they're worried she's finished Hogwarts with no suitor in sight. I didn't ask her, though, and I don't plan to."

Sirius nodded. He was inexplicably pleased to hear that. Then another thought occurred to him, and he inquired, "Are you planning to ask some other girl?"

"None of the girls are exactly my type, mate." He grinned at Sirius in a way that the younger boy was sure meant that he was supposed to understand something more than he did.

"Well, won't your parents make you get married anyway, even if there isn't a girl you really want to marry?" he asked to cover up the fact that he wasn't really sure what Rabastan was trying to tell him.

The Slytherin shrugged one of his broad shoulders. "I'm only the second son, so I have a lot more leeway than my brother does... Or than you do," he added after a moment, and his expression clouded over. "Speaking of which, why didn't you invite your girlfriend today? Edgecomb, is it?"

"Gah!" Sirius exclaimed, tossing his hand in the air dramatically. "I never asked her to be my girlfriend!"

Rabastan insisted on hearing the entire story after that, and when Sirius was done the Slytherin was laughing almost as hard as he had been under the effects of the Tickle Charm.

"So she just grabbed hold of you and wouldn't let go, did she? Well, I guess I can't blame her for
that, seeing as you're such a handsome bugger." He poked Sirius in the side playfully. "Besides, give her a couple of years and she'll probably grow a set of knockers as big as all of her sisters have, and then you'll be glad to have her around. You know, if you're into those kinds of things."

"Rabastan Lestrange!" reprimanded a high-pitched voice, and both boys turned to see that Andy had come to a stop a few feet from them and was hovering quite uncertainly in place on Rabastan's broom. "Don't say things like that to my baby cousin! And help me off this blasted thing before I break my neck!"

The Slytherin laughed unapologetically, but he sprang up immediately to help her. Sirius was certain that he was much more worried about what she might do to his broomstick than what his broomstick might do to her.

Grandfather Pollux's country manor was done up even more splendidly than Sirius was used to seeing it. The large stone house seemed to shimmer under the pinks, purples, reds, and oranges of the sunset, but the sunlight had faded enough that the lights inside the house sparkled through the picture windows. Sirius could clearly see the chandeliers in the ballroom from his place in the rows of chairs lined up in the formal garden nearest the house.

There had been a low, consistent murmur from the crowd ever since they'd begun to arrive, even after taking their seats. From what Sirius could gather, everyone was excited to witness the binding between the Noble Houses of Black and Lestrange, but they were even more excited to see what fine wine and other delicacies the Blacks had arranged for the reception.

Beside him, Sirius felt his brother shift uncomfortably in his seat. Regulus whispered, "When is it going to start?"

"Soon, dearest," Aunt Lucretia murmured back.

"Quiet!" hissed Walburga, barely loud enough for any of them to hear since she was making an effort not to be overheard by any of the other guests.

She needn't have worried, though, because no sooner had she spoken than the noise swelled louder for a few moments and then died down into silence as the music changed. Everybody turned to watch an elderly couple walk elegantly down the aisle. They took their seats on the groom's side and were soon followed by all of the other grandparents of the bride and groom. The couples walked down the aisle one at a time, in Sirius's opinion, took their sweet time. Probably just because they enjoyed being the center of attention.

Grandfather Pollux and Grandmother Irma were the last of them. "Hmph!" grumbled Pollux as he eyeballed the elder Rosier couple, whose seats were just beside his and his wife's.

Sirius had to hide his smirk at the fact that his grandfather couldn't even keep his opinion about his son's in-laws to himself in the middle of their granddaughter's wedding, not even when he was being watched by everybody who was anybody in British magical society. Sirius felt his mother stiffen beside him, clearly displeased, but he could hear his Uncle Alphard disguising a chuckle as a cough from a few seats further down.

By the time Rastaban and Adolpha Lestrange had taken their seats in the first row, the lady's bejeweled hat glittering wildly in the fading sunlight, and Aunt Druella had taken her seat after having been escorted by a young man Sirius didn't recognize, he was already getting quite bored of all the pomp and circumstance.

Rodolphus and Rabastan appeared suddenly from somewhere to the side and made their way
across the front of the audience towards the altar. They were dressed in almost identical dress robes, with only the flashy emerald pin in the elder's lapel giving away his status as the groom. The lightweight Slytherin green material of their robes hugged their stout bodies in a much more formfitting design than Sirius had ever seen before—certainly much more modern and daring than any of the other robes he'd seen tonight—and he was surprised that Aunt Druella and Mrs. Lestrange had allowed it.

The groom stood proud and stiff facing the Ministry official, but his younger brother turned to scan the crowd in a disinterested sort of appraisal, clearly just as bored by the whole thing as Sirius was. Sirius smiled, imagining exactly what sorts of cruel, hilarious comments must be running through the older boy's mind as he took in the surfeit of elaborate dress robes and even more elaborate hats.

When Rabastan's gaze finally landed on him, he was rewarded with a brief grin in return before the best man seemed to remember himself and schooled his expression into one of appropriate solemnity for the occasion.

Lucilla Lestrange and Narcissa, wearing identical airy, knee-length dresses, were escorted down the aisle by two young men, one of them the one who had helped Aunt Druella to her seat earlier. Sirius supposed that he must be one of the French Lestrange cousins. Andromeda walked down the aisle alone, dressed in a floor-length gown that was the same light-green color as the bridesmaids' dresses.

Then another murmur went through the crowd as the music changed again, and all eyes turned as one to watch as Uncle Cygnus and Bellatrix appeared at the head of the aisle.

Sirius had never given much thought to clothing, but even he could tell that his cousin's wedding gown was an quite unusual piece. The entire thing was covered in ruffles and lace that would have been quite traditional for a wedding gown if it hadn't been almost scandalously form-fitting in the bodice down through her hips. Bellatrix's long, thick curls had been arranged intricately on her head with sparkling emerald pins so that the deep V in the back of her dress was uncovered. Sirius thought that she had never looked so glamorous, which was really saying something when it came to Bellatrix.

The ceremony turned out to be only marginally more exciting than the processional before it. Sirius found himself wondering why on earth people seemed to get so excited about weddings, which seemed perfectly, dreadfully dull to him. The most exciting part of the whole thing was when the elderly wizard presiding over the ceremony said something about the couples' supposedly solemn and sober states of mind upon entering into their bond, and he and Rabastan had locked eyes.

The older boy's full lips formed the word perfectly. *Nutters!*

Sirius was sure that no one else had noticed, but he had thought he might burst out laughing in the middle of the wedding.

Bellatrix would surely have murdered him, if his mother hadn't done it first.

Afterwards the guests were free to mill around the gardens or through the ballroom for a cocktail hour before dinner was served. Regulus had already been taken home, as he was deemed too young to stay for the cocktail party. After the third conversation full of almost exactly the same small talk, Sirius decided that he envied his brother for getting to leave so early. Finishing his homework for the upcoming term would probably have been more fun than enduring answering the same dull questions.
He finally escaped from his parents' sides as they were waylaid by yet another couple that had stopped them with the same banal greetings as all the others had. He ducked around his father's side as Orion was distracted by an overly exuberant handshake and began to make his way as inconspicuously as possible towards the door leading to the garden. He thought that some fresh air would do him some good, and maybe it was less crowded outdoors.

It might have been his imagination, but as he picked his way carefully through the crowd he could have sworn that people were whispering about him as soon as he passed by. While this time last year he might have assumed that they were just speculating about the his fortune or how tall he'd grow up to be, now he was sure that they were gossiping about his sorting and whether he had truly been accepted back into the fold.

Maybe walking away from his parents hadn't been the best idea after all. Surely it seemed odd that he was by himself and not with his family?

He considered turning around and going back the way he had come, but he quickly dismissed the idea since he thought it would look like he was retreating with his tail between his legs if he changed his mind mid-walk.

A quick glance around the room revealed that Grandfather Pollux was holding court in the center of the room, no doubt taking the opportunity to brag about the marriage and accept compliments on the general splendor of the arrangements. Sirius was unwilling to join him, since he had the tact of a rogue Bludger and would surely bring up the very subject Sirius wanted to avoid.

Aunt Druella and Uncle Cygnus were standing by the doors where they could best greet all of their guests as they entered the ballroom, but Sirius knew that he would be in the way there. He couldn't catch sight of any of the rest of his family through the throng of expensive fabrics and jewels.

Sirius had determined that he had better just ignore the whispers and make his way out to the garden as he'd originally planned, when a large arm suddenly crashed down around his shoulders.

"Ah, Black, you can't go anywhere without making a spectacle of yourself, can you?" asked Rabastan, his cold public voice filled with something uncharacteristically warm.

Sirius bit back a laugh that was half humor and half sheer relief.

"I don't see where you have any room to point fingers there, Lestrange."

Rabastan smiled, showing his teeth. He always had an air of underlying menace about him, even when he was smiling, but Sirius fancied that he could see genuine amusement and affection in the dangerous lines of Lestranges' face.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Rabastan replied matter-of-factly. "Everybody knows that subtlety is my strong suit."

Sirius turned to shoot him a look full of disbelief. From this close, he could see that the fabric of the Slytherin's sinfully tight-fitting robes appeared to have been sewn using thread made of real gold. The better to show off the Lestranges' wealth, Sirius supposed. He couldn't keep his lips from quirking up into a smile.

"Oh, yes, of course. Do you have any advice for me, Oh Prince of Subtlety?"

Rabastan leaned his head down so that his breath ruffled the hair near Sirius's ear. "My advice is to stop giving a fuck what they think."
Sirius reared back in surprise at the harsh language, or at least he would have if the muscular arm wrapped around his shoulders hadn't held him in place. He settled for swiveling his head the rest of the way around to scold Rabastan for saying any such thing in public of all places, even if he had whispered it lowly enough that the society matrons probably hadn't been able to hear. He found himself almost brushing noses with the older boy, who waited a few moments longer to straighten and pull away, an expression full of amusement and something unidentifiable passing over his features.

"Oh, do leave him alone, Rabastan," his best friend interrupted as he appeared at Sirius's other side. "Weddings are tedious enough without having to listen to whatever ideas are in your thick head."

Rabastan laughed. "Prat."

"Ponce," Malfoy retorted immediately.

Mercifully, the older boys led him away to a quieter corner of the ballroom, which in addition to being out of the crowd also had the advantage of being right next to the door leading to the kitchens. They could grab goblets of wine and various hors d'oeuvres right as they came out instead of having to fight with the rest of the crowd.

"Who's that bird with your father, Lucius?" Lestrange asked around a bite of some sort of mushroom dish that he'd plucked off a tray as it went by.

Sirius and Lucius both turned to look in the direction he'd indicated with his wine glass. Abraxas appeared to be engaged in a rather heated, whispered discussion with an extremely beautiful woman with dark skin and an elegant gown.

"Oh, her," said Lucius with a roll of his gray eyes. "Celeste Something-or-Other. I don't remember what she likes to call herself now, given that she's been married twice already."

Rabastan whistled. "That Celeste? She's not got her claws into your father, has she?"

Lucius chuckled low in his throat. "No, he isn't looking to be the third husband that dies under mysterious circumstances, but it's not for her lack of trying."

Sirius watched the woman point a long fingernail at Abraxas Malfoy's face, obviously furious with him about something.

"Is that why she's angry at him, because he won't marry her?"

Lucius snorted rather inelegantly. "I imagine she's angry because he's been shagging her but didn't invite her to accompany him to this wedding, or to any other event. She must have finally realized that he won't be buying the cow."

Sirius was beginning to come to terms with the fact that the older boys and the men were much different in private together than they were in public, or with women and children. Ever since the first time he had been allowed to join his father and grandfather after dinner, he had increasingly been getting used to the topics of conversation and the swearing, but he was still not entirely used to it. Therefore, he gaped openly at Lucius for a moment before he was able to control his expression.

Rabastan laughed, obviously not the least bit surprised or offended by either the subject matter or the language. "He's been fucking her?"

"Vigorously, as I've had the great misfortune to hear once or twice."
"Well, I can't blame him, mate," said his friend, though he offered a sympathetic grimace at the idea of having to hear one's parent in the act. "Pretty young witch going after an older wizard like that, hoping to get her claws into his fortune... It would have been positively un-Slytherin of him not to take advantage of the situation."

They watched Celeste Something-or-Other stomp away from the elder Malfoy with a scowl on her gorgeous face. He watched her go with an inscrutable expression, then turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

Lucius looked like he might express a further opinion on the subject of his widowed father's affair, but at that moment his girlfriend appeared at his side and claimed his arm, and thus Sirius knew that all discussion of the subject was dead.

Lucilla Lestrange had appeared with her, and she claimed Sirius's arm, apparently not at all bothered by the fact that he'd never offered it.

"Why are you boys hiding in this corner?" she asked suspiciously.

Cissy leaned against her boyfriend's arm, staring up at him adoringly and seemingly totally unconcerned with any conversation going on around them.

"My Aunt Lucretia wants to meet you," she told him seriously. Then she giggled a bit, and Sirius realized that she was a bit drunk. "Well, you know, she isn't really my aunt; she's Uncle Orion's sister, so really she's a very distant cousin."

Lucius gazed down at her in amusement. "I would love to meet her."

"Oh good, because her husband is the British ambassador to France, you know, and he could be ever so helpful..." her voice trailed off as she led her wizard further away from their small group.

Sirius and Rabastan shared a look of amusement, but it was cut short when the latter's sister spoke again.

"Really, Rabastan, I don't want to know what Mother would say if she saw you standing over here like a great fool instead of mingling with someone important."

Rabastan shrugged carelessly. "I'm sure she would say, 'Rabastan, why are you standing over here like great fool instead of mingling with someone important?'''

Sirius had to forcefully bite down the laugh that threatened to escape from his mouth at his friend's unflattering impression of his sister's voice.

Lucilla sniffed disdainfully, not at all amused. "Well, you shan't be allowed to corrupt poor Sirius, at least, by trapping him alone with you in a dark corner. Come along, Sirius."

She yanked him forward by the arm, and he really had no recourse except to go along with it, no matter how annoyed he was. His parents would not be pleased if he caused a scene by forcefully wrenching his arm away from her. He looked back longingly at Rabastan, who was watching them go with an expression twisted up with anger and, if Sirius was reading him correctly, hurt.

The older boy gracefully snatched another full goblet of wine from a tray as it passed by him. He offered a silent toast in Sirius's direction and then threw his head back and drank deep.

Sirius turned away with a sigh and tried to keep his expression neutral instead of glaring at Lucilla Lestrange like he wanted to. She was leading him back towards the glittering crowd and, he
knew, the dreadfully dull conversation, if he was being generous enough to even call it conversation.

*When Cissy and Malfoy get married,* he thought to himself, *I'm going to pretend to be deathly ill.*

Chapter End Notes

If you Google wedding gowns from the 70s, you will see that they're generally rather loose-fitting, full-bodied numbers. I imagine Bellatrix wearing something more like our modern wedding dresses, perhaps not anything as dramatic as a mermaid but maybe a dropped waist. Something that would not be considered scandalous or too-tight or too-sexy at all by today's standards, but that probably would have been toeing the line in pure-blood England in 1972.

The rest of the notes today are all about money and cars. What fun subjects!

3,000 Galleons is about £15,000 (assuming the exchange rate doesn't vary much from the £5 per Galleon we've been told, although in real life it would), which if converted from 1972 values into today's values would be about £170,000 or $280,000. 2,600 Galleons in today's values would be about £150,000 or $250,000. I'll leave it to you to decide if the necklace was really worth that much or if Burke was just trying to swindle a wealthy customer.

I think we can conclude from talk about broomsticks throughout the series and in Quidditch through the Ages that broomsticks are a bit like cars. There are some basic everyday type models (e.g. basic Toyotas or Fords), some higher-end models (e.g. Mercedes or Bentleys), some "affordable" sports cars (e.g. Corvettes or Vipers), and then the supercars (e.g. Ferraris, Bugattis, McLarens, Lamboorghinis). There seems to be a category or brand of broomsticks that roughly correlates to the classes of cars. For example, Comets seem to fall somewhere between the luxury cars and the sports cars. The Nimbus brooms were racing brooms that were specifically made for high performance sports and were miles ahead of any other brooms on the market from the 60s to the 90s (when the Firebolt was introduced), so I think it's safe to say they're the equivalent of supercars and would come with the price tag. (Interestingly, in real life the late 60s and early 70s saw the rise of the real supercar, just like the Nimbus being introduced in the late 60s in Harry Potter.)

This would explain why Harry thought to himself that he would have to clean out his entire Gringotts vault to get the Firebolt, and why he didn't immediately order a new broomstick (be it a Nimbus 2000, 2001, or Firebolt) when his broomstick was destroyed in Prisoner of Azkaban, and instead spent weeks riding the school brooms and borrowing a copy of Which Broomstick? from Wood to look at his options. It seems that he actually wouldn't have been able to afford a Nimbus or Firebolt and still have much money left over, or else surely he would have ordered the best one he could afford right away. Remember that all of his brooms were gifts, even his Nimbus 2000.

So in this story, that's why the shopkeeper is so worried to have a bunch of hooligans near the Nimbus unsupervised, and it's why he has such a hard time accepting that Sirius's parents would have handed him that kind of money and sent him off to buy the Nimbus himself.
Sirius's last dueling lesson of the summer was the day before he departed for Hogwarts. His parents had insisted that he could have some time off before he had to leave, perhaps a whole week, but Sirius had soundly rejected the idea that he should give up three whole sessions with Dolohov. He was disappointed enough about not being able to see the man during the school year.

He levitated a cushion in front of himself to deflect the jet of red light from Dolohov's wand, then had to throw himself sideways to avoid another Stunning Spell. His instructor, as merciless as ever, immediately sent another one his way mere seconds later. Sirius ducked just in time for it to sail uselessly over his head.

By the time another streak of light came in his direction, he had repositioned his cushion in midair. Dolohov's Stunner impacted it and fizzled out harmlessly.

Then the cushion exploded and Sirius reared back in surprise just before he was hit directly in the chest. He felt his entire body freeze up, then his backwards momentum sent him crashing to the floor, flat on his back. He found himself staring upwards at the ceiling watching a flurry of feathers and bits of fabric rain down around him. Dolohov appeared in his line of vision a few seconds later, staring down at him with an amused expression on his usually dour face.

As soon as the spell was lifted, Sirius blurted, "Morgana's tit!"

Dolohov burst into laughter as Sirius continued to glare up at him from the floor. The man offered a rough hand to his pupil, then hauled Sirius upright and settled him back onto his feet in one smooth movement.

"I know you don't say that in front of your mother," he said as he began waving his wand to gather the feathers.

"That wasn't fair," Sirius replied through his scowl.

Dolohov hummed in agreement. "Dueling isn't fair."

"You said that you'd only use Stunners."

"I wanted to see how you'd react to something different, give you a taste of what's to come." Dolohov shrugged his broad shoulders. "I can't let you get cocky just because you're good at avoiding Stunners."

He replaced the cushion and plopped down onto the lone sofa, allowing his long legs to sprawl in front of him. Sirius wandered over to join his tutor, as Dolohov always wanted to use the last minutes of their lessons to discuss what had happened and how he expected Sirius to prepare for their next meeting, and eagerly reached for the water that Kreacher had laid out for them. He had spent the past hour almost continuously dodging and blocking Stunning Spells, and he was sure that he'd never known thirst like he had experienced working with his tutor, who liked to remind him that he wouldn't be allowed to take a water break in the middle of a real duel.

Eventually Dolohov set down his own goblet and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, signaling that it was time for his student to do the same.
"You'll be ahead of the game when we start training next summer. You've already got a good foundation to build on, so we can jump straight to more advanced things," he commented. He used one rough hand to push his hair out of his brown eyes and pinned Sirius with a critical stare. "That is, if you don't let yourself slip over the school year."

Sirius had learned long ago not to smile or otherwise show his pleasure at any of Dolohov's compliments, lest he be accused of getting too cocky. Instead, he asked quite seriously, "How am I supposed to practice at school?"

That discussion was probably why, Sirius reflected the next day, he didn't immediately react with his wand when James Potter barged into his compartment without knocking.

"Are you going to try out for the Quidditch team?" the boy demanded before the door had even completely opened.

Everybody in the compartment looked up in surprise. Peter's head immediately swung back around to watch Sirius's reaction, and a grin broke out across Avery's face. Mulciber's face was set in hard lines, and his hand inched towards his pocket, but Sirius responded before the Slytherin could pull his wand.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," he responded tersely. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Problem?" echoed Potter, his expression colored with surprise. "As long as you have that Nimbus, the only problem I'll have is if you don't know how to use it." The occupants of the compartment all stared up at him, and after a few beats of uncomfortable silence, he added, "Well, that would be a waste of an excellent broom!"

It was Peter who finally found his voice. "But you hate Sirius!"

Then he seemed to realize what he'd done and flushed red, slumping back into the bench as if Sirius's body might block him from view. Though there was very little chance of that, Sirius thought cruelly. Peter was far too plump to hide behind him.

Potter's cheeks had also turned a rather interesting shade of red, but he managed to say, "It doesn't matter how I feel about him as long as he's good and he has the best broom at Hogwarts."

"It's a good thing you feel that way, seeing as Malfoy and Lestrange also have Nimbus 1001s." Sirius informed him, then smirked in satisfaction at Potter's horrified expression.

Will grinned even wider. "And they've promised to give their old Nimbus 1000s to Vanity and whoever takes the remaining Chaser position."

Potter looked truly stricken now, and he stumbled out of the compartment with barely any farewell, mumbling about how he needed to go talk to Thomas, who was the Gryffindor Quidditch captain.

After he was gone, Mulciber finally spoke up, though a scowl still covered his face. "I didn't know you planned to try out."

"I hadn't made up my mind before yesterday," Sirius informed his friends, "but Dolohov said Quidditch would be a really good way to continue developing my reflexes."

Things soon settled down in the compartment. None of the other boys had finished their summer assignments, and they worked feverishly for most of the trip. Sirius refused to help any of them with their work, as he thought that would be rewarding their procrastination, and also he just didn't
He had hoped to find respite from his boredom by enjoying a brief interlude in the older Slytherins’ compartment, but the atmosphere was so frigid and tense that he didn’t enjoy it at all. It seemed like both Narcissa and Lucilla Lestrange were angry at Rabastan, who didn’t bother to hide his returned fury.

Sirius sat in the uncomfortable tension for several minutes, which was as long as he could stand it. He rose from the bench abruptly, earning himself a startled look from Rabastan, who until that point had been glaring sullenly out the window and refusing to meet his eyes.

"Where are you going?" demanded Lucilla. Her tone was laced with a touch of accusation, which earned her a glare from her brother.

"Leave him out of this, you great bloody bitch!" he growled.

Everybody stared at him in astonishment, but nobody looked more gobsmacked than his sister. She looked at him as if he were a stranger, her lips moving as if she were trying to speak but couldn't think what to say.

Lucius stood and hauled Narcissa up with him. He propelled Sirius out the door and into the narrow corridor just as Lucilla found her voice.

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME THAT WAY!"

"Come along, Narcissa," said Malfoy, but his girlfriend made no move to exit the compartment.

"I’LL SPEAK TO YOU ANY BLOODY WAY I LIKE!"

Lucius gripped Narcissa's elbow firmly.

"YOU CERTAINLY WILL NOT!"

"Narcissa," Malfoy hissed at her. Sirius thought that he sounded distinctly like Grandfather Arcturus and Father did when they were angry. It seemed to startle Cissy out of her stupor; she jerked slightly and looked around guiltily at the blond wizard, allowing him to pull her outside.

"IF YOU WEREN'T SUCH A FUCKING BI—"

Lucius snapped the door shut and cut off the sound. Sirius supposed that there must be Silencing Charms on the compartments, which, now that he thought about it, was probably a smart idea since there were so many rowdy teenagers on this train. The volume would undoubtedly be unbearable otherwise.

Cissy was still looking at Malfoy with a shame-filled expression, but he stood tall and stone-faced beside her. "Come," he said finally. "We might as well patrol while we're out here."

Sirius had grabbed Lucius's arm before he realized what he'd done. "Aren't you going to tell me what that's about?"

Lucius turned to look at him. His eyes darted to the side in Narcissa's direction, though she was standing slightly behind him and couldn't see.

"No."

Then he pulled his arm free and steered the witch down the corridor. Sirius had no recourse except
to head in the opposite direction towards his own compartment, although he was probably the worst compartment-mate possible for the rest of the way to Hogwarts. His mood wasn't very much improved by the way Janice attached herself to his arm as they were waiting for an available carriage to ride up to the castle.

"Why didn't you come find me on the train?" She seemed more than a bit annoyed.

He eyeballed her hands wrapped around his bicep. His first impulse was to shake her off and make it clear that he wasn't her boyfriend and he didn't have any obligation to have found her on the train, but then he glanced around and saw that the crowd of second and third years surrounding them was watching their interactions curiously.

"I was helping my friends with their homework and lost track of time," he told her flatly.

Will grinned at her in confirmation, and she seemed not to think anything was amiss about Nigel's scowl (not that there was anything amiss about Nigel scowling). Sirius had been worried that Peter would give the lie away, but he only let out one wheezy giggle, and Sirius decided that the boy had acquitted himself pretty well.

The first few weeks of school seemed to follow the same pattern as September first. Potter either lectured him about Quidditch tryouts or ignored him completely, whereas Sirius, Peter, and the Slytherins were all amused by his suddenly altered behavior. Rabastan and his sister only interacted through angry glares across the Great Hall, and Malfoy and Cissy appeared increasingly at odds as the days passed by.

Janice seemed to be a hero among the younger Ravenclaw girls, who were all in awe over the fact that she'd been taken on a date by the handsome Gryffindor who had his own Nimbus 1001. He quickly rethought his stance on dating her when he realized that having a pretty girlfriend made him almost as big a hero among the first and second-year boys as Janice was among the girls. Of course he also happened to possess a racing broomstick, which added substantially to his popularity. Even Potter didn't seem to think it was worth it to try to turn the tide against him anymore!

Still, it was a surprise when the other boy approached him in the library one Friday a couple of weeks into term. Sirius and Janice both looked up from their work—not that they ever got much work done, a situation which had only worsened now that they were dating—and stared at Potter in surprise. He had a stern and slightly panicked expression on his face and didn't seem the least bit fazed by their stares.

"Well, aren't you coming to bed?" he repeated his question. "Surely Edgecomb here understands that you need all the rest you can get before Quidditch trials tomorrow."

Sirius turned to look at Janice as if she would tell him that he hadn't heard Potter say that, but she was gaping at his fellow Gryffindor in such open astonishment that he surmised he hadn't misheard at all.

"Potter…" He used the same tone he might if he were to speak to a particularly stupid house-elf. "Did you follow me all the way here just to tell me that it's my bedtime?"

"I didn't follow you," insisted the other boy. "I asked Pettigrew where to find you. And you have to be up bright and early tomorrow!"

Sirius could only look at him blankly, unsure how he could possibly respond to that.

Janice suddenly pulled her hand out of his from where they'd been resting together on the table...
between them. The movement caught both of the boys' attention, and they turned to see her grinning with amusement, her eyes sparkling with laughter. She started gathering her materials into her bag.

"He's right, you know. You had better do everything you can to increase your chances."

Sirius let out a laugh. "You think I need extra help, do you? Some girlfriend you are."

Janice shrugged her wild curls behind one shoulder, although most of them escaped immediately afterward. "I'm just saying that I know how important it is to make the Quidditch team."

"You'll break up with me, I suppose, if I don't make it," said Sirius, his face straight.

He watched how Janice had to visibly bite her lip to keep from smiling or laughing. He thought that he should really help her work on hiding her thoughts a bit better. On second thought, he mentally added a few moments later, she looks rather good when she does that.

Eventually she managed to say, "That depends on if any better looking boys make any of the teams."

Sirius was just about to demand a full accounting of which boys were better looking than him when Potter, who had up to that point been shifting on his feet and looking back and forth between them with an impatient, uncomfortable look on his face, took the opportunity to say, "There, you see: Edgecomb understands how important a good night's sleep is. Now hurry up!"

Then he found himself summarily herded to their dormitory. He was almost surprised that Potter hadn't stood over his bed to verify that he really was trying to sleep, but the next morning he quickly realized exactly why Potter had insisted that they go to bed so early.

"Black! Get up!"

Potter needn't have shouted, as Sirius had already been more than woken up by the sunlight that was suddenly streaming across his face when his dorm mate pulled back his curtains. If that hadn't already done it, the rough shake the other boy had given him certainly would have.

"Black!"

Sirius shoved his hands away and sat up so fast that Potter had to quickly scramble to right himself lest their heads collide. "What is your bloody problem waking me up at—" Sirius cast a quick spell to see what time it was. "Six forty-five in the bloody morning!"

Potter looked as if he was worried that Sirius had lost his mind. "We have Quidditch trials today."

"They're not until nine," Sirius pointed out slowly, placing careful emphasis on the time as if the other boy was the one who was short a few marbles.

"Exactly!" declared Potter. "We only have about half an hour to get ready and eat breakfast before we need to head to the pitch, if we want to get our brooms from the shed and start warming up by seven thirty at the latest."

Sirius stared up at him through a curtain of disheveled black hair. "Seven thirty?"

"Yes, seven thirty! Honestly, don't you know that everybody else will get there by eight? Do you want to have to dodge everyone in the whole bloody house while you're going through your drills?"
Sirius figured that it would be more trouble than it was worth if he tried to reason with the other boy. Surely it wouldn't do much good to point out that the whole house wasn't trying out—Lupin and Peter, who were grumbling about their interrupted sleep, were the perfect example—or that Sirius hadn't done any Quidditch drills in his entire life. It wasn't likely that he'd get anymore sleep now that he was awake anyway, especially not if he spent the next few minutes arguing about it with Potter, so with a groan of defeat he rolled out of bed, pushing the other boy further away from him as he went.

Potter was waiting impatiently by the door when Sirius finished dressing and reached under his bed for his Nimbus. He stared at the broom in surprise. "Why isn't that in the storage shed? Do you want to have it confiscated?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Potter, this broom will be left out in that horrid shed over my dead body. My father told me that it doesn't even have climate-controlling charms!"

They argued about it all the way to the Great Hall, but finally Sirius declared, "Well if it isn't allowed then you had better shut your big gob about it if you don't want the professors to hear!"

It turned out, after all that, that Madam Hooch hadn't even made an appearance yet that morning, and the storage shed was still firmly locked when Sirius and James trudged down to the Quidditch pitch at seven thirty. Sirius glared at his dorm mate with renewed annoyance before stomping off to the pitch alone, leaving a pair of hazel eyes to follow him jealously. He did flips and dives and spins until he was dizzy, then took to streaking from one set of goalposts to the other at breakneck speed, trying to see if he could improve his time each go around. Finally, when he flew back down some time later, he was met by Potter's elated expression waiting for him as soon as he alighted.

"That was amazing! The broom is amazing!"

"You got a new broom, didn't you?" asked Sirius, more to stave off any suggestion that he should let Potter take his broom for a spin than out of any real curiosity.

"Just a Comet 220," said Potter distractedly. He was examining Sirius's Nimbus and looked to be fighting the impulse to reach out and touch it. "How'd you talk your parents into buying you one?"

It was a stupid question, as far as Sirius was concerned. He pushed his increasingly long hair out of his eyes and raised a bemused eyebrow. "I didn't; my father let me have it as a reward."

Potter looked at him incredulously. "For what?"

"My results last year, advancing in my dueling training…" Sirius shrugged carelessly. "You know, the usual things."

"Dueling…?"

But Sirius was spared from answering by the arrival of Madam Hooch and Jack Thomas, the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, which quickly drew the other boy's attention. They retrieved Potter's Comet and spent the next few minutes flying around the pitch, Sirius much more leisurely than Potter. Although he suspected that Potter was just trying to show off for Thomas before the rest of the hopefuls arrived.

And arrive they did, soon enough. Potter's prediction that they would all converge on the stadium by eight o'clock had been wildly off-base (And more than a little paranoid, thought Sirius.), but by the scheduled time there were over a dozen prospective members flying around the pitch.
There were two empty spots at Chaser and one at Beater, so Sirius concluded that the odds of making the team weren't very good and was busy thinking about his strategy when the current team members joined Thomas in front of the crowd.

"Right, you lot!" called the dark-skinned wizard, drawing everybody's attention. Once they had all settled on the ground, he continued. "We're in a really good position this year since we have so many returning members, but I want to make it clear that nobody's position is guaranteed."

This caused a stir to go through the hopefuls. Sirius noticed that the current team did not look surprised at this announcement, although several of them looked quite unhappy about it.

"What's that mean, then?" asked one of the older boys. Sirius recognized his strawberry blond hair from around the common room, but he couldn't have said what the boy's name was or what year he was in.

Thomas held out his hands to quiet the crowd until he could be heard over them without shouting. "It means that we're all going to try out for every position, and we're going to create the strongest team possible not only for this year but also with an eye for the future. Two of the current members finish this year and the rest of us the year after that, and we don't want to leave behind a bunch of holes in the team."

Several members of the team shifted uncomfortably, and Sirius deduced that this worry about creating a strong team for the future was more Thomas's brain child than any of theirs. They would undoubtedly rather keep their own positions secure and weren't much worried about what would happen after they left school.

He smirked in amusement. "So the current members can get the boot?"

They all shifted again and shot quite unpleasant looks at Thomas when he answered, "If one of you is better for the team, yes."

After that the day passed by both quickly and slowly. Sirius found that he quite enjoyed many of the exercises Thomas had them perform, and the time went by far too quickly when he was racing from one side of the pitch to the other, dodging Bludgers, and fighting viciously for possession of the Quaffle. Then there were the things he found less fun, such as hitting Bludgers, blocking shots, and waiting to spot the Snitch. He quite despised all the waiting, actually, and he considered playing Seeker to be a bunch of boring waiting that steadily tore at his already low level of patience while he watched the others have fun below him.

Still, he had more fun than not, and almost before he knew it they were all trudging back up to the castle for a rather late lunch. They met the Slytherin co-captains on their way down to prepare for their own Quidditch trials that afternoon.

"Oi, Black!" called Lestrange as the groups got within earshot of one another. "So you've turned traitor after all, have you?"

The corners of Sirius's mouth quirked up into a smile, and as they got closer he could see that Rabastan and Lucius were as amused by the memory as he was. He was about to answer the charge when Potter stepped out from beside him.

"Shut your slimy Slytherin mouth!" he exclaimed. Everyone turned to look at him in surprise, not the least of which came from the three boys who had up until that point been smirking at one another in shared amusement.

"Potter!" hissed Sirius.
But the consummate Gryffindor would not be cowed. "No, they don't get to attack you! You were sorted into Gryffindor; you were never one of them!"

Sirius was stunned. He blinked, but the scene was still right there before him when he opened his eyes.

"Potter…" he began, unsure of exactly what he should say.

"No, it's okay. I was a git," the other boy declared matter-of-factly, "but I get it now!"

Lucius's slight smile had disappeared behind a frigid mask, and Rabastan's face had twisted into a perfect parody of a smile, with his teeth bared and a terrifying light in his eyes. Sirius watched helplessly as Malfoy laid a restraining hand on his best mate's wand arm, his long fingers visibly digging into the flesh just above Rabastan's wrist.

"I see," said Rabastan instead, his voice coming out more like a hiss than his usual controlled, cold tone. "I wonder if this is exactly what my dear sister and your cousin had in mind when they warned you off."

He directed the last to Sirius, who was just as confused by it as Potter and, a quick glance assured him, all of the other Gryffindors. Rabastan jerked his arm out of his friend's grasp and stalked through the crowd towards the pitch, roughly shouldering Potter aside but avoiding any physical contact with Sirius. Lucius followed him in a much more dignified manner, though Sirius could see through his mask that he was worried. He briefly squeezed Sirius's arm as he passed by, though Sirius was sure that to everyone else it had looked like the older boy had pushed by him the same way Rabastan had Potter, if more gently.

The rest of them turned as one to watch the Slytherins make their way towards the pitch, and soon enough Potter said, "Don't worry, mate. They'll just slither back into their hole and leave you alone."

Sirius let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and rounded on Potter so quickly that the other boy took several steps backwards. "I am not your mate!"

Potter and several of the other Gryffindors called after him as he stalked away from them, but he didn't look back. He shoved his way carelessly through a crowd of first years on his way up the steps, but a glare from his flashing black eyes silenced their protestations quickly enough as he continued into the castle.

Thomas had said that he would take until at least Friday to think over his decision, with Quidditch practice to start the very next day. Sirius was in a vicious mood all week, quite sure that he didn't have a shot in hell at making the Quidditch team after what had happened, no matter how good he was (and he wasn't arrogant enough to think that he had been the best in the first place). What's more, he found himself in the unaccountably weird position of being ignored by Lestrange and followed around by Potter, which just made his mood even worse.

He had taken to hiding out in some of the unused rooms in the dungeons. Lestrange and the other Slytherins seemed intent on ignoring him, and Potter, Janice, and everyone else from the other three houses wouldn't think to look for him down here. The dungeons were really the perfect place.

As it turned out, only Peter of all people knew about it. Sirius had to admit, if only to himself, that the half-blood had given up relationships with everybody else in order to stay friends with him, and he therefore felt that he owed Peter the courtesy of maintaining their friendship even as his own popularity rose astronomically.
Besides, he still needed the other boy's help in Potions unless he wanted to start actually reading the material himself, which he didn't. He had barely managed an Exceeds Expectations in Potions, and that was mostly on the strength of his in-class brewing and homework assignments throughout the year. He had received a Poor on his end-of-year exam. Professor Slughorn had been all too willing to tell him that he had only managed to make it into the E band by the smallest of margins once his classwork had been added to his exam, and the man had wondered if Sirius had perhaps been ill or otherwise distracted on the day of the test.

Sirius had managed to charm his way through the conversation, but he knew that he wouldn't be able to go another year scoring Os on his class work and then failing his exam without Slughorn wising up to the fact that he wasn't actually doing much of his own work in class. However, he figured that if he'd been able to manage Os on classwork almost entirely based on the strength of Peter's notes, then he could probably do better on exams if he just put in a minimal amount of extra effort during the year to actually learn the material for himself.

Peter had, of course, scored an Outstanding in Potions, getting third in the class behind Severus Snape and Lily Evans. Snape had been far and away the best in the class, and Peter had complained almost daily when they had first returned to school about how Evans must have only scored so high on account of being Snape's partner. Peter had also managed an E in Transfiguration thanks to Sirius's help, but he was quite relieved to have passed Charms by barely scraping out an Acceptable.

Thus they decided to keep up their study sessions, though they spent half of their time continuing their Dark Arts studies from last year and the other half actually completing school work.

Today Sirius was lounging across a table preparing for Potions by comparing Peter's notes and his textbook side by side. Peter was working on a remedial Charms essay after having failed to properly manage the Engorgement Charm in class.

"This is ridiculous!" Peter burst out, then threw down his quill in disgust and leaned back in his chair. "I don't know how Flitwick expects me to write six whole inches on how Engorgement Charms are supposed to be used…. They make things bigger, that's it!"

Sirius glanced up from his own work with a raised eyebrow. "I'm sure that he wants you to wrap your mind around the fact that you have to control how much bigger you want something to be."

"But I already know that, because it's right there in the textbook. Look, I even put it in my essay already!" Though Sirius couldn't see the words from where he was lounging, Peter jabbed his finger at a place about two inches down his parchment to prove his point.

"You made your feather explode in class," Sirius reminded him dryly. "I'm still picking bits of it out of my hair."

But it was clear that Peter had given up on the assignment, and Sirius was already quite bored of Potions despite his solemn promise to himself that he'd put more effort into the class, so only a few minutes later they packed up their things and headed to the Great Hall for dinner a little earlier than they usually did.

Remus Lupin descended the central staircase just as they were approaching. His limp brown hair seemed even duller this year than it had the last, and Sirius eyed the new, faint scar on the boy's cheek with interest. Lupin claimed to anyone who asked that he'd gotten it in a flying accident over the summer, but Sirius had seen the other Gryffindor flying and didn't think that he was incompetent enough on a broom to have really managed to fly into a tree.

"Oh, hello!" called Lupin cheerfully, giving a little wave in their direction. He waited until Sirius
and Peter came abreast of him and joined their walk.

Sirius eyed him with silent disdain, but Peter was nice enough to return the greeting. Lupin swallowed nervously but put on a brave face and acted like he hadn't been snubbed by the taller boy.

"Were you two off in your secret hideout?" he asked Peter with a teasing smile. "If I didn't know that you two do so well in class, I wouldn't believe you when you say that all you do is go off to study in peace."

For one terrifying moment, Sirius thought that he might have to step in and stop his friend from saying too much and giving away their secret about the Dark Arts, but it turned out that Peter was calmer under pressure than Sirius had given him credit for.

"Sirius was just helping me with my remedial Charms essay," he explained with barely a hint of a stutter.

"Oh, are you still having trouble with the Engorgement Charm?" Lupin asked unnecessarily. "I had trouble with it at first, too, but I checked out a library book that was really helpful. I can lend it to you if you like."

Peter turned to give Sirius a questioning look, clearly unsure about whether he should accept an offer of help from the friend of his friend's enemy. When Sirius's expression didn't change and he didn't shoot the smaller boy any quelling looks, Peter turned back to Lupin with a grateful smile.

"That'd be great! Sirius helps a lot, but I'm absolute rubbish at Charms."

Lupin smiled in relief and said kindly, "I'm not very good at it either. Defense comes naturally to me, I think because it's more about intent. I have more trouble with Transfiguration and Charms, though."

If Sirius had liked the sickly boy enough to offer him any help, he would have informed him that actually all three were about intent. It was just that it required much less control in order to produce an effective offensive or defensive spell, so it was enough to really know what you wanted without paying much attention to the correct incantations or wand movements. Charms and Transfiguration, on the other hand, required precise incantations and wand movements in addition to a clear picture of what you wanted to happen, because the results you wanted were much more specific and intricate than in Defense.

But he didn't like the other boy, so he kept his mouth shut.

Lupin and Peter's chatter died down as they stepped into the Great Hall. Potter waved them over with a jovial smile. The git had somehow engineered it so that the only free seats at the entire table were around him, but Sirius would rather have starved than sit with him. He glanced at the Slytherin table, but of course there was no chance he could sit there—not anymore, thanks to Potter. He let out a sigh and made his way to the only other table that would have him.

Janice smiled brilliantly when he made his presence known by gently tugging on one of her curls. The girls sitting all around her giggled and stared at him in a way that made him distinctly uncomfortable, but they made room for him without having to be asked. He wondered what his life had become that he would rather sit here than anywhere else.

"Where have you been, Siri?" asked Janice. Sirius wasn't sure when she had started calling him that, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. "I missed you today."

They hadn't had plans to get together today, but Sirius had realized weeks ago that she constantly
wanted to be with him whether they'd planned it or not.

His smile was a bit forced, but she didn't seem to notice. "I studied with Peter after class."

She gripped his hand under the table, and he obligingly closed his fingers around hers as he started piling food onto his plate with the other hand.

"Did you hear anything about the team?"

Sirius sighed again. "Not yet."

And then the conversation quickly moved on around them. He was sure that Janice would have talked to him or about him the entire time, but her friends weren't nearly as interested in him exclusively. He ate his dinner in perplexed silence as they chattered on about various things he hadn't a clue about—Really, what in Merlin's name was Sleakeazy's anyway?—until their Ravenclaw started showing through and they began discussing assignments. Then he found himself engrossed in a conversation about Transfiguration with two of the girls who up to that point he'd thought were hopelessly silly.

After dinner he met up with Peter to walk back to the common room together. He seemed content to have continued his conversation with Remus Lupin, and to Sirius's disappointment their dorm mates trailed behind them as if they were one big happy group. Sirius was uncharacteristically silent all the way from the Great Hall to Gryffindor Tower, but the grouping turned out to be somewhat fortunate when Jack Thomas met them just inside the portrait hole.

"You two, let's talk outside," he said without preamble, then he clambered back out of the tower without bothering to check if they were following.

Of course they did follow, as they figured it had something to do with the Quidditch team. Once the trio was settled in a small alcove a few paces down from the Fat Lady's portrait, Thomas crossed his arms over his chest and looked sternly between the two younger boys.

"Right then, I need to know whether you two can work together. If you can't, then I can only choose one of you for the team."

Sirius and James looked at each other warily, and Sirius could tell that the same thoughts were going through Potter's head as his own. Which one of us would it be? Sirius acknowledged that he had far less natural talent on a broom than Potter did, but on the other hand he was well schooled and had a broomstick that was half again as fast as Potter's.

Potter grinned mischievously and clapped Sirius on the shoulder, letting his hand rest there as if they frequently engaged in this sort of display. "Course we can get along!" he declared. "We've made up and agreed to play nice."

Thomas looked between them skeptically. Clearly he'd noted Sirius's avoidance of the other boy and, when he couldn't avoid him, his silence.

For his part, Sirius would have groaned if he were prone to such unseemly outward displays of his emotions. What choice did he have except to play along? He had no guarantee that he would be the one chosen for the team if he denied that they had agreed to make up, and even though he had been resigned to the idea of not making the team, now that he knew he could be on it he wasn't willing to risk giving that up. He forced whatever semblance of a smile he could muster onto his face.

"Don't worry about us. We get along famously."
Thomas stared hard between them for several more seconds before his own grin broke out across his face.

"I'm glad to hear that! The Chasers really have to get along and work together more than anyone else on the team, you know," he informed them jovially. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "Oh, Potter, you're also reserve Seeker."

The Gryffindors had a grueling schedule of Quidditch practices every Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday. Sirius found that between classes, homework, Quidditch practices, and finding some free time to see Janice, several more weeks had passed before he realized it. He still hadn't been able to speak with Rabastan or Malfoy, although he had spoken to Avery and Mulciber, who had been made the Beaters for Slytherin.

"I don't know what's up with Lestrange, but he was absolutely beastly at trials," Will had told him when they'd stopped briefly in the Charms corridor to congratulate each other, although he'd clearly had no idea that Sirius had anything to do with the older boy's foul mood.

Mulciber had snorted and rolled his eyes. "And every day since then."

That hadn't made Sirius feel any better, but, on the other hand, the longer time went on the more annoyed he got that Rabastan was apparently angry with him over something Potter of all people had said.

Potter had been a constant fixture in his life since they had made the team. He was seemingly not the least bit put off by the fact that Sirius maintained his stony silence more often than not. In fact, the only time that Sirius had willingly spoken to him for weeks was when they were at Quidditch practice or going over plays to prepare for the practices. It was actually the most fun he'd had since dueling practice during the summer, but Sirius never would have admitted that to anyone who might tell Potter.

Still, his days fell into a more or less tolerable pattern until one day in mid-October when he found himself unable to shake the other boy's presence. He was itching to go down to the dungeons and practice some of the minor curses he'd found in a book in the library, but Potter seemed determined not to leave his side.

"We could play chess," he suggested cheerily, "or if you aren't up to that we could always do with a game of Exploding Snap."

Sirius's grip tightened on his quill as he continued his letter to Bellatrix, but he didn't respond to Potter.

Maybe you can suggest a spell that would make it painful for Potter to talk to me about anything other than Quidditch.

Potter flopped onto his four poster dramatically. "Come on, Sirius. There's got to be something less boring than writing letters."

If you can't, I'm afraid that I might snap and kill him soon.

Peter looked up in annoyance from his Defense homework (put off until the night before it was due, of course). "Where's Remus, anyway?"

Sirius really wasn't sure exactly when they'd all supposedly got onto a first-name basis. He determinedly did not look up from his letter.
"I wouldn't mind killing him, of course, except that the reserve Chaser who'd replace him isn't very good."

"Oh, he's stuck in the hospital wing again," Potter replied quickly. "Say, Sirius, who're you writing to anyway?"

Sirius finally looked up, but only because he found it odd that Potter had so suddenly expressed an interest in his correspondence after having declared it boring mere moments before.

"My cousin, Bellatrix," he said as he examined the other boy's expression. "What's wrong with Lupin?"

Potter suddenly looked entirely too innocent for Sirius to believe a word he said. "Oh, you know, he just wasn't feeling well. I think the castle's a bit too drafty for him. Erm… Do you write to your cousin a lot?"

Sirius and Peter shared a suspicious glance. Sirius decided that he probably wasn't going to be able to get any more information out of Potter, and he was more likely to solve the mystery of Remus Lupin if he didn't seem too interested and antagonize the boy's friend.

"All the time," answered Sirius finally. "I know that they aren't up to your lofty standards," he added a second later, just to be contrary, "but I do love my family."

Potter visibly wilted, and Sirius was surprised at how much the jab actually seemed to have affected his nemesis. He actually looked down to avoid Sirius's gaze for a few moments, which was very unusual for the normally brash boy. Then he sighed and seemed to collect himself before looking up and meeting stormy gray with his own embarrassed hazel.

"Look, Sirius…" he began unsteadily, "I… That is to say… Did you know that my mother wasn't invited to your cousin's wedding?"

"Of course I did," Sirius responded with a scowl. "I was there after Belley got your mother's owl, and nobody was very happy about your mother expecting an invitation."

Potter winced. "Right, erm…" He fidgeted nervously and seemed to be trying to find something to do with his hands. "Your mum sent my mum an owl back, explaining why we hadn't been invited. She wasn't exactly nice about it…" He trailed off at Sirius's pointed glare, but continued a few seconds later. "The thing is, my mum wasn't exactly very nice to me after she read it. She was actually pretty furious, I reckon, and she really let me have it about how I treated you."

Sirius was extremely surprised, but he endeavored not to let either that or his curiosity show in his expression or his voice. "Really?"

"Yeah," Potter answered and ran a hand nervously through his messy hair. "She didn't speak to me for a whole week—after she yelled at me the first time, I mean. She explained a lot of stuff to me and told me that I had to apologize to you, but I guess I've been putting it off."

"So you only apologized because your mother told you that you had to?" Sirius asked incredulously.

It wasn't that he was surprised that Potter would only apologize to him because he'd been ordered to do it; it was just that he was surprised that anyone, even Potter, would actually admit such a thing to the person they were supposed to be apologizing to.

Potter sat up straighter as a look of alarm came across his features. "No! I mean, she told me how hard it must have been for you to get sorted into Gryffindor, and maybe at first I didn't really
believe her and was just going to apologize because she said I had to, but then we've spent so much time together this term and I've decided that you're all right, and then there were those slimy Slytherins after Quidditch trials and—"

"Merlin! Okay!" Sirius exclaimed, afraid that Potter would just keep rambling if he didn't stop him.

They all sat in silence for several long seconds. Sirius pretended to be considering his letter while Potter considered him from across the room, and Peter stared between both of them anxiously.

Finally, Potter ventured to ask, "So… are we okay, then?"

Sirius stared hard at his dorm mate. He didn't really want to be okay with Potter, but he was terribly tired of all the antagonism and of not feeling comfortable in his own dorm room. And he had to admit that Potter was okay to be around when they were just talking about Quidditch, so perhaps he'd be able to tolerate the other boy if they talked about other things, as long as they maintained an air of friendliness.

Eventually he shrugged one shoulder, affecting a carelessness that he didn't really feel. "Yeah, sure."

Their official ceasefire was in full force the very next morning, when Sirius didn't protest when Potter joined him for breakfast. They both got surprised looks from their fellow Gryffindors and from the younger contingent at the Ravenclaw table, and Sirius could certainly understand why.

Janice offered a quizzical smile from across the aisle, and he offered a rueful smile in return.

Unfortunately, Lily Evans was sitting directly in his line of sight, between him and his girlfriend at the Ravenclaw table, and she scowled at him. She was sitting with the first years, as Emmeline and Mary apparently still hadn't forgiven her for staying friends with Snape after he'd called Mary a Mudblood last year. Sirius knew that she would probably have preferred to sit with her friend at the Slytherin table, but the other Slytherins wouldn't have stood for it. Just as the Gryffindors wouldn't stand for Snape to sit at their table. He didn't feel the least bit sorry for her and glared back unrepentantly.

After everyone got over their initial shock, breakfast went smoothly, as did Charms and Defense later than morning. Still, Sirius was glad when Lupin finally got out of the infirmary in time for lunch; he had never felt the same animosity for Lupin as he had for Potter, and he was more comfortable with both Peter and Lupin there to deflect attention away from him.

Plus he still hadn't forgotten the mystery the other boy presented. He commented about the other boy's illness, but Lupin only smiled blandly and said that he had a weak constitution, whatever that was supposed to mean. Even close observation over the next several days did not help Sirius glean any new information. Lupin seemed entirely normal.

The following Wednesday, Sirius and Peter were able to converse in Potions without the other two Gryffindor boys overhearing them, as Sirius had managed to get a table as far away from them as possible at the beginning of the year, before they'd made up.

"I think he isn't so bad now that we've got to know him a bit better," Peter whispered.

Sirius stopped stirring his potion when Peter stopped stirring his, then consulted his book to verify the next step.

"Yeah, I guess," he replied. "I just keep thinking that he'll turn on me again the first time something goes wrong."
He didn't mention that Bellatrix had written him back with several creative ideas that he might use against Potter if he ever did that. *If only she'd had some idea what's wrong with Rabastan,* Sirius thought sourly.

Peter passed him the Sopophorous beans. "I hope not. It's so much nicer when we all get along."

Sirius couldn't disagree with that, even though he still felt a twinge of anger at the idea of forgiving the boy who had made his life so miserable for so many months. Professor Slughorn drew closer to their table as he made his rounds through the classroom, so Sirius was spared having to come up with a reply. He carefully and silently watched Peter chop his beans, taking in the method his friend used and the shape and size he produced before mimicking him to the best of his ability. The professor bustled up to their table, his enormous belly preceding him, just as Sirius was finishing up.

"Excellent, excellent!" he exclaimed as he looked over the contents of their cauldrons and the ingredients still strewn across the workspace.

Then he moved onto the next table, and Peter's resulting scowl could have curdled milk. Sirius knew that he was incredibly jealous of the attention paid to Severus Snape and Lily Evans, and he felt that he deserved at least as much recognition for his own skill with potions. But Sirius knew all about Professor Slughorn from his cousins' stories over the years, and he knew that Peter was neither as brilliant as Snape nor as charming as Evans (nor well connected enough to make up for it), so he was unlikely to ever get the attention he wanted.

"He doesn't really care about his students," Sirius reminded his friend, as he had taken to doing every time Peter expressed his displeasure about Slughorn. "The be—"

"Best way to get revenge is to grow up to be brilliant and make him sorry he overlooked me," Peter finished for him, but his grateful smile belied the trace of annoyance in his voice. "Speaking of, do you think we'll be able to get away soon?"

Their Dark Arts studies had obviously been a bit interrupted by the fact that Potter and Lupin hounded their every step. They couldn't very well use the excuse that they wanted to get away to study when their new friends needed to study the same things as they did. Sirius found that even the minor curses they'd been working on—not what he considered truly Dark, really, but all they could manage to teach themselves at this point—made him feel good when he performed them, and the longer he went without practicing the more the desire seemed to coil under his skin like a persistent itch.

He didn't answer aloud, but he shared a glance full of promise with his friend. They had to find a way to be alone.

Surprisingly, it was Narcissa who gave them the chance, although she certainly hadn't intended that result when she had invited him to her birthday party. "Every year Mother sends along all sorts of things the Hogwarts elves don't make," she had told him. "This year I'll make sure she sends some of your favorites, too." Neither of them had actually mentioned the fact that he hadn't been invited the year before, but it had lingered in the air between them. Sirius had resisted the urge to ask if Rabastan was invited when he'd accepted the invitation.

Peter hadn't been invited, but it had been easy enough to convince Potter and Lupin that he had. "I'm sure she would have invited you, too, if she'd thought of it," Sirius had lied. "She invited Peter because she remembered him from the league final last year."

James had still looked skeptical that Narcissa Black would invite a Half-blood to her birthday
party, but Peter had quite convincingly piped in, "And she saw us together over the summer, remember?"

"Yes, quite. She probably just wants to make me feel more comfortable in Slytherin by having a friend with me," Sirius had agreed readily, silently thinking that Peter's skills in deception were coming along quite nicely.

In the end, the Saturday before Halloween found Sirius and Peter making their way to the dungeons without the other half of their quartet. They parted ways at a junction where Sirius would turn right towards the Slytherin common room and Peter would head left towards the unused classroom they'd claimed as their own. Peter had promised that he could keep himself occupied for an hour or two while Sirius enjoyed the party, and Sirius had promised to leave early so they would have an hour or two to practice before curfew.

Sirius found that as excited as he was about the party, he was even more excited about what would come later.

The Slytherin common room was much more to Sirius's taste than its Gryffindor counterpart, as he found that the elaborate, grand fireplaces and black and green leather couches reminded him of home. There was an aura pervading the space that reminded him of Dark magic, and it was comforting and made him think of his grandfather's study at Grimmauld Place.

Narcissa had taken over an entire large corner of the space as her own for the evening, and there she had laid out a feast of cakes and candies and other sweets. Sirius left his and his family's presents (owled to him by his mother just that morning) on the table set aside for that purpose and joined the group of Slytherins who had positioned themselves on various couches and cushions near a small fireplace.

Narcissa, who was sitting regally in an ornate throne that had clearly been transfigured just for the occasion, smiled at his approach. "Come sit by me, Siri."

Sirius had been planning on sitting next to Rabastan or, failing that, in the place that Avery and Mulciber had clearly saved for him on their couch, but he found himself directed to a narrow space between Malfoy and Andy. He and Lucius both shifted to get comfortable as their legs pressed tightly against each other's, but a look from the older boy quelled Sirius's complaints.

Rabastan hung back on the fringes of the group. He refused to meet Sirius's gaze no matter how long Sirius stared at him, and instead he seemed to be paying an inordinate amount of attention to an older boy Sirius didn't know. Sirius felt jealousy and anger flare up inside him, and he was surprised that Malfoy didn't seem to mind that his best friend was ignoring him in favor of someone else. Surely he wasn't wrong to feel so jealous?

He couldn't enjoy the rest of the party. After Narcissa had opened her gift from the Lestranges, the strange boy whispered something in Rabastan's ear and, ignoring a pointed glare from his sister, he allowed himself to be led away. Sirius thought that he did a good job keeping a scowl off his face for his cousin's sake, but as soon as Narcissa opened his presents (a set of exquisite robes from his parents, surely chosen by his mother, and from Sirius a picture of Narcissa, Malfoy, and himself together at their picnic over the summer, which he had asked his mother to have framed) he found himself wishing that he could disappear, too.

Instead he waited until all of the presents had been opened, because he didn't want to disappoint Cissy.

She received various gifts, both large and small, not the least of which was a diamond necklace from Malfoy, which earned him a kiss right there in front of everybody. Sirius was, of course,
provided an up close and personal view due to his place next to Malfoy, and he was afraid for a moment that they were going to carry on quite disgustingly. Then someone whistled and Narcissa pulled back with a brilliant blush. She released the sides of Malfoy's face and sat back elegantly in her throne, but her face was quite red with embarrassment for several minutes afterwards.

Sirius wondered if she'd asked Bellatrix about snogging or if it was actually perfectly normal to use one's tongue that way.

When he was finally able to slip out of the Slytherin common room and join Peter for Dark Arts practice, the itch under his skin had increased to heretofore unknown proportions.

"How was the party?" Peter asked when he stepped into the room, but Sirius ignored him and headed straight over to the cage of mice they'd smuggled into the dungeons.

Several Ear-shriveling and Jelly-Legs Curses later, he felt a bit better. At least enough to give Peter the details he would need to make Potter and Lupin believe that he'd really attended the party.

The semi-contented feeling remained through the Halloween feast the next week. He had been too caught up in his own situation to have enjoyed it last year; he had, like usual, stayed in the Great Hall only as long as it had taken him to grab what food he could carry and retreat. This year he fully appreciated the live bats and boulder-sized jack-o-lanterns, and all the pumpkins brimming over with candy.

Although he hadn't thought he would, he also especially appreciated the sense of belonging and friendship as he and Potter sat with their heads together watching the Slytherin table as everyone finally began filing out of the Great Hall.

Rosier turned around, and though they couldn't hear what he was saying from all the way across the cavernous space, Sirius assumed he was asking why Snape was still seated at the table.

Sirius and James both snickered at the flush that traveled up Snape's pale neck, discernable all the way from the Gryffindor table.

Avery and Mulciber apparently neither noticed nor cared that their dorm mates weren't following close behind them, because they had kept walking without so much as a backward glance. Snape must have convinced Rosier to leave him behind, because a few moments later he shrugged and followed the other two out of the Great Hall, and Snape remained at the table.

The two Gryffindors stayed in the Great Hall only long enough to watch Snape sit unmoving in place while the rest of the Slytherins began to file out, then they beat a hasty retreat, slipping out behind a group of older students. They maintained their silence—except, perhaps, for a few irrepressible snickers—until they had made their way back to the tower and escaped their fellow Gryffindors by closing the door of their dormitory behind them.

"Did you see his face!" crowed Potter, more exclamation than question. Of course Sirius had seen his face!

Sirius barked out a laugh. "I only wish we'd been able to stay long enough to see the end!"

Peter, who had known about the prank and had been a little jealous for the past several days that he'd been supplanted from his place at Sirius's side by James, was now looking at both of them with an air of awe. Remus, who James had insisted from the beginning would not be at all supportive of their efforts and had accordingly been left out of their plans, was looking back and forth between them with an air of discomfort.
"Right under the professors' noses!" cried Peter. He bounced a little on his bed in his excitement. That sent Sirius and James into another round of joyful laughter.

Remus continued to look uncomfortable. "What did you do?" he asked in a tone that suggested he didn't really want to know.

As it had been James's idea originally to prank Snape during the Halloween feast, following a rather horrible row between them in the Charms corridor, and it had been he who had actually done the casting, he explained about the Stickfast Hex they'd managed to cast on the other boy. However, since it had been Sirius who had modified the hex from its intended purpose (sticking someone's shoes to the floor) to sticking Snape's robes to his seat, it was he who explained how they had made their plan work.

Lupin looked between them with a disapproving expression on his face. "What if the professors had caught you?"

"They didn't," Sirius replied flatly.

"But what if they had?" the smaller boy persisted. "Besides that, what if Snape figures out who did it and decides to retaliate?"

James snorted. "I'm not worried about Snivellus."

"But what if—"

Peter interrupted then, with an exasperated roll of his eyes for Sirius's benefit. "Lay off, Remus! They didn't get caught, and anyway it was a brilliant bit of spell work."

Remus's expression continued to show his clear disapproval, but he shrugged in defeat and sank onto the end of his four poster. "Think what you could do if you used your talents for good instead of ill."

"I don't know how to use my talents for good," Sirius informed him.

James laughed, as Sirius had known he would, and he smirked back in acknowledgement. It was probably the most truthful thing he was likely to ever say to his new friends, yet Potter had no idea of the true meaning behind his words. He could see Peter's own smirk out of the corner of his eyes, and he mentally reveled again in their shared secrets.

The Gryffindor versus Slytherin Quidditch match was held the second Saturday in November. It was the first game of the season, so the entire school was abuzz with excitement during breakfast. James, on the other hand, was sitting in uncharacteristic silence at the Gryffindor table, looking a bit green around the gills. He had seemed perfectly fine—arrogantly confident, even—the night before, but Sirius supposed that their looming first match was finally affecting the other boy.

"Lighten up, mate," he said cheerfully, slapping James on the back as he took a seat on the bench beside him. "You'll be fine."

Sirius was, of course, feeling a bit nervous himself, but he was confident that he knew their plays well enough that he wasn't going to completely screw up. Thomas had been practicing them to the brink of exhaustion for weeks leading up to the game, until the rest of the team had insisted that they weren't going to be able to sit their brooms at all by the time of the match if they didn't get
James still seemed a bit overwhelmed when they made their way to the Gryffindor changing rooms, but Sirius did his best to ignore him lest his friend's nerves rub off on him.

As they made their way towards the door, Thomas stopped and turned to look back at them.

"Right," he began, "we've put together a good team, and we've put our all into practice. Slytherin always plays dirty"—here the older members of the team made various rude noises—"but we're good enough to beat them without any dirty tricks. Let's just go out there and do what we normally do in practice."

As far as pep talks went, Sirius found it rather anticlimactic, but it seemed to have calmed James down so that at least he was no longer gripping his broom so tightly that his knuckles were white.

The filed onto the pitch to the loud cheers of the Gryffindors and the jeers of the Slytherins, and Sirius felt really nervous for the first time as he realized the size of the crowd who would be watching. He watched almost as if in a dream as Thomas shook hands with Malfoy and Lestrange, and he didn't hear a word that came out of Madam Hooch's mouth. He did register her whistle several seconds later, though, and kicked off into the air along with everyone else.

Elizabeth Frobisher, a sixth-year Gryffindor, managed to catch the Quaffle first. She immediately flew towards Slytherin's hoops, and Sirius followed her into the formation they'd previously decided they would use for their first attack. He was acting almost on instinct, though he was dimly aware of James falling into place on the other side of Frobisher just before she tossed the Quaffle hard in his direction.

"Potter's got the Quaffle!" the commentator, a Hufflepuff, told the crowd.

As they approached the end of the pitch James suddenly went into a steep ascent, a move they had planned both as part of their play and in anticipation of any possible Bludgers that might be sent his way. Using the superior speed of his Nimbus 1001, Sirius streaked upwards and over Frobisher to pass in front of his friend.

"Black makes a move, and Potter passes the Quaffle to Bla—" The commentator cut himself off suddenly as James dropped the Quaffle. "And Frobisher's got the Quaffle…. FROBISHER SCORES! TEN POINTS TO GRYFFINDOR!"

The Gryffindors roared.

Their strategy had worked just as they'd planned. The Slytherins had all thought that Sirius was going to take the Quaffle and had descended on him en masse, while their Keeper had moved to cover the rings nearest him. Frobisher had been able to quickly catch the Quaffle and pass it through the undefended hoop farthest from Sirius before the Slytherins been able to correct their mistake.

"That was an interesting take on the Porskoff Ploy!" cried the commentator, and the Gryffindors roared louder.

Just like that Sirius felt relaxed and confident on his broom. After sharing an exhilarated grin with James, he quickly sailed over his friend's head and took his position covering Emma Vanity, a Slytherin Chaser, just as her team received the Quaffle.

Even though Gryffindor had that early success, the match proved to be difficult and hard fought. The Slytherin Chasers were equipped with a Nimbus 1001 and two Nimbus 1000s, just as Malfoy and Lestrange had told him over the summer, and they were not opposed to fouling and dirty
tricks, just as Thomas had warned them. The Slytherins had quickly adopted the same man-to-man
defensive strategy as the Gryffindors, and unfortunately for Sirius, Rabastan was assigned to cover
him, as his broom matched Sirius's.

Half an hour, six fouls, and innumerable nasty words later, the score was only Gryffindor fifty and
Slytherin forty.

Then Sirius found himself feet away from the business end of Mulciber's bat. He reacted as
quickly as he could, but as he watched the Beater's bat connect with the Bludger seemingly
in slow motion, he knew that he wasn't going to be able to move in time.

He was suddenly falling backwards, and the Bludger flew just above his head.

A whistle blew.

"FOUL!" cried Madam Hooch. "BLAGGING!"

Sirius swiveled his head around in time to see Rabastan releasing the tail of his broomstick. They
locked eyes for just a moment before the Slytherin flew around Sirius towards his Beater. Sirius
was still somewhat in a state of shock, but as soon as Madam Hooch placed the Quaffle in his
hands he managed to regain his purpose. He barely made his penalty shot by squeaking the
Quaffle just inside the bottom of the left ring, just outside the reach of the Keeper's right foot.

"BLACK SCORES! GRYFFINDOR SIXTY, SLYTHERIN FORTY!"

The Gryffindors roared again as Sirius flew in a loop to rejoin his teammates, but all he noticed
was Rabastan gesticulating wildly at Mulciber, who looked torn between confusion and anger at
the way his captain was shouting him down.

Then the Slytherins' cheers drowned out the Gryffindors', and all the players on the pitch turned as
one to watch a streak of blond and green plummet towards the ground.

"MALFOY'S GOT THE SNITCH!" cried the commentator. "SLYTHERIN WINS A
HUNDRED AND NINETY TO SIXTY!"

Amanda Towler, Gryffindor's Seeker, pulled up short. She was still a good twenty yards away
from Malfoy, and it was clear that she had been coming from the opposite side of the pitch. She
scowled in disappointment, and with her red hair, round cheeks, and small eyes, Sirius thought
that the expression made her look like an orangutan.

The atmosphere was decidedly subdued in the Gryffindor changing room, and Sirius hurried out
of his Quidditch robes and escaped as soon as he could. He met Mulciber and Avery just as they
emerged from the Slytherin rooms.

"Good game!" exclaimed Will, his grin even wider than usual. "You played very well."

Nigel sported a rather unattractive mix of chagrin and defiance. "It wasn't personal, you know. It's
just Quidditch," he declared.

No one needed to ask what it was.

Sirius nodded. "I know."

The Slytherins left soon after that, no doubt excited to get to whatever celebration party was being
thrown in their common room. But Sirius couldn't get the look in Rabastan's eyes out of his mind,
and he found himself lingering outside the Slytherin changing rooms almost against his will. He
panicked when he heard his own teammates emerging and quickly stepped into the arch leading into the Slytherins' rooms. His fellow Gryffindors trudged by without noticing him.

*I'm being silly, he thought. If he wanted to talk to me he wouldn't have been avoiding me all term. What's he going to think if he finds me skulking outside his changing room, if he's even in there?*

He had just determined to leave when he heard the smooth voice raised in anger.

"This can't go on, Rabastan!"

"You know I'm not going to do anythi—"

"I know that," his friend cut him off, "but it's clearly affecting you!"

Rabastan was silent for a few moments, then he said in a deceptively calm voice, "It isn't affecting me."

Lucius's laugh held more incredulity than humor. "Lestrange, you handed him ten points to keep him from getting hit by a Bludger, and then you threatened to kick Mulciber off the team for doing his job."

"That Bludger could have killed him!"

"Furthermore," Malfoy went on as if he hadn't heard him, "it's doing you no good to deny it when your sister and Cissy can see right through you anyway. You had much better accept it and bloody well deal with it!"

Silence reigned for eight heartbeats, which Sirius could easily count as the organ was pounding against his chest as if it were trying to break free from his body.

"You're right." Rabastan sighed as if he were in pain.

"I know I am. And you're an idiot if you think being an ass to him is going to help anything."

Malfoy's voice was closer now, and Sirius realized that he was heading out of the changing rooms. His heart leapt into his throat and he stood frozen for several seconds before he regained control of his senses and darted out of the Slytherin archway and into the Hufflepuff one right next door. The two older boys were no longer talking, but he could hear the rustle of their robes as they headed towards the castle. He peered cautiously around the corner in time to see them disappear around the side of the building, then he sank back against the cold stones to calm his racing heart.

He obviously knew that he had been the subject of the conversation, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what it was about. What was Rabastan trying to hide, and was whatever-it-was the reason Lucilla and Narcissa had been so angry with him all term? More importantly, what in Merlin's name could the Slytherin be trying to accomplish by purposefully being an ass towards him?

He had come up with no more answers by the time he finally returned to the castle to find Janice waiting for him just inside the doors.

"Sirius!" she called his name when he appeared. "I was beginning to think that I'd missed you."

He stared at her dumbly. "Have you been waiting for me this whole time?"

She nodded shyly as she approached him, and he hadn't formed a response by the time she came to a stop mere inches away from him and took his free hand in both of hers.
"I just wanted to tell you how proud I am. You played so well, and I'm sure you would have won if Malfoy hadn't got the Snitch when he did."

Sirius knew that already, but it was something altogether different to hear someone else say it aloud. He smiled at his girlfriend in genuine appreciation. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She giggled and glanced down for a moment, then before Sirius had time to react she leaned up on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his.

He almost dropped his broom.

Even later, long after she had released him and all but skipped into the Great Hall to join the rest of the student body for dinner, he still didn't know exactly what to make of it. It had only lasted a few moments, and it hadn't been unpleasant. Her lips were soft, and they were fuller and plumper than his. He supposed that it had actually been quite nice. He just didn't know what had possessed her to do it, or why she'd run off immediately afterwards without another word to him.

Sirius determined that he had better not tell anyone about it. He well remembered the teasing he'd received at the hands of the other Gryffindors, especially Potter, and anyway maybe she had only done it in a fit of insanity because she'd felt sorry for him for losing. Maybe she would regret it now and not want to repeat it.

Fortunately, he found out as soon as he returned to his common room, it seemed that the rest of the Gryffindors squarely blamed Towler for their loss to Slytherin and had absolved all the rest of the team of any responsibility. Sirius was still regarded as a hero by virtue of being a member of the team, and even more so now that he had acquitted himself so well in his first match.

James, however, was not content to bask in the glory of a good performance as long as it was under the shadow of a loss. He was quite vitriolic on the subject of Towler.

"If I had been Seeker," he said for the umpteenth time several weeks later, "I'm sure we would have won."

Neither Sirius nor Peter responded, and James had surely only felt safe repeating his argument at this particular time because Remus had taken ill again and was put up in the infirmary. Where Sirius and Peter's primary tactic included silence, Remus had become so annoyed in the last few days that he had taken to snapping at James quite irritably anytime he brought up the subject.

Taking the silence as acquiescence, he continued. "I did better than Towler at trials, and I think we all ought to get together and demand that Thomas move me to her position for the next game."

That was a new part of his argument, and Sirius raised an eyebrow in surprise.

They had reached the stairs of the Astronomy Tower by then. As they headed upwards, Sirius's voice echoed off the stones surrounding them. "Thomas'd never do that. You're better than Towler at Seeker, but the reserve Chaser is loads worse than you at Chasing. We've already got the best team possible, considering."

James scowled quite unattractively, but he was quiet for the rest of the climb and sulked in silence as they attempted to fill out their star charts with the light of the full moon obscuring many of the stars.

The next day was Sirius's thirteenth birthday. Despite the late night in Astronomy the night before, he got up bright and early in order to receive his owl post at breakfast. Sure enough, he received loads of presents from his family. To his surprise, he also received a few from his Slytherin
friends, who had apparently decided to send them by owl rather than try to track him down throughout the day. Avery and Malfoy had both sent packages, and there was one that said it was from the Lestrange siblings, except it was clearly written in Lucilla's hand. Sirius tried not to be disappointed that Rabastan hadn't sent him anything personally, even though he knew from Narcissa's party that the siblings' common practice must be to send one gift together.

Of course he also received presents from Peter, James, and, after he finally rejoined them during lunch, Remus. All in all it had been a wonderful birthday—much better than the year before, to be sure—even before he joined Janice in the library that afternoon. Their meetings had necessarily been scaled back quite a bit due to his Quidditch practices, but they still tried to meet at least twice a week, either during shared breaks or after classes.

Today she was waiting with a beautifully wrapped gold package with a bright red bow.

"Happy birthday, Siri!" she said as excitably as she could without Madam Pince hearing.

Sirius grinned happily and carefully unwrapped the package. (He would normally tear into his packages without abandon, but he had ascertained over the years with his mother, aunts, and cousins that girls preferred it if he were much more respectful of the elaborate jobs they'd done with the wrapping.) It was a book on Muggle motorbikes. Sirius stared at it in surprise.

Janice shifted anxiously next to him "Do you like it? I tried to think what you wouldn't already have, and I noticed that you read that book on Muggle transportation whenever you're waiting for me here…"

She trailed off uncertainly, but by that time Sirius had regained his composure. He smiled at her.

"I love it."

He had flipped the cover open and perused the table of contents for several seconds before the thought occurred to him.

He glanced back at her. "Er, Jan… When is your birthday?"

"Oh, it was back in September." She frowned at his guilty look and rushed on to say, "Oh, don't be sorry; you didn't know!"

"No, but I should have thought to ask," Sirius admitted. Although Blacks didn't apologize, as he had been taught many times, he distinctly remembered that Father had apologized to Mother and Grandfather Arcturus had apologized to Grandmother Melania, before she had died, several times to great effect. Therefore, he felt justified in saying, "I'm sorry."

She flushed prettily. "You're so sweet."

Sirius rather doubted that he was any such thing, but he didn't have time to say so before she had pressed her lips against his. He had spent a rather alarming amount of time over the past weeks thinking about the first and only other time she had done this, so although he was surprised, he was prepared. He kissed her back willingly, and this time their lips stayed pressed together much longer than a few seconds.

He wandered back to the common room a couple of hours later with a large grin on his face and no more homework done than he'd had before. If his dorm mates were curious about his odd mood, they didn't have time to ask about it before he found the plain brown package on his bed.

"What's this?" he asked as he let his book bag drop on top of his trunk.
When none of his friends seemed to have any idea, Remus suggested, "Maybe someone asked the house-elves to leave it for you."

There wasn't any writing on the brown paper, nor was there any card attached. Sirius curiously tore into the package, but he abruptly stopped all movement when he saw what was inside.

"What is it?" asked Peter.

When Sirius didn't answer or make any move to pull the contents out of the box, his three friends crowded around to peer inside.

James was the first pull back, sneering a bit in distaste. "Who would send you that? It must be from a Slytherin, so you'd better be careful it doesn't bite you or something."

He didn't reply, but the metal serpent hissed up at him from its place nestled inside the box. When he reached inside, it willingly wrapped itself around his wrist, and Sirius's heart thudded uncomfortably in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it: Sirius and James have made up and decided to play nicely. And, you know, a lot of other stuff also happened.

Thank you for the bookmarks, kudos, and comments! Please do drop me a line to let me know if there's anything you particularly like or dislike; I really appreciate all of the feedback I've received.

Porskoff Ploy: When one Catcher flies upwards to draw the other team off, then drops the Quaffle to another Catcher waiting directly below. The Gryffindors have an "interesting take" on it because of the inclusion of a third Chaser (Sirius) in the ploy.

Blagging: Grabbing the end of another player's broom to impede their movement. Hooch was a bit harsh to call this on Rabastan under the circumstances, but I'm sure that the previous six fouls in half an hour had her a bit on edge.
Unfortunately for Walburga, Christmas that year fell on a Monday. She was undoubtedly glad to meet her son at King's Cross on Friday, but she was far less pleased that apparently every other family in wizarding Britain had also decided to descend on Diagon Alley over the weekend.

"I have no idea why they let the riffraff come down this way," she said, wrinkling her nose in distaste as people in the crowd brushed past her. "Most of them cannot afford to buy anything in this part of the alley."

She clutched Sirius's arm even tighter, as if she were afraid that someone might snatch him away from her. He was as tall as she was now, but he doubted that his mother would ever see him as anything other than a baby who needed protecting.

"I'm sure they just want to look at the holiday decorations, Mother." His voice cracked on her name, and he scowled in irritation. It had started doing that a couple of weeks after his birthday at the end of November. "I'm sure it'll be more crowded tomorrow, on Christmas Eve."

She sniffed. "You know how I hate coming here when the common people are about."

She had only agreed to the trip because he had grown so much over the term, and she couldn't stand seeing his ankles and wrists poking out of his clothes. Sirius still had shopping to do, but he really couldn't think how he would purchase a gift for Janice with his mother on his arm, if he could even figure out what he was supposed to buy her in the first place. He could hardly ask his mother for advice on what sort of present would be appropriate for a girlfriend.

At least not for another few years, when the girlfriend was some snotty pure-blood she'd picked out for him and the gift was an engagement ring. He frowned momentarily at the thought but regained control of his expression before his mother noticed.

"All right, Mother," he said finally, turning to guide them back in the direction of the Apparition area. "You know I hate for you to be uncomfortable."

It was not easy to escape his mother's clutches even after they returned to Grimmauld Place, as she insisted on him sitting with her for the rest of the afternoon and then sitting next to her at dinner. Apparently the fact that he was visibly growing up had inspired her to heretofore unseen levels of maternal hovering. Sirius's agitation continued to increase as the hours passed. Finally, after his mother had mercifully retired for the evening with Kreacher bouncing along behind her carrying the train of her evening robe, he crept to his father's study and lightly knocked on the door.

"Come," came the serious voice from within.

Sirius sighed in relief—he hadn't been sure that his father would still be up at this hour—and pushed until the heavy oak door admitted him to his father's private sanctum. Then he stopped in the doorway, halfway in and halfway out of the room, and worried his slipper-clad toe into the thick carpet.

Orion regarded him with an expression halfway between amusement and concern. "What did you do?"

It was a fair enough question, Sirius had to admit.
"Erm, nothing," he replied, although this response didn't convince either his father or himself. (After all, it wasn't strictly true that he hadn't done anything, even if he hadn't actually come to confess any of his misdeeds.) He looked up from the carpet—which was really a lovely shade of green, and he wondered briefly if it was dyed or spelled, then mentally shook himself to stop avoiding what he'd come here to do—to meet his father's bemused eyes, and suddenly it all came spilling out.

"Only I have this girlfriend—I mean, I didn't want her to be my girlfriend, at first, and I never asked her or anything, but she kind of just made herself my girlfriend, and now I feel like I've got to buy her a Christmas gift because she bought me a birthday present and I've been snogging her in the library, and I suppose you really ought to buy presents for people you've—"

"You—WHAT?" Orion interrupted.

His eyebrows had risen during that little speech until they had disappeared underneath the longish black hair that, at this time of night, had escaped from its proper place and was falling across his forehead.

Sirius waved his hands helplessly. "I have this—"

Orion held up his hand for silence, only to realize with a start that the quill he'd forgotten he'd been holding was by now terribly misshapen between his fingers.

"I heard you the first time," he said in mixed surprise and exasperation. He came up with half a dozen colorful expressions in the few seconds it took him to take out his wand and repair the splotches of ink he'd created on the parchment he'd been working on, then he looked up suddenly at his son, who was still hovering in the doorway and looking like he might turn and bolt any second.

"What are you doing? Come in and close the door before someone else hears you…. Merlin, if your mother…"

Really, Sirius didn't need any more incentive than that.

After he'd settled himself into a deep velvet chair, father and son stared at each other across the great ebony desk. Orion cleared his throat as if he were getting ready to speak, then settled back into his seat as if someone had pulled his plug and let out all his air. Sirius felt a flush creeping up his neck.

"So…" the elder eventually began, after it was clear that his son had nothing more to say. "Why exactly did you tell me this?"

"Oh, right, I uh… don't have any idea what sort of Christmas gift I should buy her."

Under his father's stern gaze, Sirius thought briefly that it might have been a better idea to ask Bellatrix or even Narcissa—well maybe not Narcissa; he was mad at her, seeing as he was fairly certain that she had something to do with whatever was going on with Rabastan—about what sort of present was appropriate for a recent sort-of-girlfriend who had really soft lips. He'd have asked Rabastan, except the other boy wouldn't talk to him, and he couldn't ask Malfoy because Malfoy'd tell Narcissa for sure,…. Orion cleared his throat again to draw his son's mind back down to Earth. "Ah, I see. Well, what did she give you for your birthday?"

"A book," Sirius answered easily, much calmer now that they were actually talking about
unembarrassing facts. He thought that it would probably be best not to mention to his father that it was a book on Muggle motorbikes, but he did add, "She’d noticed that I always pick a certain book off the shelf when I'm waiting for her, so she got me one on the subject."

But that had just brought Orion's attention back to the embarrassing bits, and he asked, "The library, eh? What sort of snoggi—?"

"Father!" The blush crept back up into Sirius's face.

"Right. That kind." Orion grinned. "Well, she chose a personal gift based on observations she'd made about you, so you really have to pick something similarly personal. What do you notice about her?"

Don't say she has a nice mouth. Don't say she has a nice mouth.

"Curls!" Sirius blurted. "I mean, she has really curly hair, and it's always going everywhere and she's always messing with it."

Orion was beaming at him now in a way that made Sirius distinctly uncomfortable but also, inexplicably, sort of satisfied.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed. "Tomorrow you can snag one of your mother's ladies' magazines. They have all sorts of female frippery on offer in there, and I'm sure you can find some sort of decoration to do with curly hair. Your mother certainly finds more than enough."

It was a good plan, except, "Tomorrow's Christmas Eve."

"Oh, well, you just include a bucketful of Galleons with your order and they do it up all pretty for you and send it directly to her the same day," Orion explained.

Sirius raised his own eyebrows then, a smile creeping onto his features. "Experienced with last-minute presents, are you?"

His father chuckled, gesturing with his hands to shoo his son out of his study. "Sirius, you are not the only devilishly handsome man in this family, nor the only one whose mouth outpaces his mind."

Sirius had just rounded the doorway into the corridor, laughing still, when his father called him back. He poked his head back around the doorframe and met his father's slightly worried gray eyes.

"Who is it anyway? Is she a pure-blood?"

He blinked for a moment in surprise, although, upon reflection, he really shouldn't have been the least bit caught off guard by the question. "Janice Edgecomb."

"Ah, a few generations pure then." His father nervously pushed his hair off his forehead. "Son, you realize that you can't marry her?"

Sirius gaped at him for a moment, then, his voice cracking, exclaimed, "I'm thirteen!"

His father's lips turned up, just a bit. "Just don't get too attached. And best not mention it to your grandfather. Er… or your mother. Or your other grandfather…. Actually, why don't we just keep it between us?"

Sirius was still pondering his father's words the next day, long after he'd filched one of his
mother's magazines and sent off his owl order for a pair of sapphire hair combs that were charmed
to style curls in various ways "without flattening or frizzing," according to the advertisement. His
father had assured him that the gift was expensive enough to impress her but not so over-the-top as
to seem like he was showing off, and he had further suggested that Sirius write a handwritten note
to be delivered with the package.

Sirius was coming to realize that there was much more to his father than just his relationship with
Sirius's mother.

He quickly put aside those thoughts later that evening when he arrived in Grandfather Pollux and
Grandmother Irma's drawing room. Rodolphus was, of course, in attendance with Bellatrix. And it
appeared that the Malfoys had been Officially Accepted into the Family, since Mr. Malfoy was in
one corner talking to Grandfather while, on the other side of the room, his son had his head bent
low to listen to Cissy whisper in his ear.

Sirius brushed past his brother and made his way over to his favorite cousin and her husband.

"Siri!" Bellatrix greeted him with a wide grin.

He ignored her, as he was so focused on her husband. "You." He pointed a finger at the large
man's chest. "What's wrong with your brother?"

"Wrong?" Rodolphus growled, eyeing the finger as if he was considering snapping it off. "There's
nothing wrong with my brother."

Sirius glared at him. "Well, you tell him that he'd better get over whatever's not wrong with him
before I decide I'm better off without him anyway."

If he had been less angry, then perhaps he would have discerned from his new cousin's slack-
jawed expression that there had been some sort of fundamental miscommunication. But he was
very angry that Rabastan had avoided him for the last weeks of term even after sending him such a
wonderful birthday present. He had made a habit out of disappearing around corners or behind
doors whenever Sirius almost had him cornered. (If that boy didn't turn out to have an Invisibility
Cloak, Sirius would eat his boots.) He realized with a start that he had been absently rubbing his
wrist where the serpent bracelet should be, if he hadn't refused to wear it as long as the older boy
was ignoring him, and he crossed his arms across his chest to stop himself.

Bellatrix shared a glance with Rodolphus. "Siri, darling—"

"And," Sirius spoke over her, rising his voice just a bit, "tell him to stop acting like a scared
Hufflepuff who does whatever his stupid sister says!"

The older man's glacial eyes were glittering now, and there was the barest twitch at the corner of
his mouth that Sirius would have missed if he hadn't been so used to the younger brother's
expressions. "Why don't you tell him yourself?"

"I would if he wasn't hiding from me!"

They were called for dinner then, and with one last sweep of his furious gaze over both of them
(his anger quite irrationally extending to Bellatrix because of her association with Rodolphus, who
was in turn associated with Rabastan) Sirius stalked away to find a seat at the table.

His trouble this year, unlike last year when no one had wanted to sit with him, was avoiding the
people he didn't want to sit beside. He steadfastly avoided Cissy and Lucius, as he was furious at
her over the Lestrange situation and was avoiding her boyfriend by association. He avoided
Belley and Rodolphus for the same reason. He avoided his father because the older man kept
sending him secretive little smiles that made Sirius quite uncomfortable, and he avoided his mother because he'd rather not eat Christmas Eve dinner with her hovering over him as if he were a toddler.

He ended up more or less happily situated between Grandmother Irma and Mr. Malfoy. The feast was laid out as sumptuously as ever, and he thought that he would have quite enjoyed it had it not been for the absolutely excruciating conversation around the table.

"It's so wonderful to have you and your delightful son join our family tonight," Grandmother Irma expressed the sentiment for what must have been the dozenth time. Mr. Malfoy offered her a tight smile over Sirius's head.

Across the table, Aunt Druella and Bellatrix had managed to corner Andy between them, and she was clearly unhappy with the situation.

"Dear, there really must be at least one boy whom you find acceptable," her mother was saying. "Surely you don't want to be alone? Bella, tell her how wonderful it is to be married."

Rodolphus offered his wife a self-satisfied grin.

Bella rolled her eyes at him and turned to face her sister. "Honestly, Andy, if you don't like any of the men your own age, I could introduce you to a few of my associates who are a bit older."

Andy looked quite pale. With a barely discernable "Please excuse me," she pushed her plate away and rushed from the table, leaving her mother and sister staring after her in confusion and consternation.

Rodolphus noticed Sirius staring and, with a dangerous smirk in his direction, asked, "What about Sirius? Isn't the age difference between him and Andromeda the same as between his own parents?"

From Rodolphus's other side, Regulus let a laugh escape before he was able to control himself. Sirius only had time to silently scowl at both of them before his attention was drawn by his name being spoken further down the table.

"You absolutely must send me an owl immediately if Sirius needs new clothing before the summer holiday. He won't do it himself, you know. Boys are quite useless at these things," Walburga was saying quite loudly so that Narcissa could hear her from across and a little down the table.

Rodolphus's smirk grew. Lucius tried to raise his goblet to his mouth to hide his laugh, but didn't quite succeed.

Narcissa, on the other hand, tutted in sympathy.

"Hush, Lucius!" she commanded sharply. Then, without pause, she turned to her aunt and continued, "I understand perfectly, Aunt. I keep a magical measuring tape at school for just this sort of thing."

Mr. Malfoy and the other men who had heard the exchange shared looks of amusement as a flush crept up Lucius's neck, but the women all nodded along with Cissy and continued their conversation about clothing, as if there was nothing worth remarking upon about her treatment of her errant boyfriend.

Sirius sank further into his chair and tried to tune everybody out so that he could enjoy his goose in peace.
The atmosphere in the Great Hall was something of a welcome relief for Sirius on his first morning back at Hogwarts a week and a half later. The rest of his holiday had not gone much better than the beginning, his Christmas presents notwithstanding. His mother had continued to hover and fret, and his father had continued to express his amusement over their late night conversation. Furthermore, he had wanted to schedule at least one meeting with Dolohov, but the dueling instructor had sent an owl a few days after Christmas to say that he had unavoidable engagements in the first days of January and wouldn't be able to get away. Grandfather Arcturus had accordingly taken the opportunity to test Sirius's dueling knowledge, which wasn't nearly as fun for Sirius as his sessions with Dolohov.

What was worse, Regulus's jealousy towards his older brother had returned with full force as a result of all the attention Sirius had received. He had only just begun to loosen up a bit, and Sirius was disappointed that they were back to the hostility of last year.

James, on the other hand, seemed to be quite unhappy to be back at school.

"Ugh, Merlin…" he grumped as he threw himself down on the bench, tossing his bag carelessly somewhere near their feet. "Why do classes have to start so early?"

Sirius closed his eyes for a moment so that he wouldn't roll them in public. He was used to getting to breakfast early so that he would have time to look back over his homework and assignments for the day, but James had held him up this morning so that they only had about twenty minutes to eat and get to the Potions classroom.

Remus peeked one brown eye over the top of his Potions textbook and said, "If you'd go to bed at a reasonable hour, you wouldn't have so much trouble getting up."

"Lay off, Remus," replied James cheerfully. "And let me see your Potions notes."

But Remus's dull hair was all that remained visible over the top of his book. With a scowl, James turned to Sirius.

"You don't want mine," Sirius preempted him as he chased a bit of egg around with his fork. "I'm rubbish in Potions."

Peter leaned around Sirius. "You can look at mine."

But James's chortle made the smaller boy freeze and, with a hurt look in Sirius's direction, he slumped back down and glared into his plate. Sirius guessed that Potter must not have been aware of how well Peter did in Potions. And why would he, really, given that Professor Slughorn didn't give Peter much praise at all next to Snape and Evans, and Peter himself didn't talk much about his abilities outside of his and Sirius's Dark Arts practice? If the other boy were to judge Peter's understanding in Potions based on his understanding in Charms and Defense, it wasn't a big surprise that he assumed Peter's notes weren't worth looking at.

Peter was quiet through the rest of breakfast and the walk down to the dungeons, and he ignored Sirius when the group separated so that Sirius and Peter could take their seats near the front of the classroom while Remus and James took theirs near the back.

As soon as Slughorn was distracted with his lecture, Sirius wrote Peter a note and slid it towards the center of their table.

*It's his loss. I think you shouldn't offer to help him even if he wises up and asks you later.*
Peter sniffed and sent Sirius a little glare, but Sirius could see how his tense body relaxed a bit and how he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

"Can anyone tell me the purpose of the anti-clockwise stirs?" Slughorn was asking the class.

They were discussing the Hair-Raising Potion in class today, and although Sirius remembered the ingredients, he really had no idea about anti-clockwise stirs. Peter's hand shot up and he bounced a bit in his seat.

Slughorn's eyes swept over the room. "Ah, Miss Evans!"

Peter dropped his hand with a disappointed sigh.

Sirius felt sorry for his friend as he watched the same scene play out over and over, sometimes with Evans but other times with Snape or with any other student except Peter. He had learned from his cousins that Slughorn tended to pick his favorites and blatantly favor them even to the exclusion of others, and unfortunately for Peter he was neither the smartest student in the class nor the best connected nor the most charming.

They had Transfiguration right after Potions, and he found himself feeling particularly altruistic towards his friend, who was still moping about his earlier experiences.

"This term we will begin discussing the theory of object-to-animal transfigurations," Professor McGonagall informed them in her usual no-nonsense tone. "Can anyone tell me why object-to-animal transfigurations will be more difficult than the animal-to-object transfigurations we have studied up to this point?"

Sirius quickly scribbled on a bit of parchment and slid it towards his friend.

"Bringing it to life."

Peter stared at it for a few moments before turning a confused expression in Sirius's direction. Sirius nodded and gave his friend his most encouraging look. Peter slowly raised his hand, apparently to his own confusion as much as to Professor McGonagall's.

"Mr. Pettigrew," she said, her voice colored with so much surprise that it was almost a question.

"Uh…” He looked a bit shocked that she had actually called on him. "Bringing it to life?"

His words also came out more like a question than an answer, but at McGonagall's nod he all but beamed at the stern woman in his delight at having gotten it correct.

Professor McGonagall was looking at him shrewdly now, her lips pursed together. "And, Mr. Pettigrew, can you tell me why exactly this would make it more difficult?"

Peter's eyes widened in panic. "Erm… uh… that is…"

Sirius almost sighed in exasperation that Peter couldn't suss out the complete answer on his own, but nonetheless he quickly circled a sentence in the notes he had made when preparing for class, and Peter's eyes darted over to his side of the desk.

"Because you have to create a spark of life."

The professor's eyes were narrowed on them now, but after a few moments she nodded turned back to the rest of the class.
"Yes, object-to-animal transfigurations are so difficult because one must infuse the transfigured animal with enough magic—a 'spark of life,' to use Mr. Pettigrew's terminology—in order for it to seem alive and to act like a real animal." She swept across the front of the classroom, pinning all of her students with her strictest gaze as she went. "Of course, we cannot actually create life from non-life. Can anyone explain why not?"

The lesson continued without incident, although most of the students seemed either bored or confused by the discussion of the last of the Principle Exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, which said that one could not create real life from non-life. Sirius personally found the lecture fascinating, and he was a bit disappointed that they were only going to work on transfiguring objects into proper animal forms the rest of the year. He would have to wait until third year before they began trying to animate the animals, but he already knew that he would work on it himself in his spare time.

When the students were filing out of the classroom, Professor McGonagall called him back. He and Peter shared a wide-eyed glance before the shorter boy all but ran out of the room lest he also be asked to remain. Sirius rolled his eyes heavenward at his friend's willingness to abandon him after he'd helped him.

He turned back to face her and approached the desk at the front of the rows of desks. "Yes, Professor McGonagall?"

She watched him with suspicious eyes and a hard mouth. "Why did you give Mr. Pettigrew the answer?"

"Because he didn't know it."

Sirius almost immediately regretted his snappy reply as soon as he'd said it, and the professor didn't appear too appreciative of it herself.

"Am I correct in assuming, Mr. Black," she began sternly, "that you also gave him the answer to my first question?" Sirius saw no point in denying it, so he nodded in the affirmative, after which Professor McGonagall studied him intensely for several long seconds before asking, "Why would you do such a thing?"

He debated with himself for a few moments whether he should tell her—whether she would even care or understand his reasons if he did tell her—before he decided that there was no real reason not to.

"I thought that he would feel better if he could answer a question in class," he finally explained. "This morning James laughed at him when Peter offered his Potions notes, and then Professor Slughorn never called on him, even though Peter raised his hand all the time because he really did know the answers."

McGonagall regarded him with a slightly softer expression. "That's very noble of you, Mr. Black. However, if Mr. Pettigrew is going to get attention for answering questions in my class, he will need to earn it himself in the future."

Sirius breathed out heavily through his nose. "Yes, Professor."

She was riffling through papers on her desk, and Sirius figured that he had been dismissed. He hitched his bag up further onto his shoulder and turned for the door. He was almost out of the room when she called his name. He turned back around with a sigh.

"I will have to take five points from Gryffindor for cheating."
He sighed again but nodded his acceptance.

"However," she continued with a slight smile, "I believe that I can spare five points to Gryffindor for your having known the correct answers, and I suppose you must have another five for coming to the aid of a fellow student."

It took Sirius a few seconds to react, but when he did he offered his professor a wide grin, white teeth flashing in the sunlight coming through the windows.

"Thank you, Professor," he said, affecting a duly solemn tone despite his smile, then she shooed him out of her classroom and he quickly rounded the corner into the corridor.

His friends hadn't waited for him, but he couldn't blame them too much. They had lunch now, and he certainly wouldn't have wanted to wait for any of them if it had been the other way around. He entered the Great Hall a few minutes later and immediately made his way to the seats that he and his friends favored near the center of the table, although he spared a glance for the Slytherin table. Rabastan's back was to him, as usual, and Narcissa was speaking with the girl sitting next to her and didn't notice him looking. Malfoy, however, caught his eye and gave him a slight nod.

"There you are!" cried James, and Sirius turned his attention back to his friends. "What did McGonagall want?"

Peter looked at him warily, his small eyes seeming to beg that his friend not tell the truth, which would only lead to him having to bring up what had happened earlier that morning in order to explain his actions.

Sirius shrugged. "Nothing important. She just wanted to talk about the essay I handed in before the break. Gave me five points for it, too."

Potter and Lupin seemed to take his word at face value without any questions. Sirius supposed that he had always been a rather good liar.

"Five points!" Remus exclaimed. "Could I read your essay later, to see what sort of things you said?"

But Sirius never had to answer, as James spoke over the rest of them. "I bet she's just taking an excuse to add points since the last Quidditch match was such a low-scoring one. We need to start training for our next match in March if we want any chance of winning either the Quidditch Cup or the House Cup."

As it invariably went when talk of Quidditch was involved, Sirius, James, and Peter spoke enthusiastically—James and Peter more enthusiastically than Sirius—while Remus buried his nose in a book. This was still the state of affairs as they began the walk to the Defense classroom, and for that reason none of them noticed Snape and Evans until James plowed headlong into the sallow Slytherin.

"Watch where you're going, you imbecile!" cried the smaller boy.

James flushed brilliant red in his anger. "If you hadn't been standing directly in front of the stairs —"

But Snape cut him off, declaring, "It's a good thing you're talented at Quidditch, because apparently you don't have the brains to pay attention to anything else!"

From behind his friend, Sirius snorted. "Wish you had more brawn yourself, do you? I know you tried out for the Slytherin team and didn't make it."
"Well I'm sure he had to use one of those decrepit school brooms!" James added with a peal of laughter.

Snape turned white in his fury. Sirius was still a quicker draw than Snape, and James was standing between them. James yelped and leapt backwards when the hex hit him, colliding hard with Sirius as he fell. Sirius barely kept his balance and only just managed to bring his book bag up to take the impact of whatever hex Snape had sent his way. He was glad that the near-instinctive reactions Dolohov had pounded into him over the summer—sometimes literally—had apparently survived the months without a dueling lesson quite intact.

He really, truly wanted to use one of the Darkest and most painful curses he knew on Snape, but he was not yet so angry that his desires overwhelmed his good sense. He settled for merely Disarming the other boy.

No sooner had he caught the wand than someone snatched it out of his hand from behind.

"Oi!" he cried, spinning around to give the interloper a piece of his mind. It was Rabastan Lestrange. The words died on his tongue, and they succeeded at nothing more than staring at each other for several long seconds.

Then, with the menacing air that must have been inborn in him, Rabastan pocketed Snape's wand and shot the boy a look that could have frightened the Bloody Baron. "Snape, have we not had words about you harassing Black?"

He had grabbed hold of the smaller Slytherin by the back of the neck and propelled him halfway across the entrance hall before anyone else had time to react. Snape appeared to attempt to struggle against the grip, but Rabastan shook him violently, and by the time they reached the stairs that led down to the dungeons he was taking the treatment as placidly as a newborn kitten.

Evans appeared at once to be quite frightened for her friend and working herself into righteous indignation, and Sirius figured that he had better nip any ideas she had in the bud.

"There are rules in Slytherin that Snape knows better than to break, Evans," he addressed her seriously, trying to balance his voice somewhere between stern and understanding. "You'll only cause more trouble for him with his own house if you tattle on Lestrange, and anyway Rabastan won't really hurt him."

The bell signaling the end of the lunch hour had chimed by then, and students had begun to pour out of the Great Hall. They were quickly hustled along their way up the stairs by the crowd behind them, and Sirius could only hope that Evans had taken his words to heart.

And, of course, wonder whether Rabastan had only acted because Snape had been violating a direct order from the older Slytherins, or if he had done it for Sirius personally.

The thought occupied his mind all afternoon until something much more pressing distracted him. That night at dinner, the Great Hall suddenly filled with owls carrying a special edition of the *Daily Prophet* to all the staff and students who subscribed. *More magical attacks on Muggle villages!* screamed the headline, and Sirius could hear gasps and cries all around him. He unfolded his paper as quickly as he could.

*There have been two more attacks today by wizards on Muggle villages. These attacks, in isolated villages in Derbyshire and Hampshire, mirror attacks that occurred in Wiltshire and Yorkshire on New Year's Day. Attackers wearing black robes and white masks dragged Muggleborn witches and wizards and their families into the streets, where they burn them alive in a cruel mockery of...*
the witch hunts that happened hundreds of years ago. The attackers then set fire to any nearby Muggle homes and killed any people inside.

As of this afternoon, the Ministry has officially confirmed that these attacks were all carried out by Death Eaters, a group of pure-blood supremacists headed by a Dark wizard known only as Lord Voldemort. The Ministry has yet to comment on the rumors that the many werewolf attacks and the rash of disappearances over the past two years are connected to the Death Eaters.

Muggleborn witches and wizards and their families are being advised to remain extra vigilant and to report any suspicious activity immediately to the special Department of Magical Law Enforcement task force that had been set up to handle this terrorist group.

Other pages of the Prophet went on to describe the attacks and the Death Eaters in more detail, but Sirius didn't bother to read them yet. He was thinking back on hushed whispers and hastily redirected conversations. He wondered how much his family knew and how much they had been hiding from him.

Weeks passed without anything more exciting happening than Quidditch practice and his continued meetings with Janice in the library. She had apparently thoroughly enjoyed his gift—in fact, she wore her new hair combs nearly every day, and she had informed him that she was only halfway through the guidebook of possible hairstyles that had come with it—and Sirius had thoroughly enjoyed her thanks. He thought that they must both be getting better at kissing, because it became more pleasant every time they did it.

He was also quite sure that Janice had been sharing the details of their encounters with her friends, because all of them were acting even sillier around him than usual. He had been tempted, therefore, to share the details with his own friends or with the various other first-, second-, and third-year boys who had asked him how far they'd gone, but he had discovered quite by accident that leaving a shroud of mystery over it only made him all the more popular. Apparently other boys were quite happy to assume the worst—or was that the best?—if left to fill in the details for themselves.

As for Quidditch, Thomas was pressing them harder than ever in light of their earlier loss against Slytherin. Given that their next match wasn't until the second week in March, Sirius found the intense practice schedule to be a bit ridiculous. He had even implemented Muggle techniques!

"When I was home over the holidays," Thomas had informed them at their first team meeting of the term, "I talked with my brother about how practices are handled for his football team."

There had followed a long explanation of exactly what Muggle football was, but to Sirius it had sounded deadly dull—not even any flying, or balls that could kill you!—and the only thing he had really gleaned from the whole affair was that they were now expected to run about and do various Muggle exercises at the start of every practice.

He thought about quitting the team, but he figured that might be a bit suspicious to everyone. Plus Potter would probably murder him in his sleep.

At the end of February, they all trudged down to the pitch with the rest of the student body to watch the Ravenclaw versus Slytherin match. The only notable exception was Remus, who had apparently taken ill again the night before. Sirius had noticed that he looked a bit peaky the day before, but he hadn't thought the other boy had needed the hospital wing. James had announced that he was carrying Lupin to the infirmary and that they didn't need anyone else to go with them, and off they had gone by themselves. It had all been suspicious, of course, but Sirius hadn't been able to quickly think of a way to follow them without being detected.
Maybe I should ask Rabastan how he's been avoiding me, he thought to himself, not a little bitterly.

Still, he found himself secretly cheering for Slytherin—secretly because his friends and fellow Gryffindors had looked absolutely horrified when he had tried to do it openly—and for Lestrange in particular. Every time the commentator announced "LESTRANGE SCORES!" he felt his heart clench a little bit and remembered that night last winter when he had overheard Rabastan and Malfoy talking about him.

Slytherin annihilated Ravenclaw three hundred and seventy to sixty, so the commentator said Lestrange's name quite a lot.

After the game, James and Thomas had gone off to sulk and plot out any conceivable way that Gryffindor might still win the Quidditch Cup given Slytherin's now enormous lead in points, and Remus still hadn't returned, so Sirius and Peter took the opportunity to sneak down to their room in the dungeons.

"My grandfather wrote to me about your father's potions books," he told his friend. "Here, listen to this: 'In my limited potions experience, the annotations seem quite spot on and the new recipes promising. Your father agrees. I will have him brew one of the more useful potions and test the results, and if all goes as planned perhaps your friend would like to discuss having a potions master look the books over.' That sounds promising. Maybe you can sell some of your father's inventions and make a few Galleons."

Peter seemed quite excited by the news from Arcturus, but he was obviously conflicted about Sirius's idea. He shook his head. "I'm not sure I want to sell them. They're all I have left of my father, you know? It would be like selling his body to be harvested for ingredients. I'll have to think about it."

Sirius didn't comprehend it at all, actually, but then again he figured that he really ought not to try to understand what it would be like to lose a parent when he still had almost his entire family, except for his paternal grandmother.

They studied in silence for a while longer, Peter doing his Astronomy homework and Sirius reading out of a new Dark Arts book he'd bought over Christmas and occasionally trying out a spell.

Then Peter broke in with, "Sirius, can I borrow your moon chart? I left mine in the dorm."

"Oh, yeah, hold on."

Since Sirius's book bag came equipped with an Undetectable Extension Charm and a Featherlight Charm, he always carried all of his books with him at all times just for convenience. He had already handed the moon chart over to Peter and settled back onto his table when the thought hit him like a ton of bricks. He leapt back down from the table and was already halfway across the room before Peter could react.

"Let me see that!" He snatched the chart out of Peter's grasp without waiting for a reaction, and a few moments later he was staggering backwards as if he'd been hit in the stomach with a Bludger.

Peter grabbed onto his forearm as if he was afraid that Sirius might fall over.

"What's wrong?" he asked in alarm.

Sirius laid the chart onto the desk and pointed at two of the dates. "There was a full moon last
night and on the night before my birthday!" His friend still looked alarmed and more than a little confused, and Sirius flung his hands in the air in agitation. "Lupin! He's been ill on the nights of the full moon!"

"Wha—what?" stuttered Peter, turning to consult the moon chart as if he might find that Sirius had been mistaken.

"It all makes sense…." Sirius was pacing back and forth between the desk and the door of the small room, muttering more to himself than to his friend. "Except it doesn't make sense at all!"

Certainly lycanthropy made sense of a lot of Lupin's symptoms, now that Sirius had a theory and the benefit of hindsight. He was always ill about once a month, then tired for several days, then perfectly fine for about three weeks until he suddenly became tired and quite irritable, then he had to spend another night in the hospital wing. (Only Sirius really doubted that a werewolf was actually spending time in the infirmary during full moons, which meant that the professors, or at least the school nurse, had to be in on it!)

Except Sirius had been taught his entire life that werewolves were little better than dangerous, mindless beasts even when the moon wasn't full. He remembered that his grandfather had once come home quite agitated because there had been a case about a werewolf who ate human flesh and infected others even without a full moon. But he'd been sharing a dorm with Remus for over a year and half, and the other boy had never been violent or appeared dangerous that he could remember.

It made so much sense, and yet it shouldn't make sense.

"What do we do?" Peter asked him, his eyes wide.

Sirius shook his head in disbelief. "Maybe two dates is just a coincidence? We don't remember the exact dates of the other times he was sick, so I think we should wait and see if he's sick again on the next full moon before we do anything."

However, he really didn't think that he was going to be able to act completely normal around the other boy while they waited.

That agreed, Sirius and Peter found that they were both too distracted to be productive, so they began to make their way back towards the common room. It turned out that Sirius was correct about not being able to act completely normal around Remus, but they both tried valiantly. He seemed as mild tempered as ever, and he even asked them about the Quidditch match he'd missed and asked Peter if he wanted to work on their Charms essays together.

Over the next days and weeks, Sirius convinced himself quite thoroughly that he had been wrong. There was absolutely no way a boy like Remus Lupin could be a werewolf, and he was certain that when the next full moon came he and Peter would laugh at themselves for their suspicions. Therefore, he soundly put it out of his mind as much as possible.

He found that pouring his energy into his animosity towards Snape and his anger at Rabastan worked quite well as distractions. James's hatred for Snape had apparently been firmly cemented after the incident in the entrance hall, as he was sure that the Slytherin had hit him with some sort of Dark curse and he still hated anything to do with the Dark Arts. Although his friend's attitude towards the Arts was quite troubling, Sirius was glad for his willingness to target Snape.

They had begun a quest to hex or jinx the other boy as much as possible, everything from turning his robes different colors to more serious attacks whenever they caught him alone in the corridors. Snape had given almost as good as he got, of course, and they had earned themselves a month's
worth of detentions within a couple of weeks, but Sirius thought it was a small price to pay.

Not to mention that it actually seem to raise their social status among the younger students, who apparently saw them as some sort of fearless heroes for getting so many detentions.

Rabastan was another kind of problem entirely, one that Sirius found that he couldn't ask for any help with. Certainly his Gryffindor friends were not going to help, and none of the Slytherins were in a position to offer aid either. After mulling it over and getting increasingly angry and frustrated the longer he went, Sirius came to a decision and made his way to the Slytherin common room. He didn't know the password, but it was nothing to strong arm a passing first year into giving it to him.

Everyone did a double take when he stomped purposefully across the dimly lit dungeon and straight towards his intended target. Rabastan was sitting at a table with Malfoy and a few older boys Sirius didn't know, and he looked horrified at the Gryffindor's approach.

"You!" Sirius declared, leaving no room for questions. Where he had only pointed in Rodolphus's direction over Christmas, he actually poked Rabastan hard in the chest.

Lestrange spluttered. "You—you poked me!"

Sirius ignored his indignation. "You will come with me right this instant or we will do this right here in front of everybody!"

Rabastan looked vaguely ill, but nonetheless he hauled himself up from his seat and, with the air of someone in a much more dignified position than he currently was, started off towards the stairs. Sirius allowed his icy glare to sweep across the room, particularly focusing on Lucilla Lestrange and Narcissa. Lucius's eyes gave away that he was impressed and a bit amused by the whole affair, but he only smiled blandly when Sirius looked in his direction. Then he spun on his heel and followed his target down to the sixth-year boys' dormitory.

Rabastan turned on him as soon as the heavy ebony door slammed shut behind them. "How dare you speak to me that way in front of the entire house!"

"How dare I?" cried Sirius, running a frustrated hand through his long hair. "You're lucky I decided to talk to you at all, but maybe I'll changed my mind if you're going to act like this!"

"You undermined my authority in front of everyone!"

Sirius had taken a step forward and shoved the larger boy as hard as he could before he'd even realized he'd done it. "You should have thought about that before you IGNORED ME LIKE AN ENORMOUS GIT!"

Taken by complete surprise, Rabastan stumbled backwards over a trunk and tumbled to the floor. Sirius panted from anger and exertion, and Rabastan stared up at him in shock and not a little anger. Sirius expected him to get back up and shove him back or hit him or at least pull his wand and hex him on the spot. But as the seconds ticked by, the anger drained from Rabastan's sapphire blue eyes until he was looking at Sirius with affection and contrition.

"I'm sorry for ignoring you."

Sirius was surprised enough at that response that it took him a few moments to respond.

"You had better be." He sniffed in disdain, then allowed a smile to crack his face. "I'm sorry I pushed you."
Rabastan held out his hand, and Sirius reached out to help him up only to find himself unceremoniously dragged down with him. "Oi!" he cried in protest, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been, given that he landed directly on top of his friend instead of on the stone. If Rabastan hadn't hastily shoved him off onto the floor, the situation probably would have been quite comfortable.

Lestrange looked embarrassed and uncomfortable, and Sirius figured that they needed to completely clear the air.

He reached out to poke the older boy in the ribs. "I don't care what your sister or my cousin said; if you ever act like such a Hufflepuff again, I'll turn you into a Puffskein and keep you as a pet—No! I'll give you to Bellatrix as a pet!"

"Merlin forbid!" Rabastan laughed. "You might as well just cast the Killing Curse on me if you're going to sentence me to a horrific death like that."

Sirius shrugged, and their shoulders rubbed together. "Then you wouldn't have time to accept your completely justified fate as a helpless Puffskein."

Rabastan laughed again. "All right, all right! You've made your point. I'm sorry I was such a coward about it, I really am…. It wasn't so much what they said as the idea that you might reject me, but I should have known you're too loyal to do that."

Sirius couldn't imagine any world in which he'd reject the friendship of someone like Rabastan. But, funnily enough given what he'd just yelled at his friend, he found that he was too cowardly to ask… or to ask about what he'd overheard in the changing rooms last November.

He figured that there was nothing else to say on the subject, so in a bid to say something—anything—he blurted out, "Nice game against Ravenclaw, by the way."

"Thanks," replied Rabastan. As he propped himself up onto his elbows, his shirtsleeves, which had already been rolled up out of the way of his hands, rode even further up his arms.

"You'll have to teach me that maneuver you pulled against Quirk," Sirius told him, rising up to mirror the other boy's position.

Rabastan snorted. "Not on your life, turn cloak."

Sirius barked out a single laugh and leaned over to nudge the Slytherin's shoulder with his own. Then he noticed the black ink peeking out from the edge of his friend's sleeve.

"When did you get a tattoo, Rab?"

He shot up away from Sirius suddenly, tugging down his sleeve as he went. "'Rab' now, is it?"

But Sirius didn't get to call him out on the weak attempt at changing the subject, because Malfoy shoved the door open and stopped short in the doorway, raising a pale eyebrow at their position sprawled across the floor. "There's an owl trying to get in for Black. Do bring him upstairs before it kills itself against the windows."

After that there was very little choice except to leave the Slytherin dungeons for the nearest window so that the owl could deliver its letter. He was annoyed to find that it was only a letter from his parents expressing their disappointment about his most recent detentions. He was doubly annoyed that his conversation with Rabastan had been interrupted just for that.

He was still scowling when he found his friends lounging in front of the fireplace in the
Gryffindor common room. Peter and Remus had moved together two of the armchairs and were playing on a chessboard they had levitated between themselves. James was sprawled on his back across the sofa, one of his legs propped up on the back and the other hanging over the side. Sirius shoved his legs out of the way and sat on the sofa.

"Oi!" James protested, dropping the book he'd been reading and giving Sirius a kick.

Sirius shoved him in return. After several seconds of struggling they ended up more or less comfortably sharing the narrow space, James's legs both thrown over the back of the couch and Sirius sprawled across the rest of it.

"Where've you been?" asked James.

Sirius shrugged and extended his wand to magically stoke the fire. "With Janice. What're you reading?"

James mirrored his shrug. *Strategies for the Successful Chaser* by Joscelind Wadcock. I'm going to draw up some new plays to show Thomas. Hopefully we can start practicing them tomorrow."

"Well, Hufflepuff aren't very good, are they?" Sirius asked. He pushed James's leg further up the back of the couch and away from himself. "If you add even more to Thomas's already insane practice schedule, I swear I'll quit."

"It doesn't matter how good they are! If we underestimate our opponents—if we become complacent—that's when we'll lose!"

Sirius groaned and let his head fall back against the arm of the couch. "James, mate, we already practice more than enough. The only way we could possibly be more prepared is if we got our hands on Hufflepuff's playbook."

The other boy shot up from his relaxed position. Sirius gave a shout when his friend's legs connected with his head, but James was already speaking. "Hufflepuff are practicing right now!" He sprung up from the sofa and stood over it looking down at Sirius. "Well, come on then!"

Sirius squinted up at him through the lamplight. "Come on what?"

But James grabbed his arm and hauled him up from the couch without answering. Sirius had half a mind to resist, but he was honestly curious what Potter was up to. He found himself dragged up the stairs and to their dormitory, where James, after looking around to make sure no one was in the vicinity, stepped inside and shut the door firmly behind them.

He moved to his trunk and started rifling through it, but soon enough he stopped and looked over his shoulder at Sirius. "You can't tell anyone else about this."

"All right," replied Sirius. What else could he say?

James stood, and with him came a mass of shimmering silver fabric. As Sirius looked on, he shook it out to reveal that it was a cloak.

"An Invisibility Cloak!" Sirius recognized it immediately. A few seconds later he cottoned on to James's plan. "You want to spy on the Hufflepuffs."

"Yes."

"It'd be cheating."
"Nah, bewitching the balls would be cheating. Spying is a time-honored tradition."

"Good point."

James grinned at him. "Agreed, Black?"

Sirius smirked back. "Agreed, Potter."

They realized as they were heading down the narrow tower stairs that perhaps they should have practiced. Sirius was tall for his age and James was an average almost-thirteen-year-old boy, and they didn't fit particularly well under the cloak together. There was plenty of room if they worked together, but one wrong move from one of them could have the other's feet showing.

By the time they'd reached the common room they had a system worked out reasonably well. At least Remus and Peter, who were still playing chess in the common room, didn't notice when James and Sirius passed by a few feet away from them on their way to the portrait hole. Neither did anyone else as they took the most direct route from the tower out to the pitch and climbed up into the stands.

"This is fantastic," Sirius told James. He fingered the silky fabric of the cloak as they watched the Hufflepuffs run through plays. "My grandfather told me that he once saved up his allowance for months to buy an Invisibility Cloak, but his grandfather confiscated it before he could get it to Hogwarts."

James laughed. "You Blacks are such sticklers for the rules. My mum would go bonkers if she knew Dad had let me bring this to school, so he told me that if she finds then out I'm on my own and better not rat him out if I know what's good for me."

Sirius doubted that James would have the same opinion if he knew how many laws his family members broke on a daily basis, even his Grandfather Arcturus from his position on the Wizengamot, but he was so pleased that James had acknowledged his mother as a Black that he wouldn't have dared say anything to ruin it.

He wondered suddenly if James would be friends with a werewolf, given his intense hatred for anything to do with the Dark Arts. Werewolves were Dark creatures, after all. The thought distracted him sufficiently to make him miss whatever play the Hufflepuffs had just run through, so he was at a loss when James exclaimed, "Did you see that? It's a good thing we're here to see it so we can prepare!"

"Potter… James…" he said, though he was still warring with himself over whether he should ask.

James shifted under the cloak to face him, not that there was enough room for much of that. "What is it?"

Sirius found himself blurting out, "Is Remus a werewolf?"

He could feel Potter go stiff next to him. Then, after several tense seconds, he asked, "When did you figure it out?"

Sirius almost fell off the bench.

It isn't that he hadn't expected it; he might have halfway convinced himself that he had to be wrong, but honestly he'd known in the back of his mind that there wasn't any better explanation. But he was still shocked. He couldn't reconcile the nice boy he'd lived with for nearly two years with all he'd ever heard about werewolves.
"I hadn't, for sure," he managed to say, though his voice cracked. "Until just now."

"I've known since the first term we were here. I suspect you would have as well, if you'd have spent time with him."

"And you don't have a—a problem with it?"

James sighed. "Maybe I did at first, but I mean… it's Remus. He'd never hurt anybody if he could help it, and he can't help it that once a month he has a—a furry little problem."

Against all odds, Sirius laughed. "A 'furry little problem'?"

"Well I've got to call it something nonthreatening!" Potter defended. "Look, you aren't going to kick up a fuss, are you? He isn't dangerous or anything; on the full moons Madam Pomfrey takes him to an old house in Hogsmeade that Dumbledore himself prepared."

So the professors were in on it! Of course, now that it was confirmed that he was a werewolf, Sirius knew that the professors had to be in on it. Lupin couldn't possibly manage otherwise.

They watched the Hufflepuffs in silence for a few minutes longer while Sirius thought about everything he had learned, and the past two years sharing a dorm with Remus Lupin. Finally, he came to a conclusion.

"I won't kick up a fuss."

James bumped their shoulders together. "You're all right, Black."

The Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff Quidditch match was the second week in March. By then the Gryffindor team was as prepared as they could be. Thomas never asked where James and Sirius's information came from, but he certainly took advantage of several of their spying sessions under the Invisibility Cloak.

The game was in full swing when Sirius recognized the formation he'd been watching the Hufflepuff Chasers practice. They flew together towards the Gryffindor goal posts, and under normal circumstances the Gryffindor Chasers would have attacked from either side to try to steal back the Quaffle. However, James and Sirius had found out that the Hufflepuffs were waiting for just such a maneuver so that their Seeker could fly into the path of one of the Gryffindors and their Beaters could gang up on a second.

Elizabeth Frobisher, the sixth-year Chaser, played bait for the Hufflepuff Seeker. When the boy flew into her path, instead of swerving to try to avoid him, as expected, she put her head down and flew directly into him. The Hufflepuffs in the stands immediately began screaming for a foul, but as the Seeker had intentionally flown into the path of the oncoming Catcher, Frobisher was not at fault.

Instead of doing what was expected and attacking from the side, James dive bombed right into the middle of the Hufflepuff's formation from above. In the ensuing chaos, he came away with the Quaffle, which he directly passed to Sirius.

Sirius took off at an alarming pace, streaking across the pitch with a full measure of speed from his Nimbus 1001.

Unfortunately the Hufflepuff Beaters hadn't been as slow on the uptake as they'd hoped. Sirius saw the first Bludger coming out of the corner of his eye and dove just in time for it to whiz by over his head. By the time he saw the second, he had no time to do anything except flip over upside down on his broomstick. He avoided the Bludger, but by the time he was right side up he'd
lost a lot of speed.

He didn't look behind to see how close the other players had gotten by now. Instead he pressed himself flat to the handle of the broomstick and coaxed every bit of speed he could out of it.

The Gryffindors all roared when he passed the Quaffle through the center ring, barely out of reach of the Keeper's outstretched fingertips.

But it was the cheers from the Slytherin stands that made Sirius feel like soaring. There were only two, and Sirius supposed that his own cousin really didn't count, but Rabastan was waving a small Gryffindor flag and cheering along with her, and that made Sirius grin. Malfoy was standing stiffly between them, looking dour.

A few days after the match, which Gryffindor won two hundred and forty to eighty, Rabastan was sure to inform him that he'd only been cheering because he knew that there was no chance of Gryffindor catching Slytherin in points.

"Not that this excuses it," drawled Malfoy as he straightened his green and gold scarf. "A Lestrange cheering for Gryffindor, imagine. It's a disgrace."

Rabastan laughed and slung an arm around Sirius's shoulders. "About as disgraceful as a Black sorted into Gryffindor, I reckon. Cissy, can't you do anything with him?"

Lucius turned to look down at his girlfriend with a raised brow, as if daring her to say that she could control him.

She giggled and playfully pecked a kiss on his arm, then rested her cheek against his bicep as she looked up at him. "I might be able to persuade him to be nice."

Lucius looked a bit pink around the edges, but his expression was as stony as ever. Except his eyes, which were glittering.

"Come, Narcissa," he said coolly. She laughed again and allowed him to lead her off, giving a little wave over her shoulder as she went.

Rabastan winked at Sirius and released him, then sauntered off towards Hogsmeade after his friends.

It was getting more difficult to explain his friendship with the Slytherins to James. He understood that Sirius didn't want to abandon his cousin, Slytherin or not, but he absolutely could not fathom why Sirius would willingly want a relationship with Rabastan or Lucius, or with Avery and Mulciber.

"They're not right, mate," he'd warned Sirius. "Dad says that their fathers are undoubtedly Death Eaters, and Abraxas Malfoy is so far up the Ministry's ass that the Minister sneezes when he does."

So Sirius had to resort to sneaking off to see them whenever he could, such as sneaking out of his bed early on a Saturday to speak to them before their trip down to the village. He wasn't sure which he preferred: the simple life he'd had when no one had wanted anything to do with him, or the double life he was leading now between his Gryffindor and Slytherin friends.

The next full moon was on March nineteenth, and Sirius marked its coming with a heavy heart. He'd known it was true, but it hadn't quite been real to him until he'd watched Remus fake an illness and make his way to the hospital wing.
They hadn't mentioned to Lupin that he and Peter knew. Potter had thought it would be best to give it a few full moons and then drop it into casual conversation that they'd known all along, as if it weren't a big deal at all, so Remus wouldn't be afraid that they would change their minds suddenly about being all right with it. He had apparently been an absolute ball of anxiety for the first few months after he'd found out that James knew his secret.

That night Sirius borrowed James's Invisibility Cloak, although James had been quite reluctant to allow him to have it just so he could reveal its existence to his girlfriend and snog her afterhours in private. He met her at their usual time, an hour before curfew on Mondays, except he met her outside the library doors instead of at their table in the Muggle Studies section.

"Will you come somewhere else with me tonight?"

Janice looked surprised. "You mean stay out after curfew?"

"If you want to," he replied and took her hand. "We won't get caught, I promise. Do you trust me?"

She didn't answer verbally, but she wrapped her fingers around his. They set off together down the corridor at a leisurely pace, stopping every once in a while to kiss in the occasional alcove, until he'd led her up the steps of the clock tower. There they settled underneath the clock mechanism, where they could look out over the front of the castle and the Great Lake.

Sirius sat with his back against the cold stones and his arm around Janice, who was resting against his side. He tilted his head down to kiss her, but after a minute or two she pulled back.

"What's wrong, Sirius?"

There was no use denying it, so he sighed and leaned his head back against the wall. "Have you ever found out that something you've been taught all your life is wrong?"

Janice wrapped her arm around his middle. "No, I haven't.... I'm sorry."

He knew that he couldn't explain to her about Lupin, but he was happy just to be held.

Sirius was in Charms several weeks later when Lucius all but burst through the door. It would have been surprising under any circumstances, but it was even more shocking coming from Malfoy.

"Professor Slughorn sent me to fetch Black," he told Flitwick a bit breathlessly. "Urgent business."

Everyone was silent for several seconds, until Flitwick squeaked, "Well, then Mr. Black had better go."

Sirius could feel the eyes of his classmates on him as he gathered his things and followed Lucius out into the corridor. When they were alone, he grabbed the older boy's arm to halt his rapid steps. "What is it, Malfoy?"

Lucius yanked his arm away. "It's Narcissa. She's asking for you."

Sirius could only stare after him as he set off down the corridor again at a blistering pace. Malfoy had already reached the staircases by the time Sirius caught up with him.
"But why is she asking for me?"

He didn't answer, and Sirius figured that there wasn't any point in wasting his breath after that. They hurried down the stairs—fortunately none of them decided to move—and into the dungeons without speaking further. Professor Slughorn was waiting for them outside his office, but he only offered a brief "Terrible business; terrible business, indeed." as he opened the door and gestured for them to enter.

Narcissa was curled up on the sofa with her legs up and her face buried in her knees. When Sirius approached, she looked up to reveal red-rimmed eyes and wet cheeks. There was really no thinking involved; Sirius knelt on the floor next to the sofa and took her hand in both of his. She squeezed his fingers with hers, but she was looking over his head at Malfoy, who was hovering just inside the doorway.

"Dear Merlin, Cissy! What's wrong?" cried Sirius, with barely any thought to sensitivity.

She sniffed in quite an unladylike manner. "It's An—Andy…. She's run away with a—Oh, Sirius!—with a Mudblood!"

Sirius reared back in shock. "She what?"

"Oh, Sirius!" Narcissa repeated, as if saying his name was somehow comforting to her. "She wrote Mother and Father a letter saying that she was on her way to el—elope with a boy named Tonks."

"He was a Hufflepuff in her year," explained Malfoy rather abruptly. Both of the Blacks looked at him then, but he looked down at the floor before either of them could meet his eyes. "I—I'll just leave you alone," he said quietly. "I ought not intrude on such a private family matter."

As soon as he had closed the door behind him, Narcissa collapsed into Sirius's arms. She didn't seem to notice at all when he overbalanced and they fell backwards into a heap on the floor.

"Please, Cissy…" But Sirius really had no idea what to say to her.

She sobbed into his shirt. "He'll never marry me now! How could he ever want to?"

Sirius was shocked at this turn, as he had thought her tears were solely for her lost sister, but he rubbed her back as consolingly as he knew how. "He would be a fool if he lets Andromeda's actions keep him away from you, Cissy. Every family has bad eggs every once in a while, even the Malfoys…. And I've seen the way he looks at you."

"No, you don't understand," she sobbed. "I haven't told him—I couldn't bring myself to say it!—but when he finds out he won't have a choice. His father would never let him….""

"Haven't told him what?" he asked. By now he was more than just a bit uncomfortable with his role as her confidante.

"Oh…! She's p—pregnant!"

Sirius blinked several times before he found his voice. "What?"

"Pregnant!" wailed Narcissa. "At least five months along! Out of wedlock! With a Mudblood's baby!"

It suddenly made much more sense to him. "She left now because she couldn't hide it for much longer…."

"Cissy,
Malf—"Oh," was all he could say for several long heartbeats. Then, "Narcissa, please listen to me. This is nineteen seventy-three, not eighteen seventy-three! Malfoy can't be that old-fashioned if he even asked a nice pure-blood girl like you to…you know…in the first place. I know he won't think poorly of you for doing it with him."

Narcissa sniffed again. "Do—you really think so?"

"Yes!" he declared emphatically, and he thought privately to himself that Malfoy had better not prove him wrong or he'd kill the older boy. "I'm sure he just feels uncomfortable intruding, like he said. And you did ask for me, so he probably thought you wanted to be alone with me. Trust me, he's really worried about you."

She managed to stop crying at some point after that, although Sirius was too afraid to try to move them off the floor lest any slight jostling set her off again.

Finally, he ventured, "Have they burnt her off the tapestry then?"

Narcissa pulled back from him. Though her face was still red and puffy, her expression was quite fierce. "Yes, and good riddance to bad rubbish, I say. How dare she! She didn't think about any of the rest of us at all, not about how she might drag her sisters down along with her, nor how it would injure the family name, nor how devastated Mother would be."

That, Sirius thought, summed up the weight of expectation quite thoroughly. He remembered how his thoughts upon being sorted into Gryffindor had been about what his family would think and how it would disappoint them, and he wondered how Andromeda had forgotten the importance of not only the members of her family but also of their name itself, their heritage and reputation. It was the ultimate betrayal, and he knew that it was his duty now to cut her out of his heart like Narcissa had done, for the sake of their family.

Chapter End Notes

I had the article call Voldemort by his name instead of "You-Know-Who" or similar because this is just the beginning of his reign of terror. His reign of terror only started in the early 70s, and I figure he needed a bit of time after that to earn such a reputation that everybody was afraid to even speak his name.

Narcissa's worries about being ruined on account of her sister's actions are more than a bit eighteen seventy-threeish. However, I view the ultra pure-blood society—those supremacists families who are "truly pure"—as 1) so concerned with blood traitors and keeping the blood pure that it would really harm a family to have a member do what Andy did, and 2) so isolated from reality that traditions and stigmas would be important to them longer than to most of society (especially since wizards in general are so long-lived). And anyway in the 70s it was still a pretty huge stigma to have a baby out of wedlock, even above and beyond the fact that she'd become a blood traitor. I also think that Narcissa loves Andromeda, but it's just that she loves Lucius.
more and is in love with him, and therefore he would have been her first thought.
Summer and Fall, 1973

Chapter Summary

Sirius tries to deal with the fallout from Andromeda's marriage and learns some interesting things about some of his family and friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Summer at Grimmauld Place was decidedly awkward. It was even more awkward than Sirius's first Christmas back home after his sorting, although in an entirely different way. The whole family felt the weight of Andromeda's actions.

Grandfather Arcturus had become particularly surly in his criticisms of his daughter-in-law, because without her presence in their immediate family the taint of Andy's actions wouldn't have stretched quite so far. They would only be distant cousins otherwise, but unfortunately, as it stood, Walburga was Andromeda's aunt. He had become very fond of reminding Orion that his side of the family was pristine, whereas he had warned his son against marrying the daughter of a man who already had a Squib brother and a catamite son—and now a Mudblood-fucking granddaughter!

"Come now, Father," his son had replied with a small grin that did little to hide his annoyance. "Certainly Alphard is a sodomite, but he's got too much chest hair to qualify as a catamite."

Grandfather's scowl had been so impressive and Sirius's confusion so great that he'd refrained from asking for clarification just then, but later he'd looked up those words in the library. It was unclear whether his feeling had been more one of embarrassment or curiosity after he learned the truth, but then again his curiosity and the mental list of questions he had for his homosexual uncle had been so embarrassing and foreign to him that he had quickly done his best to shove the entire subject as far into the back of his mind as he could. Although he was sure he'd still been blushing at dinner that night.

Of course, eventually Sirius had taken great offense to his grandfather's proclamations about Walburga's side of the family, more for their poor reflection on himself than for any great worry about his mother's feelings.

"The blood will always out," declared Arcturus as the rest of the family picked listlessly at their desserts one evening. "My father always maintained that my uncle marrying that Bulstrode woman would be the downfall of his brother's line. The Bulstrodes already had two squibs and at least one blood traitor in recent history when Uncle Cygnus married her, and look what she's introduced into his line: a Squib, a homosexual, and a Mudblood's slut."

"And a Gryffindor." Sirius had been seething in his seat throughout dinner, and he found himself speaking now with a reckless abandon born of several days of pent up thoughts.

Everybody turned to look at him all at once, his father and brother with a sort of panicked shock he had last seen that dreadful Christmas when Regulus had called him a blood traitor, and his mother with wide eyes in her gray face.
Grandfather Arcturus blinked at him owlishly for a moment before he finally managed to ask, "What?"

"Me, Grandfather," informed Sirius, drawing himself up to his full height and producing his best mask of aristocratic hauteur. "Your daughter-in-law's blood runs through your grandchildren, or hadn't you thought of that?"

"Sirius, you know that I never meant—"

But his grandson had been stewing on these thoughts for too long now to want to hear whatever patchwork explanation his grandfather was able to produce in the heat of the moment. "I suppose you think that your blood will out in me, not my mother's, although I'm not sure how you reconcile my being in Gryffindor—"

"Now, Sirius, just calm down—"

"—so you must actually be insulting me when you insult my mother."

"—and we'll talk about this like rational people."

"Fuck you."

Sirius's declaration was met with absolute silence from around the table, even from the target of his words. Arcturus was staring at him as if he'd never seen him before, but Sirius suspected it was more that no one had ever dared to speak to him that way before. Well, thought Sirius, at least Rabastan, from whom he'd learned a good deal of his swear words, would be proud of him. Maybe when his grandfather kicked him out of Grimmauld Place, his friend could sneak him in to stay at the Lestrange manor and keep him fed on leftovers he managed to smuggle away from family meals. Like a blood traitor Gryffindor puppy.

Drawing himself up as much as possible, Sirius stalked out of the dining room with as much dignity as he could muster. He only started running after he'd attained the second landing and was sure that nobody could hear him.

Nobody followed him, and over the next several days no one mentioned what had happened. His grandfather avoided him like the plague, even going so far as to fail to call him for their usual lessons in the afternoons. Sirius didn't mind, however, partly because he was secretly terrified of facing the man again but mostly because that left him more time to devote to his renewed studies in the art of dueling.

It was after one of his morning sessions with Dolohov when he came across Regulus moping in the library. It occurred to Sirius only then that his little brother had probably been hit hardest by their cousin's actions, because he had often looked on Andy the same way Sirius had looked on Belley. Although Sirius's wounded pride warred viciously with his brotherly affection, after several seconds of internal struggle he reluctantly decided that their fights over the past couple of years shouldn't stop him from being a big brother when it really mattered. Even if Regulus had been a less than ideal little brother.

He approached the sofa with caution, sinking down into the cushions on the far side only after Regulus made no move to keep him away.

"Hey," he greeted inelegantly. "What are you doing in here? Don't you have lessons until lunch?"

Regulus shrugged and kept his eyes on the book in his lap, although Sirius could see that his eyes weren't moving over the page. "Grandfather hasn't called for me since the morning after you—er, after your… outburst. He kept staring at me as if he couldn't stand to look at me, then he dismissed
me and I haven't had a lesson since."

Sirius sucked in a breath of surprise. "Oh… I had thought it was only me. I'm… I'm sorry."

"You are?" Regulus finally turned his head to stare at his brother, his dark eyes—their mother's eyes—piercing Sirius like shards of ice.

"Yeah, of course. I shouldn't have lost my temper, or at least not that way. I never meant for it to affect you, too."

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes, which was closer than they'd been with one another since the year before Sirius left for Hogwarts. He took the opportunity to study his brother, finding that Regulus had grown out of the short, chubby stage that had plagued him all throughout his young childhood. He looked now like someone had stretched him out, all of his excess baby fat transforming into long, lanky limbs and knobby joints. Regulus's features weren't as strong as Sirius's. His cheeks were a bit more rounded, his nose not quite as defined… but they were undeniably brothers.

Finally, Regulus ventured, "Do you think it's true that we have weak blood?"

"Nah," replied Sirius, "I'm brilliant and very talented at magic, not to mention athletic and good looking." This was said matter-of-factly, as if he were discussing the merits of one type of broom polish over another. "I'm sure we're similar."

The younger of the pair considered the elder's words quite seriously for a moment, as if he were contemplating some bit of sage ancient wisdom, then he nodded in acceptance of its truth. It would have perhaps seemed like the height of vanity and arrogance if anybody else had heard them, but that fact seemed happily absent from either of their minds.

After a few minutes, and in a smaller voice, Regulus asked, "But do you think that I'll, you know…?"

"Be sorted somewhere other than Slytherin?" filled in his brother. When a flush crept up on Regulus's face, he knew that he'd guessed correctly. "Look, Reg, it doesn't matter, all right? You'll still be the same person and have the same talents no matter where you end up."

"Well, yes, but I've always wanted—"

"To be in Slytherin." Sirius sighed and cracked his neck as if that would relieve his sudden tension. "I know, trust me."

And so it transpired that several days later it occurred to Sirius to invite his brother along when he met a group of his friends in Diagon Alley. "They're all Slytherins except one, and I figured you'd like to meet them before you get to school," he explained stiffly. "But you should know that we absolutely do not tell each other's secrets to the adults. No matter how much you might want to get me into trouble, if you tattle your reputation will be ruined."

If the way his mouth hung open was any indication, Regulus was undoubtedly shocked when his brother greeted the pretty young witch who was waiting for them with a vigorous kiss, his tongue finding a much better occupation than actually talking to her.

The rest of their group laughed at his reaction, and it was Will Avery who finally said, "I hope you didn't expect to actually spend any quality time with your brother. The rest of us have accepted that he rarely comes up for air."

"It seems to run in the family," added Nigel Mulciber. His words hung in the air for a couple of
terrible seconds when both Sirius and Regulus thought that he was referring to Andromeda, but then he continued, "Malfoy has all the luck."

Janice finally pulled away with a bashful giggle, and Sirius turned his eyes towards his friends. Will was holding hands with a witch of his own, a quiet Slytherin girl who seemed unable to decide between watching Sirius and Janice avidly or tearing her eyes away in embarrassment. Nigel was standing next to a small boy with freckles and straw-colored hair styled carefully into place as if he were planning on meeting the Minister himself that afternoon.

"This is my cousin, Bartemius Crouch," supplied Mulciber with a little wave of his hand in the boy's general direction.

"Barty," the boy immediately corrected.

Regulus took to Barty immediately, as they were both about to enter their first year at Hogwarts and wanted to be Slytherins. Of course, Sirius knew that his brother probably would not have been nearly so nice if the boy's last name hadn't been Crouch, which was one of the names of the twenty-eight remaining families that were truly pure-blooded. He supposed that Mulciber, whose family was not among that number, must be the product of what the Crouch family considered a disadvantageous marriage. All in all, Sirius was rather glad that his brother had someone his own age to hang out with, as he'd been somewhat regretting saying he could tag along.

"He's so cute!" exclaimed Janice as the group was walking towards Fortescue's. She was looking at the pair of younger boys as if she were observing a pair of toddlers and not boys who were only a couple of years younger than she was. "He's not as handsome as you are, of course—I noticed you from that first boat ride together, you know. Oh, how I wish we could take the boats again. It would be so romantic!—but he's very cute."

Sirius, who was used to her girlish outbursts by now, merely smiled and refrained from rolling his eyes. "Thanks, Jan."

"It's so nice walking together like this," she chattered on. "I'm so glad we'll be allowed to visit Hogsmeade this year. You will take me, won't you?"

"Course, love," replied Sirius dutifully, if a bit off-handedly since he was distracted by the display in the Quality Quidditch Supplies window. She made a sort of mewling sound, as if she had choked on a squeal, and he turned to look at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Are you okay?"

She offered him a brilliant smile and clung even tighter to his arm. "Oh, yes. I'm just perfect."

"Okay then," he said quizzically, not really understanding her at all. Not that he ever understood her particularly well. With a little shrug to himself, he rushed her along to catch up with the rest of the group.

A few weeks after the Incident—the one at the dinner table, not The Incident with Andromeda, which deserved at least two capital letters—Sirius's parents thought it would be best if he went away for a few days. The tension at Grimmauld Place was getting a bit too thick in the air to handle, but Orion was sure that he could talk his father down if he had a few days to work on him without Sirius constantly underfoot. Staying outside of the family was out of the question, because that would require some explanation for why he wanted to invite himself over. Likewise, staying
With Uncle Cygnus and Aunt Druella was out of the question, because they'd recently had an unwed daughter become pregnant and elope with a Mudblood while under their roof. Sirius put his foot down and flatly refused to stay with Grandfather Pollux and Grandmother Irma.

Therefore he found himself stumbling out of the fireplace and straight into Rodolphus Lestrange's arms.

"I don't know what you and my brother get up to, but I despise hugging," the man informed him matter-of-factly. If it hadn't been for the humor in his eyes as he set Sirius onto his own feet, Sirius would have thought that he was being entirely serious.

"Really? Nobody must have told Bellatrix that," Sirius shot back, recalling the many times he'd had to sit uncomfortably by while they pawed at each other.

Rodolphus laughed, a sound that was similar to his brother's laugh but not quite as naturally full of malicious promise. "She's an exception. One day you'll understand."

"Oh, I understand," replied Sirius, thinking of how nice it felt to kiss Janice.

A vaguely worried look passed over Rodolphus's face, but before he had time to speak or Sirius had time to ask about it, his wife rushed into the room with her long hair wild around her shoulders.

"Siri!" she squealed excitedly, enfolding him in her embrace. "Rodolphus, why didn't you tell me immediately that he was here?"

Her husband shrugged entirely unapologetically. "I wanted to give him a moment of peace before you got ahold of him. Sorry, Sirius, but she's been like this since she learned you were coming."

The look Bellatrix shot him was full of promised retribution, but from the man's responding look Sirius could only conclude that he was looking forward to it. Sirius shuddered.

The young Lestrange couple lived in what Bellatrix had told him was a cottage on the southeast coast, but calling it a cottage was a bit like calling the ocean he could see beyond the windows a lake. Sirius saw a smallish library before he climbed the staircase, and he counted four bedrooms on the way to his own.

As soon as they'd closed the door behind them, Bellatrix tugged Sirius down to sit next to her on his bed. "Now, how are you?"

Sirius shrugged. "Fine. I was really more interested in asking you about your sister." When Bellatrix's face began to harden with disapproval and distaste, he clarified, "Narcissa."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, eyeing him curiously now. "She's taking it much harder than I had expected, now that you mention it. They were never close."

Sirius really had not wanted to bring it up with Bellatrix—or with anyone at all, ever. However, he had spent the weeks since finding out about Andromeda considering the problem of Narcissa and Malfoy, and he didn't really see how he could help at all if he kept it all to himself. He had considered asking his father, but that idea had been almost immediately rejected since he hadn't thought the adults in their family would like to know that more than one daughter had been busy. He had thought about asking Rabastan, but that option was reluctantly rejected as Sirius had to acknowledge that he wasn't sure the older boy wouldn't take Lucius's side if it came down to it. That left him with Bellatrix.

"She, erm… told me some things," he began uncomfortably. "You know, right after we'd found
out, when she was still crying about it. I... um... Well, you see, she's worried that Malfoy won't marry her."

"That's ridiculous!" exclaimed her sister immediately. "The Malfoys aren't so pristine that they can judge us!"

Sirius grimaced. "Yes... But she's worried he thinks she's the same as Andromeda because she, you know..."

Bellatrix glared at him, although he knew it wasn't directed strictly at him. "Know what?"

It was painful, truly it was, but Sirius had no choice except to spell it out. "Merlin's balls, Bellatrix! She shagged him, okay? Merlin..."

"Oh," she said flatly. Then, "Oh, Cissy..."

They sat in uncomfortable silence for several minutes, Bellatrix seemingly deep in thought and Sirius looking anywhere but at her in his embarrassment. Although he was getting quite used to talking about sex in front of his male friends, he had never imagined discussing any such thing in front of girls, especially not ones to whom he was related. He examined the elaborate embroidery that ran across the duvet, then the canopy. Next he painstakingly traced the carvings on the armoire with his eyes.

Finally, Bellatrix asked, "Why didn't she tell me?"

He was almost certain that she was just thinking aloud and didn't expect him to have any sort of answer. Nonetheless he scooted closer and wrapped his arm around her thin shoulders. "I'm sure she's just embarrassed, Belley. You know how everybody would react if they knew. She only told me because she was beside herself and not thinking clearly."

"Still, I could have helped her, made sure she knows how to be safe, so she doesn't end up like her. She might trust Malfoy to take care of her, but I'd feel better if she knew how to—"

"No, no, no," insisted Sirius, cutting her off with an emphatic shake of his head. "I do not want to know anything about that kind of... stuff. I already know too much."

He could feel her giggle against his shoulder, where she'd rested her head, but she obliged him and stopped thinking aloud about Narcissa's sex life.

"Do you think Rodolphus can do something about Malfoy?" asked Sirius, turning the conversation back to what he thought was the important thing. "I think he really loves Cissy, but she might be right about how Mr. Malfoy will react to... the situation."

Bellatrix nodded against his shoulder. "Mr. Malfoy's as old-fashioned as they come, but I don't think Lucius will cave in to him, especially not if he has the support of his friends. What can Mr. Malfoy really do against his only son, his only child?" She let out a frustrated sigh. "For all the progress we've made, I can't believe that we women are still subject to these ridiculous notions. You won't grow up to be like those men, will you, Siri?"

Sirius agreed that he would not. After all, Bellatrix was one of the most formidable people he knew, male or female. He could hardly argue that she deserved any less respect or that she needed to be protected just because she was a witch and not a wizard. He was sure that other women he knew—his mother, Narcissa, Mrs. Lestrange—would be just as formidable if they'd been raised with different expectations, or if they'd cared as little for expectations as Bellatrix.

It was unfortunate for Narcissa that she was probably the "best" of the Black sisters, by society's
standards, yet it was the very society she cared so much about that was ready to tear her down.

His first night at Bellatrix and Rodolphus’s house was relaxing and fun, full of laughter and games and silly discussions. Rodolphus disappeared before Sirius got up the next morning and only returned as Sirius and Bellatrix were sitting down to dinner, but he and Bellatrix spent the day having dueling practice and just generally spending quality time together for the first time since Sirius had started Hogwarts, so they didn't miss Rodolphus's company.

On his second night staying with the newlyweds, he found himself alone in the cozy library fairly early in the evening. His cousin and her husband had retired to their bedroom almost as soon as they'd eaten dinner (Gross! he thought.), and he'd considered it safer to stay downstairs for a few hours. He was perusing Rodolphus’s self-annotated copy of Offensive Defensive Magic for the Advanced Dueler when he heard a curse and a crash from the small entryway.

He'd leapt to his feet and drawn his wand into his hand before his brain caught up with his body, but then his heart started pounding. He carefully poked his head around the door, being as silent as possible, and saw a large figure in the shadows near the front door.

"Stupefy," he whispered.

He couldn't wait until he learned to cast spells nonverbally, but for now he just had to hope that the intruder wouldn't hear him and defend himself.

As it turned out, his spell hit the mark. The man toppled over, his head striking the umbrella stand before he slumped motionless to the floor. A wave of Sirius's wand lit the sconces along the walls, and when he finally got a good look at the intruder he couldn't help but cry out in surprise.

"Rabastan! Shit!"

He bounded across the entryway to kneel down next to his friend, only belatedly thinking to cast the counter-spell. Rabastan immediately moaned in pain. He struggled to sit up, and without thinking Sirius reached around the larger boy's back to help him.

"Shit, Rab!" he repeated. "I'm so sorry!"

Rabastan leaned forward with his forehead resting against Sirius's shoulder and then seemed unable to go any further.

"Shh, it's okay," he shushed. Then, with a pained chuckle, added, "Nice shot."

Sirius wrapped his arms more securely around his friend to keep him from keeling over again, which he seemed about to do at any given moment. "What are you even doing here?"

"I live here!" retorted Rabastan. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting! Why do you live here? Doesn't your family have a big manor up in Yorkshire?"

Rabastan fidgeted in discomfort for a moment, pressing his hand against his side.

"My parents thought it would be best if I left. I was making everybody uncomfortable and all," he said absently as he brought his hand up to his face to investigate it.

But Sirius wasn't really paying attention to his words, as he was distracted by the blood on his hand. He looked down Rabastan's body to his torso, which was covered in shredded robes and blood.
"Did I…?" he asked in a small voice, one of his hands going automatically towards the wound.

Rabastan froze for a moment when his hand made contact, then he huffed out a pained breath and said, "No, no, it wasn't you." He pulled Sirius's hand away from his body. "C'mon, love, I'm fine. I'll be okay. Help me up and we'll fix it, yeah?"

Mutely, Sirius rose to his feet and leaned down to help his friend up. He tried to be as gentle as possible, but as Rabastan was so large—at least six inches taller and, it seemed to Sirius, at least double Sirius's weight—it wasn't the easiest thing to accomplish. In the end, between the two of them and with the help of the wall, they managed to get him upright with only a handful of profanities uttered. "I don't want to bother Roddy and Bellatrix with this," Rabastan insisted when asked. He leaned heavily against Sirius, his arm wrapped around Sirius's shoulders and Sirius's arm wrapped low around his hips so as to avoid the injury, and directed Sirius to the makeshift potions lab Rodolphus had set up in a room at the back of the cottage.

After he had been settled onto a low stool, Rabastan motioned with his chin towards a large cabinet that took up almost an entire wall. "The dittany is over there, on the third shelf from the top."

By the time Sirius had located the rather large vial—surely larger than any he'd ever seen before, which made him wonder if this sort of thing happened often—Rabastan had peeled the remains of his clothing up to reveal a nasty gash running diagonally across his ribcage.

"Fucking hell, Rabastan!" Sirius cried, unable to help himself. "What happened?"

Rabastan looked up from where he was delicately prodding the edges of the wound with his fingers and met Sirius's worried eyes, his own sapphire gaze sparkling in amusement through his discomfort.

"It was just a basic Severing Charm. You should see the other guy." He paused for a moment, a dark expression passing over his face. "Well, what's left of him anyway."

Sirius watched with his arms crossed over his chest and a disapproving scowl on his face as his friend generously applied essence of dittany to his cut. A green billow of smoke later and the previously nasty gash was scabbed over and appeared to be several days old. Rabastan examined the results for a few moments longer before he finally removed the remains of his clothing up to reveal a nasty gash running diagonally across his ribcage.

"Aw, come on, Sirius," he whined. "I'm okay; I don't need it."

Sirius leveled an impressively flat glare on him. "Eat it. Or I'll go get Bellatrix."

Rabastan looked for a second as if he would argue, but then a brief smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You're a right little dictator. Fine."

And amid all the grimaces and complaints he could manage, he chewed the raw dittany and gagged it down. Sirius was almost tempted to order him to open his mouth so that he could look and make sure his patient had really swallowed it, and he couldn't stop the smile that spread over his face at the thought of demanding Rabastan Lestrange to lift up his tongue for an inspection.

"Salazar but that's nasty," Rabastan informed him.

"It'll make you heal more quickly," answered Sirius with a shrug.

They were silent as Rabastan carefully cleaned the blood and remaining essence of dittany off of
himself and Vanished his ruined clothing. Sirius wanted to ask again what had happened, but he sensed that he wouldn't get a better answer than the one he'd already received. So he kept his questions to himself and took the opportunity to eye the tattoo he'd noticed before on Rabastan's arm, now revealed in its entirety along with the rest of the older boy's bare upper body. It was probably the ugliest tattoo Sirius had ever seen, a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. He wondered what on earth had possessed his friend to get it.

His thoughts were interrupted when Rabastan looked up and inquired, "So, we know why I got kicked out of my house. Why did you get kicked out of yours?"

Sirius had no idea why Rabastan had got kicked out of his house, unless he'd been referring to the fight he'd had with his sister seemingly all of the previous school year. And Sirius still wasn't one hundred percent sure what that had been about. However, he was too embarrassed to admit any such thing, so he nodded absently as he replaced the vial of dittany in the cabinet.

"My grandfather blames the supposedly weak blood on my mother's side of the family for Andromeda's… defection. He went on and on about it until I finally reminded him that anything he said about my mother applies to me, too, and I… might have… well… I told him to fuck off."

Full lips parted in surprise. "You did not!"

Sirius nodded again in confirmation. "He's been avoiding me as much as possible since then, and my father thought it would be a good idea for me to get out from underfoot for a few days."

"Sirius… I… Fucking hell!"

"I had thought to myself that at least you would probably be willing to hide me in your bedroom and keep me alive if I got kicked out, but it looks like that won't be necessary."

Rabastan, who was still shaking his head in apparent disbelief, allowed a chuckle to escape his throat. "Well, you can still live in my bedroom if you want, but I've been told that I kick in my sleep."

"And I steal all of the covers, so we'd make a miserable pair. I think I'll have to pass."

"Ah, well, the offer's always open," said Rabastan, with an odd expression passing over his face that Sirius couldn't quite read.

The next morning, Sirius found all three of the other occupants of the house already sitting around the breakfast table when he came downstairs. They abruptly stopped talking when they noticed him, which he found rather odd. He was used to it from all of the adults in his life, of course, but he had never placed these three in that category in his mind.

"Morning, Siri," chirped Bellatrix. "I hope you don't mind that Rabastan's staying here, too."

"We already talked last night," he told her as he settled into his chair and surveyed the breakfast offerings.

Breakfast was a subdued, nearly silent affair until their morning owls arrived. Sirius had more mail than anyone else, which prompted the others at the table to tease him about his popularity. The baby pink envelope in particular caused all sorts of uproar.

"An admirer?" asked Rodolphus between laughs.

Sirius rolled his eyes in exasperation. "My girlfriend. She's a bit… much."
"Girlfriend?" echoed the elder man, his quizzical eyes traveling to his brother and then back to Sirius.

"Say, Bellatrix," interjected Rabastan, who Sirius was astonished to see had just the slightest flush creeping up his neck, "do you think we might be able to get Dolohov to include Sirius in my lessons, too? You know, a two-for-one sort of thing, so Sirius doesn't have to miss his dueling lessons while he's here. And maybe he'll even have a chance to beat me and redeem himself after Gryffindor's disastrous loss to Slytherin in the House Cup….

That was the best thing Sirius had heard in weeks, and it was more than sufficient to distract him from the rest of the weirdness going on around him.

Sirius was able to return home the next weekend, although relations were still tense between him and his grandfather. He sincerely wanted to leave again, at least for a little while, but he didn't want to impose any more on the newlyweds and he knew that there weren't really any better options. His parents would never let him go to Peter's—not that he'd want to go stay with Peter's Mudblood mother—and it was probably too early for him to broach the subject of staying with the Potters after the drama of the past two years.

James had written him a lengthy letter pleading for him to come to Godric's Hollow, where his family lived. *I'm so bored I could die*, he'd written. *There aren't any other kids here our age, and Remus's parents won't let him go stay anywhere even if it isn't that time of the month. Plus I have some ideas I probably shouldn't put in writing, and I really want to talk to you about them.*

It was incredibly tempting, because Sirius was incredibly curious what new schemes Potter had cooked up. (He imagined it was probably some cruelly creative new way to torture Snivellus.) Still, he figured that he'd stirred up enough trouble with his parents and grandfather to last him the whole summer and at least partially into Christmas holidays, so he wrote back that he wouldn't be able to visit and resigned himself to a miserable rest of the summer.

Over breakfast one morning, Arcturus flicked the top of his newspaper down to interrupt an otherwise perfectly normal conversation between Orion and Sirius about their visit to Diagon Alley later that day.

"Son, you had better stop into Bingham's when you're out today."

Sirius watched as Orion's newspaper landed in his empty plate. "Father, he's just completed his second year!"

"Yes, and by the time he goes back to Hogwarts he'll be nearly fourteen. We don't want to leave these things up to chance. Best to get it all out in the open sooner rather than later."

Orion shot Sirius a nervous glance. "Fourteen, Father? Do you really think this is necessary? You didn't take me until I was nearly fifteen."

"Well, we have already established that Sirius takes after me, not you," the elder replied with just a hint of humor in his voice. He and Sirius glanced at one another, but they both looked away quickly, still uncomfortable in each other's presence. Arcturus flicked his newspaper back up into place. "As I said, we don't want to leave these things up to chance."

"Father!" exclaimed his son, who was staring at the back of the paper with a horrified expression, as if it were Arcturus's face.

The voice that replied from behind the *Daily Prophet* was full of amusement, and Sirius wondered
if his grandfather was actually smiling behind his barrier. "Orion, if you do not want to hear these things about your father, I suggest that you simply take his word as law and refrain from questioning him."

Orion stared a moment longer before a rueful smile flickered across his lips. "Well, if His Holiness will give us leave, I believe that it's time my son and I head out. Sirius, are you finished?"

Arcturus sent them off with an imperious wave from behind his Prophet.

Knockturn Alley was much the same as ever, although Sirius had never been inside the apothecary. The inside was substantially larger and less cramped than the apothecary in Diagon Alley, and the proprietor, Mr. Bingham, was behind the counter tending several cauldrons. A bell chimed when they stepped through the door, but the man did not look up from whatever he was working on. Orion did not seem bothered by this. He led Sirius directly to the third aisle, where he briskly walked about two-thirds of the way down and bent low to peruse one of the shelves near the floor.

Sirius leaned around to get a look at the vial of clear orange liquid his father had plucked from the shelf. "What is it?"

His father's face remained impassive, but his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed nervously. He looked around and held out a hand to quiet Sirius's impending question so that he could listen for other voices in the shop. Once he was satisfied—and by that time Sirius's curiosity had him on the verge of exploding all over the aisle—Orion answered.

"It's a contraceptive potion," he explained in a clipped tone that would have gone a long way towards masking his embarrassment if he'd been talking to someone who didn't know him as well. At his son's horrified look, he took a breath and then rushed forward as if getting it out quickly would lessen their mutual embarrassment. "It's probably better to explain it here, since at Grimmauld Place there's always your mother and brother or my father hovering about. Son, this potion will protect you when you decide to—Um, Sirius, you do know about the, er... the birds and the bees?"

Sirius's expression had by this time screwed up into one of disgust, if only to hide his acute embarrassment. "Are you really trying to talk to me about sex?"

His son's reaction had managed to make the elder Black relax enough that he was able to chuckle. "Yes, I'm trying to talk to you about sex. What do you know about how children are made?"

He looked at Sirius so expectantly that Sirius felt there was no hope of escaping this conversation. He blushed and turned to give the vials lining the shelf nearest him a thorough examination so that he wouldn't have to look at his father as he spoke.

He managed to bite out, "I know what goes where and that children are made when the man... you know... in the woman. You've no need to explain it to me." At that possibility, he paled beneath his scarlet blush. "Please don't explain it to me."

"Have you started, ah... you knowing, by yourself?"

"Father!" Sirius hissed. He was so aghast that he nearly knocked down the shelf he'd been looking at, and his face felt very hot.

Orion had the grace to look sorry he'd asked, if his son had actually been able to look at him and see it. On second thought, Orion supposed that he was not actually ready to hear about his son's
sex life, such as it may be. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"I was just asking because, well, you can do that, you know, instead of rushing to do it with a girl. Just in case you didn't know, not that I want to hear about it if you did know..." He trailed off and swallowed again, then seemed to gather himself up enough to take one more stab at the subject.

"Right, well, in any case, once you decide to start with girls, this potion will prevent you from making any children with them. The Ministry regulates these potions and will only allow a week-long dose to be sold legally, for some reason—it's probably to increase the Half-blood population, if you ask me. Half-bloods and Mudbloods breed like rats—but this version will last you a month. They don't have a very long shelf life, so we'll have to set you up with an annual owl delivery. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Sirius managed to grind out between clenched teeth.

"There's a potion for girls too, of course, but you don't want to leave something like this up to the girl. Why, if it were up to your mother alone, there have been several times we might have given you another little brother or sister!"

"Ew! Father!"

Orion blushed just a bit. "Right. Er, good talk."

Sirius glared at him. "Fantastic."

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up," Orion declared with a decisive nod of his head.

He turned and started walking back down the aisle, his pace a bit faster than absolutely necessary, as if he could escape their joint mortification by leaving the scene of the crime. Sirius followed at a more sedate pace. He was sure that he needed several moments alone to compose himself before he could face his father again.

By the time he reached the front of the store, his father was waiting impatiently by the door. Neither of them dared to look the other in the eye as they headed back out among the dim views and dodgy denizens of Knockturn Alley. In fact, they barely spoke two words to each other for the rest of the morning as they flitted in and out of various shops completing their shopping lists and errands with a diligent, silent concentration theretofore unseen in either of them. By the time they sat down for lunch in the brightly lit café across from Twilfitt and Tatting's, in the high-end section of Diagon Alley, both of them were feeling recovered enough from their earlier ordeal to look each other in the face again, although they were not feeling brave enough to venture more than the safest of subjects, such as Quidditch and the new electives Sirius would begin taking during the upcoming school term.

If Sirius had already been anxiously waiting to leave for Hogwarts before this incident, he was doubly—No, triply! Quadruply, even!—waiting for it now.

Things began to go downhill almost as soon as he'd returned to school. Sirius was not one to pay attention to the news. Certainly he'd never hidden himself behind the *Daily Prophet* while breakfasting, like his grandfather and father. He didn't even have his own subscription. If he had, he might have realized how bad things had gotten before the entire Great Hall erupted in shock and sadness and anger.

He and Remus had their heads together discussing their Arithmancy homework, which was rather more complicated than Sirius had originally thought when he'd first signed up for the class, when
it began. Sirius was dimly aware of the rush of owl wings and the happy chatter of students
receiving mail. Then the deathly quiet caught his attention, and in those few fleeting seconds
between registering that something was wrong and looking up from his textbook, the first gasp
sounded out as if across a silent tomb.

James's face had gone gray as he look slack-jawed at his copy of the newspaper, which was only
half unrolled. Sirius understood why when he saw the headline: "VILLAGE LEVELED BY
DEATH EATERS!"

"Open it!" he insisted lowly, although he ought not have bothered to keep his voice low since by
then the Great Hall was filled with horrified cries and nervous chatter.

"'Death Eaters, the followers of the Dark wizard known only as Lord Voldemort, have killed most
of the magical residents of Appleby and burned the village to the ground. The attack began shortly
after midnight and reportedly lasted for about an hour; Aurors were only alerted after the attack
had ended and arrived to find the village ablaze and the Dark Mark hovering in the air,'" Sirius
read silently to himself. He looked up to see Professors McGonagall and Sprout leading a shell-
shocked boy in Hufflepuff robes out of the Great Hall. Sure enough, a bit further down the article
it said, "'The bodies of the victims have not been identified as of the time of publication, but
notable residents include Donald and Frances Bones, whose home was among those destroyed.'"

James was slumped low beside him. "Poor Jeffrey. My dad works—worked—with Mr. Bones…. I've been over to their house for dinner….

But Sirius barely heard him, so caught up was he in a bit of information in the Prophet that had
caught his attention. "'The Dark Mark, as we have reported before, is in the likeness of a skull
with a serpent emerging from its mouth. In recent months it has been left at over a dozen crime
scenes believed to have been the work of Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters.'"

He reread the first sentence several more times to make sure that he'd seen it correctly, then he
lifted his eyes slowly towards the Slytherin table. The Slytherin table as a whole seemed much less
affected by the news than the rest of the Great Hall, although the younger years seemed just as
surprised as anyone else. Sirius could see that Regulus and Barty were looking around with wide
eyes. The older Slytherins, however, and particularly the seventh years sitting at the very end of
the table, looked completely stoic at best and amused at worst.

"I bet they're all Death Eaters," put in James from beside him, barely bothering to keep his voice
low. "Or at least their parents are, and they will be too as soon as they leave Hogwarts. There's
never been a Dark wizard who wasn't in Slytherin."

Normally Sirius would have taken exception to that little speech, but as it was he found that his
head was spinning too much to really take in what he was hearing.

He would find over the next days and weeks that almost the whole school felt the same about the
Slytherins, who didn't at all help the situation with their aloof behavior. James Potter in particular
hated anything to do with Dark magic, and his hatred only rose to new heights as he obsessively
pored over every report of an attack or disappearance. He had thus far avoided mentioning
anything too specific about Sirius's family or his Slytherin friends, but Sirius suspected that was
mostly because Sirius was giving every appearance of distancing himself from them. He had
written to James over the summer about his disagreement with his grandfather, which had seemed
to put the idea into James's head that he was no longer getting along with his family in general,
and now he was taking care to avoid approaching the Slytherins anytime James might see him.

It wasn't that he honestly wanted to avoid them, of course; it was just that he found himself
unwilling to go back to the accusations and ostracization he'd faced before. He had likewise
decided not to even try getting away to continue his Dark Arts practice until the whole thing had time to blow over. He'd been left with sending longing, apologetic looks to the Slytherins behind James's back and exchanging surreptitious letters with them whenever he could.

Still, at least he and James were getting closer than ever. As they spent more time together, and as the Gryffindor boys became the only friends Sirius spent any time with, Sirius’s feelings for James were steadily changing from necessary toleration to real friendship. That was probably the reason he didn’t hex Potter’s nose off when he was woken up by a harsh poke in the chest in the wee hours of the morning.

"What the—" he began, but James clapped a hand over his mouth before he could finish.

"Shhh!" insisted James, bringing his other hand up to his face and pressing a finger against his lips. Then he motioned for Sirius to come with him, and Sirius, though he glared at the other boy over the top of the hand still over his mouth, motioned that he would come. The stone floors of Gryffindor Tower were freezing against his bare feet as they crept down the stairs and across the common room, and Sirius made a mental note to have his mother send him slippers as he dug his toes into the threadbare rug in the furthest corner of the room where James had led them.

"Why couldn't we sit by the fire?" he whined as he aimed a Hot-Air Charm at his feet to warm them.

"Shhh!" James was looking around the common room suspiciously, but he finally turned back and whispered, "We don't want anyone to hear this, okay? It's about Remus."

All Sirius could do was blink at him in irritated, still-sleepy confusion. "Okay…"

His friend leaned forward earnestly. "You know how horrible those nights are for him…" began James, and thus began a complicated, winding explanation. Sirius could only goggle at him until the other boy finally concluded, "And so I think you'll have to take point on this one, seeing as you're the most talented in Transfiguration."

He half expected that James would reveal that it had all been a joke, but when several seconds passed with nothing more than the other boy's earnest look of expectation, Sirius could only say, "You want us to become Animagi."

"Yes," agreed James.

"You want us to become unregistered Animagi," Sirius felt the need to clarify.

"Yes."

"You want us to become unregistered Animagi while we're still students."

"Yes."

Sirius sat back in his chair, abandoning his Hot-Air Charm and hardly even noticing the immediate rush of frigid air meeting his bare feet. "Are you mad?"

"Come on, Sirius!" wheedled James. "You're probably one of the best Transfiguration students in the entire school, in any year! And I'm not half bad. I know we could figure it out between us, and just think how much it would help Remus."

Although he would not like to admit, even to himself, James's flattery had probably gone a lot further towards convincing Sirius to give it a try than the idea of helping out their werewolf friend had. Sirius still had trouble reconciling the quiet, intelligent boy he knew as Remus Lupin with
everything he knew about werewolves, but even all of their recent time spent together since
returning for their third year hadn't completely rid him of the wariness and prejudice he felt. He
reluctantly agreed to at least gather what information he could from the library and, if necessary,
from his library at home, but he rather thought that he'd only discover that it would be impossible
for them to do and James would drop the matter.

It turned out that he was correct about it being almost impossibly difficult, but he was wrong about
James dropping the subject. Soon enough their twice-weekly late-night meetings in the common
room to read about the Animagus transformation turned into an annual event, and that in addition
to the almost daily Quidditch practices and their heavier course loads caused the weeks to blur into
months until it was time for their first ever Hogsmeade weekend.

"I can't, Potter," Sirius hissed under his breath, reverting back to using his friend's last name, as he
often did when he was annoyed with the other boy.

"I can't slip away from Remus and Peter like you can," insisted James in a whisper.

They both raised their eyes to look at their two friends, who were walking several feet in front of
them, Peter glancing back every so often with a look of supreme consternation at being left out of
whatever plotting Sirius was getting up to with James.

Sirius rolled his eyes in exasperation. "I can only 'slip away' from them because I'm going to be
with Janice! I think she'll notice if I take her to an apothecary and start asking for obscure
ingredients I have no good reason to need, when we're supposed to be on a date!"

James looked as if he had an argument ready on the tip of his tongue, but at that moment the girl in
question materialized at Sirius's side and leaned up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. With an
indulgent smile, he obliged by leaning down just enough so that her lips could make contact, then
took her gloved hand in his own. It was the most affection either of them was willing to show
under the watchful eyes of Professors Slughorn and McGonagall.

"Look, Potter," he said lowly as Janice began leading him away, "try to manage without me. If
you can't then we'll figure something else out."

He and Janice trekked down the snow-dusted road leading from the castle into the village in
companionable silence, until Hogsmeade came into view and Janice let out a little gasp that
immediately reminded Sirius of the sound she made whenever he bit at her lip. It was a
picturesque little village with cozy-looking cottages and storefronts lit up with twinkling displays,
but the sight only made Sirius anxious. As he'd never been to Hogsmeade before, he really had no
idea what he and Janice were going to do on this date. He thought that he was probably being
silly, since Janice had also never been before and they'd been on plenty of dates and spent a lot of
time together, but for some reason he couldn't identify, he couldn't help but be a bit nervous.

"Oh, it's so cute!" she exclaimed with a little bounce that Sirius couldn't help but notice made her
breasts bounce, too. He'd returned to school to find that they seemed to be even more ample than
they'd been when he'd seen her over the summer, and he could not but appreciate it.

He tore his eyes away with great effort.

"I thought we'd get lunch in the village," he ventured uncertainly, "but what do you think we
should do before then?"

Janice leaned into him, her head resting against his arm, and he could feel one of the hair combs
he'd given her last Christmas pressing against him through his thick cloak and winter robes. "Well,
I want to have a look at Honeydukes and Zonko's, of course," she answered dreamily, "but I
thought you could help me pick out some new robes at Gladrags."

Sirius pursed his lips together in displeasure. "Oh. Okay."

She burst into giggles a second later and brought one of her hands up to swat at his chest. "I was just joking, silly! Honestly, I know you wouldn't enjoy that."

He was obviously relieved, but then his mind raced to all sorts of possibilities. What if she were only testing him to see if he would do it? His mother did that sort of thing all the time to his father! With only a small grimace that he knew she couldn't see, he said, "But if you really want to, we can go."

"You're sweet, Siri, but I really was only joking." By this time they had entered the village and had just begun the walk up High Street, where all of the main shops were located. "How about we just window shop a bit, and we can go in if either of us sees anything interesting?"

That seemed like a good idea to him, and he quickly agreed to the plan. They passed by the Three Broomsticks first, but it already seemed to be too crowded to be comfortable even this early in the day and they weren't thirsty anyway, so they decided to pass it by and see about visiting on their way back. On the other side of the street from the pub, just visible in the distance, was a house that Janice pointed out to him.

"It was only built a few years ago," she informed him with a little shiver, "but my sister said that all of the villagers are afraid to go up there. They say the most awful noises come from it. It's called the Shrieking Shack." Sirius realized with a jolt that it must be the house he'd been told Dumbledore had commissioned for Remus's transformations. The shrieks they heard could only come from his friend, and that sent a shiver down his own spine. His thoughts were confirmed when his companion added, "My sister Pam said that her boyfriend during her seventh year was dared to go inside once, but he claimed that none of the doors or windows would open."

A bit further up the street they found Honeydukes, and both of them were eager to fight the crowd in order to check out the sweets shop they'd heard so much about from their various older family members. The shop was so packed full of students that they could barely move at all, but after nearly an hour of browsing they'd managed to look at nearly every shelf in the place. Sirius was glad that Janice had brought her purse along, because he'd had to cast an Expansion Charm on its interior in order to hold all of their spoils until they could get up to the cash register. He'd shoved handfuls of treacle fudge, pumpkin pasties, cauldron cakes, licorice wands, sugar quills, bars of Honeydukes Best Chocolate, and all sorts of other interesting-sounding treats inside. And, when Janice had turned away for a moment, he'd nabbed a few packages of Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, which the label claimed would allow the chewer to blow bubbles that wouldn't pop for days. He thought that he and James could come up with some use or another for such a thing.

As for Janice, she had been a lot more conservative in her selections, except for the dozen or so packages of sugared butterfly wings she'd enthusiastically snatched off the shelves. "They're so good!" she'd explained when she caught sight of his humored expression. "My sisters used to get some for me whenever they visited Hogsmeade. They're dark chocolate and coconut!"

Sirius rather suspected that she'd have liked them no matter what they were made of, just because they were shaped like butterflies, but he didn't say so aloud.

Next they perused the Tomes and Scrolls bookshop (where Sirius and Janice both purchased several books), Spintwitches Sporting Needs (where Sirius painstakingly examined the various types of broomstick polish on offer while Janice watched indulgently), Zonko's (where Janice pretended not to notice when Sirius gleefully selected several Galleons' worth of promising pranking supplies), and Dervish and Banges (where they were both delighted by the various
magical instruments but neither one found anything they thought they ought to buy).

It was far past their usual lunchtime when Sirius finally led Janice into the unfortunately still-crowded Three Broomsticks, but fortunately Madam Rosmerta seemed to take an instant liking to Sirius and shooed a group of older Hufflepuffs away from their booth so that he and Janice could sit.

"They finished their drinks nearly half an hour ago, dears," she explained as she leaned over the table to clear away their empty mugs. Janice did not look at all impressed by the way the barmaid's plentiful curves were displayed so close to Sirius's eyes, and Sirius thought it best not to stare too obviously, even if he found that he suddenly quite fancied Rosmerta. "Space is at a premium when you students come down from Hogsmeade, so I can't have loiterers. Now then, what'll it be?"

"I'll have the '34 Blishen's Firewhisky. Bring the bottle, if you please," said Sirius, grinning up impishly at Rosmerta's pretty face.

She laughed. "Oh, this one's trouble, my dear," she told Janice as she waved her finger at Sirius. "You had better keep a close eye on him. That'll be two Butterbeers, then?"

"Actually," Janice replied, her voice tight, "I'd like a soda with cherry syrup."

As soon as Rosmerta had moved away from their booth, Sirius turned to his girlfriend with raised eyebrows. "I thought you wanted something to eat, too?"

"Well, I'm not sure I want to stay here if you're just going to flirt with the barmaid and… and… stare at her… assets!"

His eyebrows rose further up his forehead in consternation. Before he thought better of it, he blurted, "It isn't as if I can help it. I've been staring at your assets all day."

The next few moments played out as one of those bizarre situations where Sirius thought for sure that he would be groveling for her to forgive him because he had said something very stupid, but it turned out that he found himself attached to her lips because he'd apparently said something right without realizing it. It only took him a handful of seconds before he recovered himself sufficiently to kiss her back, and they were still enthusiastically snogging a couple of minutes later when Rosmerta loudly placed their mugs on the wooden table.

"Too much more of that and I'll have to send you on to Madam Puddifoot's!" she exclaimed with false severity.

Janice pulled back with a blush, and Sirius found himself suddenly disliking the pretty barmaid a lot more than he had previously.

"Did you really mean it?" asked Janice as soon as Rosmerta was out of earshot again. "I mean, about my… assets. Do you really think they're… you know, nice?"

"Yeah, they're very"—Large. Soft. Bouncy.—"nice."

In the end, they ended up ordering a selection of pub foods and several more Butterbeers and sodas, and although Madam Rosmerta encouraged various other loitering students to leave and make room for newcomers, she didn't disturb Sirius and Janice until it was time for all of the students to head back up to the castle.

The term continued on with more reports of Death Eaters, very little progress in their Animagus
research, and their first Quidditch game (Slytherin three hundred and thirty to Gryffindor three hundred and ten) interspersed between their full course loads and detentions for their ever more elaborate pranks.

Sirius and James were walking back from the trophy room, where they'd had to polish every award by hand after being caught filling the Gryffindor common room with unpoppable Drooble's Best bubbles, when James first said something that made Sirius question his sanity.

"Evans was beautiful when she was angry though, wasn't she?" he asked, and after several seconds of oppressive silence he turned to see that Sirius was looking at him as if he were considering dragging him to the hospital wing for an examination posthaste. He rushed on. "You know, the way her eyes flashed and her little face turned all pink when that gum got stuck in her hair…. You didn't think that was cute?"

Sirius blinked at him. "James, mate, I think that you need to find a girlfriend if you're wasting your time thinking about Evans."

"Well, maybe I want her to be my girlfriend," he responded indignantly.

"Right," came Sirius's droll reply. "What with the way she thinks of you after everything you've done to her and Snivellus, I'd say that you have a better shot at convincing Snivellus himself to snog you than convincing Evans to do it."

James didn't speak to him for the rest of the walk back to Gryffindor Tower, but that night when he met Sirius at the appointed time for their meeting down in the common room he seemed to have put the conversation behind him. Although they had only been in the common room for a few minutes before they devolved into another argument.

"We've got to at least try, or else we'll never get any further with this," James argued.

Sirius disagreed. "Look, I can probably get to Diagon Alley on my own over Christmas break, or I can ask my cousin to get the ingredients for us. I'd really rather not risk being expelled for sneaking off school grounds to visit Hogsmeade."

"We can't buy all of the ingredients at once; they're on a list and the apothecary is supposed to record the names of everybody who buys them together since they can only be used in that combination for the Animagus potion," James explained, although Sirius already knew all of that. "It'll take us until this time next year if we try to divide the list up and spread it out so that we don't raise any suspicions."

They were all valid points, but to Sirius the argument really came down to one thing. "If we get caught, we're dead."

"When have you ever been afraid of the trouble you'd get in for breaking the rules, anyway?"

And Sirius really had no good answer to that, so by the time they crawled back into their beds a couple of hours before sunrise he had committed himself to Potter's harebrained scheme to sneak out of the castle in the dead of night and break into the apothecary in Hogsmeade. However, he had managed to get the other boy to concede that they ought to each try to get their hands on the more innocuous items over the holiday break so that their list would be significantly shorter and they could spend the least time possible in the shop in Hogsmeade, thus lessening their chances of being caught. The plan was scheduled to take place after the first Hogsmeade visit of the next term, as they both hoped that the professors and the denizens of Hogsmeade would be more exhausted than usual after dealing with the students' visit.
His own foray into the world of hard crime turned Sirius's thoughts to something he purposefully hadn't thought too hard about all term: At least one of his Slytherin friends was undoubtedly a Death Eater. After his mind was turned to the subject, nothing he did could distract him from it, and he determined that he really needed to talk to Rabastan as soon as possible and couldn't wait until Christmas.

Finally, a couple of weeks after he first thought of it, Sirius found a few hours to himself when James and Thomas, the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, holed themselves up in an unused classroom to discuss Quidditch tactics after they'd seen Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff in action for the first time in their match against each other. Aquila was more than happy to deliver a note to Rabastan, but she was definitely less pleased to have to come back with it undelivered. She fussed and fretted until Sirius managed to soothe her with a dozen owl treats and the promise of a nice, long letter for her to deliver to his mother the next day. The failed delivery was the best news for Sirius, though, since it meant that Rabastan was probably in the Slytherin common room.

He managed to sneak out of Gryffindor Tower while Remus and Peter were engrossed in a game of chess. Sneaking downstairs without being seen was the most difficult part, as he didn't want to risk using James's Invisibility Cloak without permission. Once in the dungeons, it was the work of a moment to snag a first year by the shoulder and demand that he pass the note to Rabastan.

"Meet me in the practice room ASAP," it said. He trusted that Rabastan would know what he meant, as he'd ended up telling him all about his extracurricular Dark Arts studies over their time together in the summer. Sure enough, he'd only been waiting for a few minutes before Rabastan showed up, an unreadably surly look on his face.

"So, difficult situation, yeah?" the Slytherin asked without preamble. "I haven't talked to you face-to-face since the train."

Sirius shook his head, not in denial of that fact so much as in despair.

"I just don't want to go back to what it was like for me first year," he said softly. "You and Cissy and Malfoy'll be gone after this year, but I have to be in Gryffindor and in a dorm room with James Potter for four years after that."

Rabastan leaned against the wall, letting his head fall back against it so he could glare up at the stone ceiling instead of at Sirius. "I understand. Hopefully you'll still make time for me, though."

In the intervening silence, Sirius's mind returned to the actual reason he'd wanted to meet with Rabastan alone, besides just that they hadn't spoken to each other in months. He turned the issue over in his mind a few times, all of his previous plans seeming inappropriate now. When he couldn't put it off any longer, he braced himself and just spit it out.

"I don't think the threat of indignant Gryffindors will put me off spending time with you when I can, if finding out that you're a Death Eater hasn't done it."

Rabastan immediately tensed. He snapped his eyes to Sirius's and, in a voice too nonchalant to be genuine, asked, "What makes you think that?"

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Well, besides the fact that you haven't denied it, that Dark Mark on your arm sort of gave it away."

"I should never have let you see that," the Slytherin responded ruefully.

Sirius shrugged. "I'm sure allowances can be made when one has a big bloody gash on one's ribcage."
"I'm sure the Dark Lord would disagree."

"Well, I'll be sure to remember not to mention it to him if you don't." Then, his curiosity winning over, he blurted, "When?"

His friend eyed him seriously for several seconds of indecision, then, after letting out a defeated exhalation, answered, "Last New Year. You remember the business that kept Dolohov from coming for your lessons, which you whinged about incessantly?" Here Sirius let out a sound of protest, but he knew that he really couldn't deny it. "That was the business. The attack that night was something of an initiation for us."

Sirius wondered what it said about him that he wasn't very bothered by the fact that one of his closest friends and his dueling instructor were Death Eaters who tortured and murdered people. He supposed that Rabastan hadn't been joking when he'd said over the summer that there wasn't much left of the wizard who had slashed his side. In fact, the more seconds ticked by the more pieces of a puzzle he hadn't known existed until that moment seemed to fall into place in his mind: his parents' references to the Lestranges' "political allies," his grandfather's annoyingly close scrutiny of Dolohov's lessons, the Christmas dinner several years prior when Bellatrix had cut Rodolphus off when he'd mentioned some common acquaintance of Mr. Lestrange and Mr. Malfoy, Rodolphus's abnormally large supply of dittany….

"So your brother too, then?"

"Yeah, but he joined ages ago," replied Rabastan. "Your nutter cousin as well. I told you they were perfect for each other."

Sirius wasn't very surprised. Even though it did take him aback for about half a second to consider his dear Cousin Belley actually committing the atrocities he'd read about in the newspaper, he quickly realized that the image wasn't at all out of character.

"And Malfoy?"

Rabastan cocked his head to the side at that one, considering Sirius for a moment before replying. "Yes. But not Narcissa."

That drew a sharp laugh from Sirius. "I never considered Narcissa. Can you imagine her traipsing about in the wee hours of the morning, dragging Mudblood children out of their beds?"

"I think that you don't give her enough credit. She's right terrifying, just as terrifying as her sister when she puts her mind to it."

"Don't be silly," admonished Sirius. "Cissy's amoral and vindictive and attracted to Malfoy as much for his sociopathic tendencies as for his hair, but she wouldn't drown a bag of kittens by hand." At that, Rabastan released a startled laugh from high in his throat. Sirius grinned in return and added, "Besides, that ugly brand on her arm would interfere with her wardrobe selections between approximately April and September."

"Oh dear," Rabastan said between chuckles, "do you suppose she's considered what she's getting into with Malfoy? She won't be able to dress him as she pleases either."

They walked back towards the fork that would lead Rabastan to his common room and Sirius out of the dungeons with Rabastan's arm around his shoulders, both peppering in comments between their continued laughter. "That thing she does when—" Rabastan was saying as they came around the last corner, but he stopped abruptly when they almost ran right into someone who was coming down the narrow corridor from the entrance hall.
Both Sirius and Rosier reared back in surprise at the sudden sight of one another, until Sirius composed his face into his usual mask. Rosier didn't appear able to get his own expression back under control nearly as easily, and his stare traveled from Sirius's face to the arm around his shoulders several times without bothering to hide his surprise and jealousy. He'd just opened his mouth, probably to speak, when Rabastan broke in harshly.

"What are you looking at? Move along, Rosier!"

With a last, all-too-readable glance, Rosier lowered his head so that his long, chestnut hair fell into his eyes and turned back towards the Slytherin common room without uttering a word. Sirius watched him go, only to discover when he looked back to his friend that Rabastan was watching him with a peculiar expression on his face.

"You know, Black, I've been thinking." He ignored Sirius's snide remark about the dangers of that. "It occurs to me that it might be time to put this squabble with Rosier behind you. After all, you'll need a good friend in Slytherin after we leave."

"You want me to be friends with Rosier," Sirius stated flatly, not bothering in the least to hide what he thought about that.

"Well, you did used to be best friends, didn't you? It couldn't be that difficult to make nice again."

"He completely abandoned me!" Sirius immediately objected.

"Yes, but aren't you going through the same situation now? Admittedly I'm glad that you're only hiding your relationship with us evil Death Eater Slytherins and not completely abandoning us like Rosier did to you, but surely you can understand his position a bit better now?" By that time Sirius had gone completely stiff under his arm, and Rabastan tightened his hold around the smaller boy's shoulders. After a long second or two had gone by without Sirius making a sound, he added, "Look, Siri, I'm just trying to look out for you. Rosier's been moping around for two years on the fringes of Slytherin because everybody took your side, and I think it'd be easy for you to turn him into a nice, evil Slytherin influence for yourself for when I'm no longer available to corrupt your Gryffindorish little heart."

"Oh, hell..." whined Sirius, his petulant tone doing nothing to mask the newfound guilt he felt. "You are a bad influence. Bloody Death Eater."

Chapter End Notes

I suspect that the time will come soon when the wizarding world fears to say Voldemort's name, but I think it's a bit too early for that in 1973.

Amelia Bones's brother Edgar was killed in the latter part of the first war, according to Moody, but since we also are told that his wife and children were killed along with him, I assume that Amelia must have another brother who is the father of Susan Bones. (Or a sister who chose to give Susan her maiden name instead of the surname of Susan's father, but that seems more unlikely.) So poor orphaned "Jeffrey Bones" it is.
“BOMBARDA MAXIMA!”

Sirius’s spell flew across the space and hit Dolohov’s quickly erected shield with such force that he could actually see it shimmering and shuddering in the air. He had only a moment to appreciate that and the cheers coming from the other side of the room before he suddenly found himself flat on his back and unable to move. Dolohov still liked to petrify him whenever he had something to say, instead of just calling for a halt the normal way; he said it built character.

“Why all this shouting?” demanded the dueling instructor. “‘I AM GOING TO TELL YOU WHAT I’M CASTING!’ Do you see how fucking stupid that is?”

Then Sirius’s entire body relaxed and he let his limbs fall fully to the floor with a sigh of relief.

“Sorry, Dolohov,” he replied, knowing that his release from the spell meant that his instructor expected an actual response. “I know you’re right. I just get so caught up in the moment.”

The man snorted to show what he thought of that. “Dueling is about control. Channel your emotions into your spells, but don’t let your feelings control you. Again.”

Antonin Dolohov was not a man of many words unless he had some specific bit of wisdom to impart, but Sirius had long since learned to follow his brusque commands immediately and without question. If he did, then he learned something valuable and worthwhile. If he didn’t, then he found himself nursing bruises even his grandfather’s potions couldn’t fully heal. He rose to his feet gracefully, gave a playful half bow to the corner of the room where his brother and Barty Crouch sat watching, and sent a Stinging Jinx across the room before he’d risen to his full height again.

Dolohov had obviously not been expecting it, as it was one of those exceedingly rare moments when one of Sirius’s spells actually hit the man. He let out a little grunt of surprised discomfort and glared at his pupil as he sent back a barrage of Stunners and Disarming Charms and mild hexes, but Sirius knew him well enough by now to recognize the barest hint of a smile on his dour face.

The next few minutes were a whirlwind of ducking and dodging and Shield Charms and trying his best to send back his own offensive spells whenever he had a spare second. Although he was sure it looked to his brother and Regulus’s friend as if he were getting his ass handed to him, the truth was that there had been a vast improvement since he’d begun his dueling lessons. In the beginning he’d barely been able to defend himself for ten seconds before one of Dolohov’s spells hit him, and he certainly hadn’t been able to even think of sending back any of his own spells. Now he could go several minutes without being hit, and he had learned how to find opportunities to send his own Stunners and jinxes. In fact, he’d gotten quite proficient at aiming while he was moving.

This time when it ended, Dolohov called a halt instead of petrifying him, which Sirius knew meant that he was particularly pleased with Sirius’s performance.

“I haven’t been hit with a Stinging Jinx since I was nine. My mother reddened my ass for cutting off one of my sister’s pigtails,” he said. Sirius wasn’t at all surprised that he’d done something like
“Mind you, if the only way you can hit me is by cheating…”

“Cheating? That’s rich,” replied Sirius, using the haughty, arrogant tone he usually reserved for hapless first years and Severus Snape. “You Slytherins are all the same: It’s ‘using every tactical advantage’ when you do it, but it’s ‘cheating’ when anyone else does it.”

The burly Death Eater laughed, his booming voice echoing around the empty drawing room in a sort of pleasant-but-scary way, but from the corner came indignant shouts of “Oi!” and “Hey!”

Before the protests from the peanut gallery could gain traction, the door opened and they all turned as one to see who had interrupted them.

“Grandfather!” exclaimed Regulus as they all took in the sight of the tall, proud man still wearing his traveling cloak. “You’re home earlier than we’d expected.”

Sirius wasn’t surprised that his grandfather had managed to conclude his business earlier than originally planned, but he was surprised that he had barged into the dueling lesson without so much as changing out of his traveling clothes. It was nearly unheard of for Arcturus Black to present himself to guests when he looked so disheveled, and Sirius’s suspicions—and his hackles—were immediately raised by it.

For the space of several heartbeats, Arcturus surveyed the room with a severe eye. When he spoke, his voice exuded barely controlled anger. “Regulus, take your friend to my study and prepare for your lesson. Sirius, wait for me in my drawing room.”

But he was eyeing Dolohov in such a way that Sirius would have had to be dragged out of the room kicking and screaming before he left them alone.

“I still have half an hour before my lesson is over,” he said instead.

“Go, Sirius.” There was no need for him to voice the “or else” part, but still Sirius couldn’t bring himself to leave. He looked back and forth between his grandfather and his dueling instructor in indecision and not a little anxiety, until finally Arcturus snapped his fingers and the house-elf appeared already in a half-bow. “Kreacher, take Sirius to my drawing room and keep him there until I arrive.”

Sirius tried to dodge the house-elf’s knobby fingers, but Kreacher was nothing if not efficient in carrying out direct orders. Sirius did, indeed, go kicking and screaming out of the room, although the racket he made perhaps wasn’t quite as disruptive as he’d hoped since Kreacher Apparated him out of the room instead of dragging him.

When Grandfather Arcturus stalked in several minutes later, Sirius was standing defiantly in the middle of the room, waiting for him with a glare.

“What did you say to Dolohov? What did you do?”

If the older man was surprised by the vicious tone of his grandson’s voice, he did not let it show.

“Dolohov has been dismissed from his position,” he stated calmly.

Sirius’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Are you mad? He’s the best dueling instructor in the United Kingdom!”

“His pernicious influence over you has gone on long enough.” Arcturus stepped up to the sideboard along the far wall and poured himself a generous helping of whisky, completely ignoring Sirius’s protests as if he couldn’t hear them. “And as soon as I am out of the house, he
“It was *my* idea to let Regulus and Barty watch my lesson! I thought Regulus might not be so jealous if he were included in some way,” insisted Sirius. “And he hasn’t had a negative influence on me at all! He hasn’t ever done anything except teach me how to duel!”

His grandfather’s silver eyes were as hard as ice, but his tone was carefully controlled when he spoke. “He is a Death Eater and has been turning you against your family, no doubt in an attempt to groom you for his master.”

“Turning me against my—” began Sirius, before it occurred to him suddenly where his grandfather’s ideas had come from and he closed his mouth so that he could think for a moment. He had known that his grandfather had been shocked and appalled by his outburst over the summer; in fact, this confrontation was the most time they’d spent alone together since that day. He had also known long before this that his grandfather had not liked Dolohov and had been against his appointment as Sirius’s dueling instructor since the first time Sirius had ever met the man. He supposed that now he could conclude that his grandfather must have known somehow that Dolohov was a Death Eater, and he must have placed the blame for Sirius’s behavior squarely at the man’s feet.

Sirius took a fortifying breath and said, carefully, “I had no idea that Dolohov was a Death Eater until a couple of weeks ago, and he’s not the one who told me. He’s never said anything to me or taught me anything that wasn’t directly related to dueling.”

“You knew?” asked his grandfather incredulously, and Sirius knew that it was probably the only bit of information he’d taken away from that little speech.

“Grandfather,” said Sirius slowly, as if he were speaking to the mentally infirm, “most of the Slytherin boys are or will be Death Eaters, and some of the girls, too.”

Sirius felt that he would be better off not mentioning the part about him only having learned all of this from Rabastan Lestrange a few weeks before. From the shocked and frightened look on his grandfather’s face, Sirius knew that he’d made the right decision.

“Is it so pervasive? Have so many fallen?”

“Er… yes.”

His grandfather moved across the room towards him and grabbed hold of his shoulders before Sirius had time to decide how to react. He peered down into Sirius’s eyes with an intensity that was rather frightening. “You will not join them; I forbid it. Other Houses may have fallen, but no Black will be a servant—a slave! Your brother is entirely unsuitable, but I swear to all the gods old and new that if you become a Death Eater I will disinherit you and take him in your place. Do you understand?”

Sirius blinked once, then twice, before his mind caught up.

“I understand,” he managed to say in a clear voice, although he was preoccupied thinking about how Bellatrix was already a Death Eater, and Narcissa was going to marry one even if she never took the Mark herself. He was glad that he hadn’t named any names before, because if his grandfather was willing to separate him from the best dueling instructor money could buy and threaten to disinherit him, then he would probably have no trouble at all forbidding him to see his cousins or Rabastan. And if he really would disown his own grandson, then he’d likely go immediately to blast Bellatrix off the family tapestry.
“If I swear it,” he began, recklessly clinging to the possibility of getting his teacher back, “will you allow Dolohov to keep tutoring me?”

“No,” his grandfather replied at once. “What is done is done, and it was done for the best. We will find you a new instructor.”

The days that followed were dreadful. Sirius refused to come out of his room the day after Dolohov had been dismissed. He wasn’t hiding out of any misplaced notion that his refusal to come downstairs would punish his grandfather, like he knew the adults thought. Rather he knew that if he had to face the man again so soon that he would undoubtedly speak his mind and say something that, while he wouldn’t regret it exactly, would only make their relationship all the worse.

The day after that he was ordered downstairs by his mother. It was phrased in polite tones as a request, but Sirius knew that his mother didn’t make requests, so he dragged his feet all the way to the downstairs drawing room. The conversation was even more horrific than he’d imagined.

“Walburga, he’s getting so big and so handsome!” Aunt Lucretia exclaimed as soon as she saw him, as if he weren’t in the room for her to address directly.

Sirius dutifully said how glad he was to see her and asked her how the trip from France had been, but both of the women ignored him.

“And so wild, too, worse than his father ever was,” Walburga informed her sister-in-law. “Detentions all day and night, imagine!”

Sirius sunk down into the nearest sofa while Aunt Lucretia clucked her disapproval.

“My dear, I’m sure he isn’t any worse than my brother was. He probably just doesn’t have the Slytherin knack for not getting caught.” If Sirius hadn’t known that his mother wouldn’t be pleased to hear it, he would have informed his aunt that he did at least three or four times as many things as he actually got caught for, thank you very much. “Perhaps what he needs is a fine girl to keep him in line. Orion improved drastically after he became engaged to you, and Sirius is only a year younger than he was.”

Sirius sat up straighter in alarm. “What?”

“Ooo, yes!” Walburga crooned. “I had been thinking of Lucilla Lestrange!”

“Lucilla Lestrange!” he cried. “I’d rather marry a Muggle!”

Both women turned to look at him. Aunt Lucretia’s severe hairstyle made her expression seem even more pointy and severe than it probably would have otherwise, and his mother’s dark eyes were coldly calculating in her otherwise flawlessly beautiful expression.

“Now, my darling, I know that she’s a plain little thing, but she’s more well-bred and wealthy than anyone else you’re likely to find in England,” Walburga told him, sounding almost as if she were sympathetic about him marrying someone who wasn’t beautiful. “The Black blood is strong; I’m sure that your children will take after their father.”

Her looks had absolutely nothing to do with why Sirius felt nauseous at the thought of marrying her, much less impregnating her. Memories of her words and Rabastan’s reactions flitted across his mind.

He glared at his mother. “If you try to set up an engagement between us, I swear I’ll treat her so badly that no amount of money would make her go through with it.”
He stalked out of the room without a backward glance, only belatedly realizing that perhaps he should have made it clear that he’d do the same to any girl they tried to set him up with without his permission. Knowing his mother, he’d come back downstairs to find that in his absence he’d been engaged to that Parkinson twit in fifth year, or maybe to Alastair Greengrass’s nine-year-old sister whom Sirius had never even met.

He felt a bit better the next day, when no engagement was announced and Barty finally went home to his own family. The Crouches stayed for dinner at Grimmauld Place before collecting their son, and Sirius was quietly amused by the way his family and Mr. Crouch danced around the dragon in the room: the Blacks’ obviously Dark practices, and Mr. Crouch’s outspoken opposition to the Dark Arts as the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Although he tried to be subtle about it, Mr. Crouch eyed everything around him suspiciously, as if he might find something incriminating about the silverware or the drapery. Grandfather Arcturus had been hard pressed all evening to find anything to talk about that didn’t involve politics about which they disagreed.

“Barty tells me that he has a particular passion for herbology,” Orion helpfully contributed into the awkward silence that had fallen between the men as Kreacher cleared away their dinner plates.

“Bartemius knows that excelling at useful subjects is more important than his little hobby,” replied Mr. Crouch as he peered distrustfully into his pudding.

Still, it was clear that the Crouches weren’t about to disapprove of the growing friendship between Barty and Regulus. Why would they, given that Arcturus was a member of the Wizengamot, and the Blacks had never been publicly accused of any crimes?

Sirius really ought not to begrudge his brother the friendship, but the truth was that he did. He was insanely jealous that his brother had a best friend he could talk about openly and actually bring home for a visit, whereas Sirius would never have dared suggest that James Potter or Peter Pettigrew or Remus Lupin be allowed to visit Grimmauld Place, and he wasn’t anywhere near close enough to any of the Slytherins in his year to want to invite them for a visit.

The only part of the Crouches’ visit he hadn’t liked was when his mother and aunt had asked Mrs. Crouch, née Travers, all about her and her husband’s families, particularly the girls. Sirius supposed that it was a good thing Barty was an only child, because if he’d had a sister then she and Sirius would have been engaged before the pudding had been cleared away and dessert served.

Although Sirius never would have thought it possible two and a half years ago when he’d first been sorted into Gryffindor, the common room in the tower was starting to feel more and more like home. It seemed that every time he left, he was more eager than ever to come back. (Of course, his increasing frustration with his life at Grimmauld Place probably contributed quite a bit to his warm feelings about Gryffindor Tower.) Even the red and gold, garish as it still was when paired together, was starting to grow on him. And he had to admit that the squishy, threadbare sofas, which he’d only ungenerously called tatty before, were the most comfortable sofas he’d ever planted his ass on.

Unfortunately, there were fewer seats than there were people who wanted to sit on them, so there was always quite a fight amongst the Gryffindors. Fortunately for Sirius, he and his friends had such a reputation at this point that even their housemates were wary of crossing them for fear of waking to find that all of their clothes had been changed to Slytherin colors or that their hair had been semi-permanently spelled off.
“Up you go,” James told a pair of second years who had claimed the best sofa nearest the fireplace.

Remus looked on disapprovingly as the younger kids cleared out, no doubt because they had their potions books spread out around them and had seemed to be in the middle of an intense studying session before they’d been interrupted. However, Sirius knew that he wouldn’t actually put up any sort of fuss on their behalf, not if it meant possibly offending James. Remus might have spoken up against Sirius or Peter if James weren’t involved, but he had a special kind of loyalty to his first friend.

Sirius threw his arm around the slighter boy, wincing a bit to feel the bony shoulders. It was a reminder of the toll the lycanthropy took on his friend’s body.

“Lighten up, Remus,” he said jovially, pushing down those thoughts. “They deserve it for trying to study on the first night back.”

Remus looked as if he were debating how to reply to that pronouncement when Sirius released him suddenly with a loud, “OI!”

James and Peter were scrambling around the sofa that the second years had just vacated; there was room for two of them to sprawl out, and the other two would have to pull up less comfortable chairs. Sirius took advantage of his long legs and vaulted over the back of the sofa, landing on his back across the cushions. A second later, James landed heavily across his stomach.

Sirius’s breath was knocked out of his body with a loud “Oof!”

James laughed and bounced a bit as Peter came up short to stand next to Sirius’s head. “Too slow, mate!”

Peter scowled at him, his small eyes scrunching even more in displeasure.

As soon as he was able to breathe again, Sirius shoved at Potter, who was still bouncing on his stomach. “Get off me, Potter!”

After much kicking and shoving and good-natured name-calling, they finally sprawled comfortably, Sirius’s long legs hooked over the back of the sofa and James’s extended beside Sirius’s body. Still grumbling over the loss of his spot, Peter slouched into the nearest armchair, which Sirius knew from experience was slightly less comfortable. Remus had pulled another chair up closer to the fire, which was his usual habit since his thin frame couldn’t seem to hold onto any heat in the drafty tower.

Things settled down quickly. For a bunch of reputed troublemakers, most of their time was spent doing rather boring, mundane things. Of course, Sirius thought, for a famous magical castle, Hogwarts could be rather boring and mundane itself at times, especially for somebody who had grown up in the magical world and wasn’t surprised by moving staircases and ghosts and other such things. James was dividing his time between studying a Quidditch tactics reference book with animated diagrams and interrupting Remus’s concentration on his advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts book. Peter was trying to teach Sirius the finer points of Muggle poker, but Sirius was having trouble remembering all of the rules.

“Is it better to have all of the same little symbols or to have two of the same person?” he asked, tapping his finger impatiently against the backs of the cards in his hand. “I can never remember.”

Peter let out a grumble of exasperation. “The point of the game is to keep your hand a secret, Sirius!”
Sirius shrugged in unconcern. “Maybe you’re just a bad teacher.”

From behind his tatty textbook, Remus lifted his golden brown eyes to look at them in amusement. “He was probably hoping you wouldn’t notice that on account of your overwhelming arrogance,” he told Sirius, his eyes crinkling in amusement. “Then he could win plenty of Galleons off you.”

Sirius’s laugh barked out across the common room, drawing attention from the scattered groups playing chess and catching up with the friends and rushing to complete homework assignments they ought to have finished over break. Lily Evans and Emmeline Vance, who were inexplicably sitting together at a table next to the stairs leading up to the girls’ dormitories, both glared in his direction. As the commotion died down and Peter’s halfhearted protests of innocence subsided, Sirius rose from the sofa, inciting a brief squabble with James, and made a show of stretching.

“Where’re you going?” demanded James as he took the opportunity to stretch out along the entire length of the vacated cushions.

“To snog Edgecomb,” inserted Peter, even as he rolled his eyes at the way James had taken up the entire sofa as if nobody else had wanted to sit there.

“Where else would he go after such a long drought?” picked up Remus. “How long has it been, Sirius? Two whole weeks?”

The three of them dissolved into laughter at his expense, but Sirius wasn’t bothered. He allowed an easy smile to cross over his thin, well-formed lips. “That’s right. I am sure that one of these days some poor girls will take pity on you boys and then you’ll know what it’s like. Maybe Evans for you, eh Potter?”

James spluttered and jerked far enough off the sofa so that he could see whether Evans had heard the comment. Remus and Peter burst into renewed peals of laughter at his reaction, but James was clearly not at all pleased to have the joke turned on him, if his dark look was anything to go by.

Sirius would have to be sure to check his bed for booby traps before crawling into it that night. Although they had all agreed that they were all off limits in public, minor pranks in the privacy of their dormitory were fair game, and Potter was a sore loser. Sirius was already planning his counter-prank before he’d even crossed the common room to the portrait hole.

As an ancient magical castle, Hogwarts had layers upon layers of magic that had been built up for nearly a thousand years. Unfortunately, there apparently wasn’t enough magic in the world to make the stone corridors any less drafty in the dead of winter. Sirius cast a charm on his robes to help warm himself, but he really wished that he’d thought to grab his cloak and maybe a scarf before he’d left the tower.

The individual rooms were a bit better than the halls, but the classroom where Janice was waiting for him had long been unused and the spells not maintained as religiously as occupied parts of the castle. Their breath puffed out in a cloud of steam between them as they leaned in for a kiss, which produced a giggle from Janice. Sirius smiled and closed the rest of the distance between them. Her lips felt soft and smooth against his own, and he briefly tasted the butterscotch flavor of her lip gloss before she pulled back.

“You need to start using lip balm,” she informed him matter-of-factly. She raised her hand to cup his cheek and ran her thumb gently along his chapped bottom lip. “I’ll bring some to Arithmancy tomorrow.”

“Do you think you can put up with it in the meantime?”

He didn’t wait for a response but leaned down to press his mouth back against hers. She seemed
more than happy to oblige him. Her hand migrated away from his cheek to tangle in the hair at the base of his neck, and he let his hands span her waist to pull her up closer against him until her chest was crushed into his.

When she broke the kiss again it was only to rest her head against his shoulder and wrap her arms around his waist.

“Before you make me forget again,” she mumbled into his shoulder, “I wanted to say thank you for the necklace.”

He eyed the golden eagle that hung from a delicate chain around her neck. It was little more than a bauble, really—something he’d seen in one of the Hogwarts-themed catalogues that one of the Gryffindor girls had left lying in the common room. He had thought it would make a nice Christmas gift, since she had admired his Gryffindor pieces before and he knew that she didn’t have any Ravenclaw ones of her own.

“Thank you for my books. I’ve really enjoyed the first two,” he replied truthfully. She had sent him a fairly nice bound set of books by some Muggle bloke called Lewis. Sirius had been surprised at first—not at the fact that a Ravenclaw would give him books as a gift, but that she’d give him Muggle books—but they had really been quite entertaining thus far.

She beamed up at him. “I’m so glad! My sister’s boyfriend told me you’d like them, but I wasn’t sure.”

Apparently one of her older sisters was dating a Muggle-born, but she usually refrained from mentioning it too much around Sirius, as it was clear that he was uncomfortable with the idea. Janice well remembered how upset he had been by The Andromeda Incident. Still, the fact that her family accepted the relationship threw into stark relief the differences between her family and his, and Sirius’s thoughts immediately went to his mother and aunt’s efforts over the holiday. He wondered if Janice knew that he would have to break up with her eventually, whenever he could no longer stop his parents from setting him up with some girl from a respectable family.

The thought made him feel awkward enough that she was able to tell something was wrong by the time he delivered her back to Ravenclaw Tower. But he had gotten ahold of himself by the next morning when he took his seat next to her in Arithmancy, and he gracefully accepted the small container of lip balm she offered him. (Fortunately she had managed to find some that didn’t taste like butterscotch or strawberry or anything else, or leave any sort of shine or gloss on his lips.)

Still, there remained a sense of slight discomfort between them that hadn’t been there before. Sirius could also feel Evan Rosier’s eyes on the back of his head throughout the class, and then later that afternoon when the Gryffindors had Potions with the Slytherins. Even James, who was usually too focused on what Lily Evans and Snape were doing at their station to see anything else (including what his own potions were doing), noticed Rosier’s incessant staring.

“What’s his problem anyway?” the other boy demanded as they were walking out of the dungeons. They were at a respectable distance behind the group of third-year Slytherins, but James was so loud that the group obviously heard. “He hasn’t even tried to talk to you since that day on the train!”

Sirius almost pointed out that James had treated him worse than Rosier had back then—Potter had actively antagonized him, whereas Rosier had merely ignored him. Remus obviously knew where his thoughts were heading, because he gave Sirius a look somewhere between wary and pleading. He was probably right, so Sirius swallowed his retort.

“It’s fine, James,” he said instead. Evan looked back over his shoulder and their eyes met briefly.
“I can handle it.”

The Slytherin flushed and turned back around to respond to something Will Avery had said, and James eyed Sirius skeptically.

“I hope you aren’t thinking of letting him get away with it just because you used to be friends,” Potter told him with frown. “He’s a Slytherin now; you’re not.”

He really wondered whether James knew that he was just as blindly biased as the Slytherins he hated so much. Sirius was no longer surprised by it, after having heard James’s opinions on how Sirius and his own mother had chosen to rise above Slytherin and be something better and other Slytherins should be able to make that choice as well, but it was still discomfiting and annoying. His fellow Gryffindor usually refrained from saying anything too bad about Slytherins because Sirius’s family were all in that house, but his feelings were still clear.

Sirius thought, not for the first time, that his life had been much easier when everybody equally wanted nothing to do with him.

By the time he finally managed to slip away and meet Rabastan in their abandoned room in the dungeons several weeks after the start of term, he really needed an outlet for everything that was bothering him or else he was going to snap. Rabastan was leaning back casually on the tabletop, idly training his light-colored wand on a mouse that was screeching and writhing in a way that Sirius would recognize anywhere.

“Should you be doing that here?” Sirius asked, more out of worry for Rabastan being caught than any concern that his friend was going around Cruciating innocent rodents for fun.

The older boy turned his head just enough to glance sideways at Sirius with one sapphire eye that was glinting in morbid amusement. “No, but what are they going to do about it even if they catch me?”

Sirius thought about it for a few seconds and had to concede the point. “I guess nothing, as long as you stick to mice.”

“Dolohov says that I have to think too much about my intentions before I’m able to cast Unforgivables,” Rabastan said by way of explanation as trained his wand on the mouse and his brow furrowed in concentration, “and that the only way that I’ll ever be effective at using them is if I practice so much that it’s like muscle memory except for my mind. Avada Kedavra.”

It was only the second time that Sirius had ever seen that particular shade of green, a ghastly bright color that seemed to trigger an instinctive sense of terror in him as the glow hung like a fog in the air around his friend’s wand. The first time had been when his father had demonstrated the Unforgivables to him when he was young and had asked about them after having seen the term in a Dark book he’d snuck out of Grimmauld Place’s library without permission. His grandfather had become quite serious when he’d asked—even more serious than he usually was—and had insisted that it was one of those private conversations that only a father ought to have with his son. Orion had taken Sirius into his office and barred the door behind them, even though Regulus, who couldn’t have been more than five or six and hadn’t known what was going on, had been left crying in the hallway at being excluded. His father’s explanation and subsequent demonstration had been the first time Sirius had realized how great and terrible the power inside of him that he’d always taken for granted could be.

Rabastan noticed his discomfort and offered him a slight smirk. “I still feel that way too, whenever I watch anybody else cast it. It doesn’t seem to cause that reaction when it’s your own curse, though. I’m sure Dolohov will teach you soon enough, and then you’ll see for yourself.”
“No, he won’t.” The bitter words had been out of his mouth before he’d realized.

“Sure he will!” Rabastan frowned and tilted his head as he looked at Sirius, as if he couldn’t quite figure out a puzzle. “Did he yell at you about how hopeless you are or something? Don’t worry about it; he only does that to people he thinks have potential. He just curses everybody else and leaves them for their parents to sort out, if they can.”

Sirius couldn’t help the brief smile that flitted across his lips at that. It did sound exactly like the way Dolohov would handle things. But it disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared.

“My grandfather fired him.”

It would have been amusing the way the older boy’s pink mouth fell open and his eyes widened comically, if Sirius hadn’t been so upset.

Finally, after he’d opened his mouth as if to say something several times without any words coming out, Rabastan managed to exclaim, “He did what?!” Sirius knew that it was a rhetorical question, so he kept silent. Sure enough, within a few seconds Rabastan, who by that point had risen from the table and was pacing in agitation, turned on him with a hard look that Sirius knew wasn’t directly aimed at him. “Why would he do that? Dolohov is the best dueling instructor money can buy!”

“I know,” replied Sirius.

“You won’t find anybody better!” Rabastan declared.

Sirius reached out to lay a hand on the older boy’s arm to stop him from jabbing his wand around to emphasize his words.

“Rab, I know,” he reiterated. “He… Well, he doesn’t want me to be a—a Death Eater. He told Dolohov to get out and said that he’d disinherit me if I ever joined.”

Rabastan gaped at him for just a moment until he regained control of his expression. “Disinherit you? Even my parents never threatened to do that! Still…” he trailed off for a moment in contemplation, “it makes sense, now, why your father has kept making excuses about why he can’t take the Mark, even though he’s given plenty of money….”

That was news to Sirius. It did make sense, though. His father had been the one to hire Dolohov, even though Sirius’s grandfather had been against it from the very start. Clearly he supported whatever Dolohov was about. But if Arcturus had threatened to disinherit his own son if he became a Death Eater, just like he’d done to Sirius, then Orion would have known that it was no idle threat.

He eyed the Slytherin boy apprehensively. “Did you… expect me to join?”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” answered Rabastan. He looked surprised that he’d been asked. “I suppose I just took it for granted that you would be with m—er, us.”

Sirius had to have known that already on some level, if he’d ever bothered to stop and think about it, and now he felt a deep anxiety settle in his stomach. The Gryffindors were only his friend because they thought he’d separated himself from the Slytherins. Apparently the Slytherins were only his friends because they assumed that, despite his second life in Gryffindor, he was still one of them. Meanwhile, his grandfather disliked everything Gryffindor-ish about him but also forbade him from following his Slytherin friends’ path. The pressure from all sides was overwhelming, and suddenly he felt the worries that he’d been holding in for years bubble up. It was absolutely
mortifying, but he couldn’t stop the tears of frustration that welled up in his eyes.

Rabastan looked incredibly alarmed at this turn of events. His panicked expression struck Sirius as so funny that laughter boiled up next to his tears, and he thought he would choke on his combined sobs and giggles.

He went willingly when his friend eventually decided that an embrace was the best course of action for dealing with a friend who had descended into hysterics. Rabastan’s arms were solid around him, and his shoulder was strong under Sirius’s cheek. It was probably one of the most comforting things Sirius had experienced in the past few years, but then he noticed the dead mouse on the table mere inches from their bodies and he couldn’t help the increased laughter that shook his body. Laughter and strength and death… that was definitely the essence of Rabastan Lestrange.

“It doesn’t matter, Sirius. You know I’d love you no matter what, don’t you?” asked the Slytherin a few minutes later, when he deemed from the lack of tears that it was safe to speak. Sirius hadn’t known that, in fact. He couldn’t remember the last time that anybody had said they loved him—surely his mother had said it before, but he couldn’t remember any specific time when she had. He let the feeling of calm wash over him as his friend added, “You could become an Auror for all I care. It wouldn’t change my opinion of you.”

Not that Rabastan could see it, but Sirius couldn’t help but raise a skeptical eyebrow at that declaration. “Really? An Auror?”

He could feel Rabastan shrug. “Well, I’d probably be a mite perturbed if you arrested me for being a Dark wizard.”

Sirius’s bark-like laughter echoed in the narrow confines of the stone room as his friend released him and he stepped back. Rabastan’s grin reached all the way to his eyes, still predatory for all that it was full and genuine.

“Speaking of Aurors, though,” he plowed onwards, clearly having decided that they were to change the subject and never again speak of what had just happened, “what do you think of Crouch?”

“Crouch?” repeated Sirius. “You mean Mr. Crouch?”

Rabastan Vanished the mouse with an efficient gesture and hefted himself back up onto the table. “No, I mean Barty. Of course your brother is a welcome member of our group because, well, he is who he is, but we’re all a bit wary of Crouch. He’s got impeccable bloodlines, but his father…”

“I doubt he’ll go running to his father about anything he finds out in Slytherin,” said Sirius, understanding at once what the other Slytherins’ concerns were.

“Yeah, that’s the sense I got, too,” affirmed Rabastan. “He kind of seems like he, well, you know…”

“Doesn’t like his father?” filled in Sirius. “Yeah, I got that, too. I never saw him say two words to Mr. Crouch that weren’t ‘yes, sir’ or ‘no, sir,’ and that was only when he had no choice but to answer a direct question.”

Rabastan leaned back on his elbows. “Well, I’ll give him a chance. The Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement’s only child would certainly be a real coup for me, maybe even enough to make up for my having let the Black heir slip through my fingers.”

His expression was neutral and he didn’t seem to be making any sort of point, but Sirius was still
quite uncomfortable with the idea that his friend might actually get into trouble over Sirius not becoming a Death Eater. His life really had been easier when he hadn’t had to worry about anyone except himself.

Sirius had thought that his efforts to procure potions ingredients over the break would be enough to convince James that it was unnecessary to sneak into Hogsmeade. He was still hesitant to make the leap from more-or-less harmless pranks to breaking serious rules and committing crimes, especially since he was already on such thin ice with his grandfather, but James was still insisting that there was no other way. Sirius, unfortunately, hadn’t been able to come up with a viable alternative for obtaining a few of the most highly controlled substances, but he still hated to admit that James was right.

His fate was sealed the second Saturday in March, when Remus failed to return from his transformation. Normally on days after a full moon he would make his way back to Gryffindor Tower by mid-morning and spend several hours resting in their dormitory, only emerging after his friends had brought him lunch in bed. On this particular day, however, he still hadn’t turned up by lunchtime, and they were all rather worried.

Professor McGonagall looked less than impressed to have three insistent third-years piled into her office demanding answers. Although it must be said that it was infinitely preferable to have them in her office because they were demanding answers from her, than to have them in her office because she was demanding answers from them to get to the bottom of whatever they’d done, which was the usual way of things.

“Boys, I can assure you that Mr. Lupin is just fine,” she repeated for the third time, though by then her patience was wearing thin and so was her veneer of polite professionalism. “He has permission from the headmaster to visit his ailing mother—”

“Professor McGonagall,” interrupted James, “we know that’s not true.”

She looked taken aback for a moment, her nostrils flaring and her eyebrows lifting on her high forehead. She gave James a pointed look. “You—you all know?”

“You mean did Sirius Black notice that his roommate was always missing on the full moon and not ask his grandfather to have the beast executed forthwith?” demanded Sirius. The normally open, cheerful expression that he found himself wearing around his Gryffindor friends had closed off into the cold, haughty mask that his family had cultivated since his childhood. The guilty expression in the professor’s eyes was enough to confirm his suspicions, and Sirius wondered again at the fact that his fellow Gryffindors still thought the worst of him because of his last name and automatically assumed that he would revert to what they thought of as Slytherin proclivities as soon as something bothered him.

McGonagall appeared to think it best to neither confirm nor deny his accusation. Instead she said, “Very well. Mr. Lupin is still under Madam Pomfrey’s care, but she tells me that he will be released this evening.”

“Oh, well, we’ll just go see him, then,” said James, already turning towards the door.

“Absolutely not!” declared Professor McGonagall. “Your friend needs rest and relaxation, and you two”—here she narrowed accusing eyes on James and Sirius—“are the least relaxing set of miscreants I have ever met.”

“But—” they both began at once, but their Head of House was having none of it.
“Do not test me, Mr. Black and Mr. Potter,” she said with a severe frown. “Now, off with you! And I had better not hear that any of you were within viewing distance of the infirmary.”

A significant look passed between James and him when Sirius turned in the direction of his friend to make his way out the door. The three boys turned as one down the short corridor back towards the main staircase, conscience of the fact that Professor McGonagall might well check to make sure they’d gone in the correct direction. They went a couple of corridors further than strictly necessary before turning to head back towards the hospital wing.

“What are you doing?” demanded Peter. He had stopped in his tracks as his two friends started into one of the secret passages behind a portrait on the fourth floor.

James looked at him with the part pitying, part annoyed looked that he seemed to have developed just for Peter’s sake. “We’re going to see Remus, of course.”

“McGonagall said—” began Peter, but James quickly cut him off.

“You’re not afraid of a little trouble, are you?” he challenged.

“I don’t want to get in trouble for that—” Peter started, and Sirius knew that he was about to say aloud that he didn’t want to risk his own neck on account of a werewolf. Fortunately, he caught Sirius’s wide-eyed glare from behind James’s shoulder and instead said, “that, er, silly of a reason. McGonagall said that he’s fine, and we’ll see him later today.”

Peter’s prejudices against werewolves had hardly abated over the months they’d all been friends, though he tolerated Remus’s presence for the sake of being friends with Sirius and James. Sirius had privately assured him that he also hadn’t forgotten what Lupin was, and that was partially true. The other half of the truth, which he hadn’t told Peter, was that hanging out with Remus had made him begin to seriously reconsider whether everything he’d been taught about werewolves was entirely true. He was still somewhat uncomfortable with the idea, but the largest part of Sirius’s tolerance for Remus was some mixture of longing to belong in Gryffindor and a newfound hatred for all of the rules imposed on him from all sides. If James thought that being friends with a secret werewolf was fine, then Sirius would play along for the sake of maintaining his recent increase in status. And if everybody around them thought that being friends with a werewolf was dangerous and simply not done, then of course Sirius had to do it.

Sirius didn’t want to actually visit Remus in the hospital wing any more than Peter did, but it wasn’t because Remus was a werewolf. It was because he knew that the likelihood of getting a detention out of it was very high. Still, sacrifices must be made in order to maintain the peace, and there wasn’t any way to talk James out of going.

He stepped forward to swing a restraining arm around James’s shoulders and offered Peter a half smile full of the understanding that he knew the other boy thought they had on the subject. “I’m sure nobody will notice a quick drop in.”

Everybody in the hospital wing, as it turned out, noticed their visit. This was primarily because James was completely unable to modulate the volume of his voice when he saw the state of his friend, who was propped up with an unreasonable number of pillows and covered in bandages and some sort of bitter-smelling ointment.

“What happened?!” demanded James. He reached out as if to touch the bandage that ran across the left side of Remus’s face and over his eye, but smartly thought better of it and let his hand fall limply back to his side.

“Oh, you’re here.” Remus opened his uncovered eye. He didn’t sound as pleased as Sirius would
have expected. “You—you shouldn’t have come.”

Peter huffed from his place standing a bit behind Sirius, but Sirius didn’t think anybody else heard him.

“Of course we should have come!” exclaimed James, still too loudly.

A group of girls who were surrounding one of their friends in a bed across the infirmary stopped talking and turned nearly as one to glare at him. Sirius felt a distinct desire to reach out and whack James on the back of the head as hard as he could, but he was thwarted by the sudden appearance of Madam Pomfrey herself.

“MR. POTTER!” she shouted from her office door, and every student in the infirmary swiveled around to look. She crossed the large room in less time than Sirius would have thought possible, and only when she was close enough to speak without shouting did she loose a glare on all three of them and continue. “You boys were explicitly told not to visit Mr. Lupin! He needs uninterrupted rest, and you can be sure that I informed Professor McGonagall as soon as I saw that you’d come to harass him!”

Peter groaned. Sirius was hard pressed not to follow his example, although he’d known that they would end up in trouble over this.

James, however, insisted, “We’re not harassing him! We just wanted to see if he was all right!”

“Of course he’s all right! He’s under my care!” The matron was clearly affronted at the implication that anybody needed to double check the status of her patients.

Sirius collared James as he gesticulated wildly in Remus’s direction, thankfully before he actually managed to open his mouth and retort that it didn’t look like Pomfrey was taking good care of his friend. He yanked sharply on the handful of James’s robes he’d grabbed and began dragging him backwards towards the doors, speaking over him as his friend tried to protest.

“You’re right, Madam Pomfrey. We were just worried about our friend, but clearly he needs some peace and quiet.”

She glared them all the way out the door, where James finally freed himself from Sirius’s grasp and turned on him with a furious look of his own.

“What was that for?”

“Honestly, James, I’d rather not get a double or triple detention just because you can’t keep your big mouth shut,” Sirius told him calmly. He realized, of course, that he wasn’t exactly the best example of self-control on that front, but there was no need to bring up ancient history.

“That was probably a good decision, Mr. Black,” came the strict voice of Professor McGonagall just before she appeared around the corner of the corridor leading back towards her office. She was still clutching a quill in her hand, as if she had left her office in such a hurry that she’d forgotten to put it down. “You already have a double detention for disobeying my direct instructions. This Saturday—”

James cut her off with a horrified gasp. “But Professor! Next Saturday is the match against Hufflepuff, and we have an all-day practice scheduled for this Saturday!”

Professor McGonagall’s frown deepened, and Sirius was sure that she was going to give them detention next Saturday as well as punishment for the outburst. Then, to his surprise, she furtively looked around and took a step closer to their group, raising her plain black quill, which was just as
no-nonsense and free of embellishments as its owner, and pointed it half an inch from James’s nose.

“You won’t tell anybody about this, Potter!”

James, eyes shining with mischief, nodded his assent. “Of course not, Professor McGonagall.”

Sirius found the quill direct at him next, and he assured his Head of House that he wouldn’t breathe a word, quickly followed by Peter doing the same.

“Very well,” said Professor McGonagall. “You will all report to my office on Saturday three weeks hence. And you had better squash Hufflepuff next week! Pomona is getting too big for her britches after Hufflepuff’s win against Ravenclaw.”

Later, after they returned to their common room, Sirius had no choice but to admit that Remus needed help sooner rather than later. He and James covertly passed notes about their upcoming foray into Hogsmeade, as their plans had been severely disrupted by Professor McGonagall having just given them detentions on that day. Peter, for his part, didn’t even bother to pretend not to notice that he was being excluded from something. His displeasure was evident to all who saw him. However, James seemed to find his silent treatment rather more amusing than anything else. Sirius felt bad for Peter, whom he knew wanted nothing more than to be respected, but on the other hand he was a bit pleased that James wasn’t likely to give the smaller boy any reason to transfer his loyalty from Sirius to James.

He felt even worse for Remus when he entered the common room some time later, and there wasn’t even another hand to make it better. He came in with his head down and a barely noticeable limp, and he probably wouldn’t have even been noticed if he hadn’t shuffled right into a passing seventh year girl, who promptly gasped and stared in wide-eyed surprise at his face in the midst of their mutual apologies. After that, everybody noticed the ugly red line that bisected Remus’s eyebrow and ran along the side of his face to curve slightly over his cheek.

“It was just an accident,” he announced loudly enough for everybody to hear. “I went home to visit my mother, you see, and my father is something of an inventor and I got caught in the crosshairs.”

It was an unbelievable story, to Sirius’s ears, but their fellow students seemed to take it at face value.

Even Lily Evans braved the proximity of James and Sirius in order to come over to their usual spot in the common room to check on Remus. “Oh, it isn’t so bad, Remus,” she told him, though she was clearly lying. After he gave her an incredulous look, she gave up and said, “Oh, but maybe you should go see Madam Pomfrey, just in case she can do something about it.”

Remus offered a small smile in response to her efforts. “Thanks, Lily, but I’ve already seen her. It was a lot worse before, and she tells me that it will become less noticeable over time, but she couldn’t remove the scar entirely.”

The boys retreated to their dormitory soon after that, on account of Remus’s clearly increasing discomfort with the scrutiny of everybody in the common room. Sirius expected that as soon as they were alone Peter would act disinterested, James would hover and demand the real story, and he would play referee as he usually did. However, James Potter’s fickle attention had apparently been thoroughly distracted from his best friend’s injuries and onto much more important matters.

“Lily? Lily, Remus?” he squawked as soon as he’d shut the heavy wooden door behind him. “Since when are you on a first name basis with Evans?”
Remus looked a bit hurt, if unsurprised. He settled onto his bed with a little sigh of relief before he
turned cool eyes and a calm voice on his friend. “Since last year. She’s been helping me with
Charms and I’ve been helping her with Defense.”

James gawked at him. “Since last year? How didn’t I know about this?”

“Because Lily doesn’t want anything to do with you, so we’ve been meeting while you and Sirius
have Quidditch practice or detention.”

“How come she wants anything to do with you, seeing as you’re friends with James and all?”
asked Sirius, before Potter could get another word in.

“We’ve agreed to disagree about our respective choices in friends.” Remus shrugged, then winced
a bit when the movement pulled at one of his bandages.

Sirius expected a further blow up, but James surprised him by turning sharply on his heel and
storming out of the dormitory rather than yelling or making any accusations. Sirius was grateful
and sunk down onto his bed without further comment. He really couldn’t care less that Remus had
been doing schoolwork with Evans behind their backs, but he suspected that James’s obsession
with the girl was only going to get worse after this revelation. If he was jealous of Snivellus of all
people—greasy, big-nosed, ugly Snivellus, whom Evans clearly only saw as a friend—then how
much more jealous was he going to be of Remus, who, for all that he was a werewolf, was a
reasonably attractive boy.

“You know,” added Remus, “Lily dislikes you almost as much as she dislikes James. Over
something Emmeline Vance told her, apparently.”

Sirius propped himself up on his elbows to get a better look at the boy in the bed next to his.
“Since when do Evans and Vance talk?”

Remus’s mouth twitched as if he were holding back a smile. “For a while now. I suppose you
wouldn’t have noticed, since you only have eyes for pranks and Janice Edgecomb.”

Even though Sirius wasn’t sure at first whether to believe that Evans, Vance, and Macdonald had
somehow gotten over their grievances and become friends without him noticing, he was able to
confirm it the next morning during Ancient Runes. Snape and Mary Macdonald had both decided
not to take the class (He had heard that Snape had talked Slughorn into giving him an extra project
in Potions but that the professor had only been able to accommodate him during this class period,
while he assumed the Mary was just not smart enough to handle the class.), and Sirius noticed for
the first time that Evans and Vance sat together at a table several rows behind his.

Remus noticed him looking at the girls and actually risked passing a note from his table directly
behind Sirius’s. I told you so.

Sirius was not impressed, but Peter, who sat beside Remus, thought it was funny enough that
Professor Dower nearly caught him snickering into his hand. Janice’s soft hand brushed Sirius’s as
she curiously pulled the scrap of paper over to her side of their table, and she glanced at him in
question after reading it. But there was no opportunity for him to explain what was going on
during class, not with the professor already suspicious of them due to Peter’s behavior, and after
class he and his fellow Gryffindors had to make a mad dash to make it all the way from the sixth
floor to the dungeons in time for Potions.

Everything seemed to go back to normal there, with Evans joining Snape at their usual station and
Vance joining Macdonald, who had just come from Care of Magical Creatures, and each pair
seeming to ignore the other. James, who trailed in after Macdonald, looked just as unhappy as he
always did after Care of Magical Creatures. He hadn’t wanted to load himself down with all of the
difficult classes and hadn’t seen any need to take Ancient Runes to become an Auror, but that had
been before he’d realized that all three of his friends had chosen Runes instead of Care of Magical
Creatures. (Sirius thought that James had the right idea about not taking difficult classes if they
were going to be virtually useless in his life, but his parents and grandfather never would have
allowed him not to take Ancient Runes, so he couldn’t follow his friend’s example.)

With a last look between Evans and Vance, and a sympathetic smile in James’s direction, Sirius
took his seat next to Peter just as Slughorn was bustling up the aisle towards the front of the room.
James glared unhappily in return as he took his usual seat next to Remus. He was clearly still
angry with the other boy.

“Do you think he’ll get over it soon?” whispered Peter as soon as Slughorn turned to write on the
blackboard.

“Eventually,” replied Sirius. A thought occurred to him then, and he glanced sideways at his
friend and asked in a tone more accusing than he’d intended, “Say, where were you during
Remus’s little meetings?”

Peter held up his hands in surrender. One was covered in purple goo and the other was still
clutching his scalpel. “I didn’t know any more than you did. He always told me he was going to
the library, and of course I didn’t want to go, so I just stayed in the tower.”

Sirius nodded and turned his attention back to his work station, his tongue poking out a bit
between his thin lips as he concentrated on holding a root still so that he could slice at it.

“What’d you do, then?”

“Mostly read my father’s journals,” Peter responded.

Sirius nodded again in understanding. Peter and he hadn’t had much opportunity to keep up with
their various Dark Arts pursuits ever since becoming friendly with Potter and Lupin the year
before. There were only so many excuses they could use, either together or separately, to get away
from their dorm mates without the two insisting to be allowed to come along or else getting
suspicious. Sirius had taken to claiming that he was seeing Janice between classes or on evenings
when he really wasn’t, just so he could slip down to the dungeons for a few minutes and cast a
few Dark spells to alleviate the almost-constant itch he could feel under his skin. Peter had no such
excuse, but at least he was able to openly read some of his father’s potions journals without fear of
James or Remus looking over his shoulder, and apparently he’d been able to read the ones that he
couldn’t risk his friends seeing when they were all out of the dormitory.

“Here,” said Peter suddenly, grabbing hold of Sirius’s wrist to stop him from further mutilating his
root, “you can crush them instead if all you want is the juice.” Sirius tried out the technique that
his friend demonstrated and was pleased to get significantly better results than he’d been getting
by trying to slice it. Peter watched him with his head held by an arm propped up against their
table, having finished with all of his own work already. Then he declared, “I want to know what
you and James are doing.”

Sirius paused in his work for a split second, but it was long enough for Peter to notice his
discomfort. “We’ll tell you soon,” he assured. “It’s just that right now the fewer people who
know, the better.”

“Does Remus know?”

“No,” Sirius confirmed. Peter looked pleased that at least he wasn’t the only one out of the loop.
“Look, trust me when I say that you don’t want to know right now.”

That wasn’t even a little bit of a fib. Sirius was quite sure that if he told Peter about their plan to sneak off school grounds, break into the Hogsmeade apothecary, and steal several strictly controlled ingredients, then his friend would immediately regret having been told. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Peter not to tell; although Sirius had frequently been annoyed at the open and talkative Peter of their first year, his friend had more than proved himself by now. Rather it was that Peter wouldn’t like to be an accomplice to such serious crimes. Sirius perfectly understood his position, since it wasn’t like he was a Black or a Potter with a rich, powerful family standing behind him to catch him if he were to take the fall. Sirius was uncomfortable enough about it, and he did know that he’d be able to complete his education and go on to live his life just as had always been planned even if he were expelled from Hogwarts.

Peter looked skeptical at the idea that he wouldn’t want to know, but his experience with Sirius had long since taught him when it was safe to question and when it wasn’t. Reluctantly he replied, “Fine. But you will tell me?”

“Yes.”

“When?” he demanded.

“Soon!” repeated Sirius. And the sooner the better, if he had anything to say about it. Neither James nor he were any good at potion brewing, and they would need Peter to take the lead on that aspect of things if they were going to succeed. Even if James didn’t like to admit it.

The next three weeks passed by both quickly and slowly to Sirius. Quidditch practice kept him busier than usual the first week, and on the second Saturday Gryffindor absolutely pummeled Hufflepuff five hundred and forty to two hundred and seventy. They had been up by four hundred and twenty points and many students had already left the stands before the Hufflepuff Seeker had beaten Amanda Towler to the Snitch by a long mile. All that was left for them to do was wait it out to see how badly Slytherin beat Hufflepuff in the first week of May, so the Gryffindors would know how many points they had to score a few weeks later against Ravenclaw in order to stay ahead of Slytherin and take the Quidditch Cup.

Their chances were looking good due to their high scoring game, but James was still absolutely incensed that Towler had been allowed to stay on as Seeker after his past complaints about her lackluster record. Sirius tried to remind him that there was only the Ravenclaw game left and then Towler would leave Hogwarts forever and James could take her position, but there was just no talking to Potter when he was in the throes of Quidditch-induced rage.

The following week, between their game and their detention, was perhaps the longest Sirius had experienced since the fiasco that had been his first year. They had expected to serve detention during the day while their fellow students enjoyed Hogsmeade, then sneak down to Hogsmeade at night. However, Professor McGonagall was so overjoyed by their massive victory over Hufflepuff that she’d rewarded them by allowing them to go to Hogsmeade for most of the day and come back to serve their detention that night. She had probably expected them to be ecstatic at the news, but in truth it had thrown a further wrench into their plans.

It was James who decided that the change was a blessing in disguise, as they could use their detention as an alibi if there happened to be any suspicion thrown their way. It was Sirius who was left to get his hands on somebody else’s wands so that they could carry out their plan. James had suggested stealing Snape’s, but Sirius had immediately shot that idea down. It would definitely throw suspicion on the two of them. After that Sirius hadn’t trusted James to do it himself.
And so it was that Sirius found himself wedged into the corner of a booth at Madam Puddifoot’s, between Janice and a ridiculous wall hanging of what he thought was supposed to be a cupid. He let his hand tangle in the curls at the nape of her neck somewhat roughly, tugging on them with something more than gentleness, as he had learned that she liked him to do. She sighed against his mouth, and he took advantage of her parted lips to slide his tongue inside.

He would even have really enjoyed the kiss, if his mind hadn’t been entirely elsewhere.

“Janice, love, I have a big favor to ask you,” he said a few minutes later, after a blushing waitress had interrupted them by rather loudly clattering a plate of cookies onto the table.

She hardly paused in her efforts to find a comfortable resting place leaning back against him. “What is it?”

Sirius swallowed convulsively and stretched his arm out towards the sweets just to give his hand something to do.

“I want to borrow your wand.”

She went still. He couldn’t see her face, only the top of her curly head, so he couldn’t gauge her reaction.

“Why?” she asked eventually, rather more calmly than Sirius probably would have if she (or anybody) had asked to borrow his wand.

James had insisted that honesty was not the best policy in this situation, but Sirius disagreed. Janice was too smart for him to be able to pull the wool over her eyes here, and she would only be upset if he tried to lie to her. Therefore, he explained, “I need to sneak out of detention tonight. McGonagall will likely confiscate my wand, so I need somebody else’s to use magic to complete whatever task she gives me. That way when she comes back she’ll have no reason to think that I wasn’t there cleaning by hand the whole time.”

She pulled away from him and scooted along the bench until she could turn to face him properly. “Why do you need to sneak out?”

“It’s just a prank, love. It’ll be brilliant, because nobody can blame us for it if we were in detention the whole time.” Well, partial honesty was the best policy.

Janice was clearly reluctant to hand over her wand, as any proper witch or wizard would be, but apparently her trust in him ran deep enough that she was willing to do it. About an hour later, he left her in the care of her friends at the bookshop and left with her wand securely in the deep inner pocket of his winter robes. He had told her that he was heading back to the castle to get some homework done before his detention began, but he actually turned sharply into the tight alley between the Owl Post Office and the pastry shop and made his way past the rubbish bins and around the back of the buildings.

Rabastan was waiting for him there, leaning against the grimy wall. Sirius had asked for the meeting in Hogsmeade (because Hogwarts’ walls seemed to have ears), but Rabastan had suggested the location. Sirius was struck by how he looked so in his element there in the shadows, yet also so out of place with his perfectly combed back hair and thousand-Galleon dragon hide overcoat.

“Do you want my wand, too?” he asked without preamble.

Sirius gaped at him. “Wha—how—were you spying on me?”
“Yes,” replied Rabastan at once. Then he took a menacing step forward, and Sirius had to fight the temptation to take a step back. “Why? And don’t give me that shit your little girlfriend bought.”

He hadn’t been planning on hiding the whole truth from Rabastan in the first place, because he’d known that Slytherin Death Eaters—and Lestranges to boot—didn’t go around handing over their wands all willy-nilly for friends to carry out childish pranks. But even if he hadn’t been planning on revealing it all, he probably would have anyway under the intense stare that Rabastan had pinned him with.

“We’re going to sneak back into Hogsmeade and steal some Bicorn blood and a few other things.”

Rabastan looked slightly impressed and even more furious. “You’re going to get yourself expelled! Or worse! Why in the name of Merlin’s saggy nut sack do you need Bicorn blood anyway?”

“Bloody hell, Rabastan. I don’t think the people on the other side of Hogsmeade heard you,” Sirius complained, only half joking. Rabastan’s heated glare quickly confirmed that he was in no mood for jokes, and Sirius rushed to continue. “I can’t tell you why. And yes, I’ve already considered just having Bellatrix or Rodolphus get it for me, but it’s a strictly controlled substance and they’d have to actually provide a good reason for needing it, which they can’t. And you can’t come, because you know that would ruin everything with James.”

“You can’t tell me why,” repeated the Slytherin incredulously. “You want me to give you my wand for an illegal operation to steal a Class B controlled substance, but you can’t tell me why.”

Sirius didn’t think it was a good idea to point out that he was really only going to use the wand to cast a few cleaning charms and maybe an unlocking spell or two, and certainly not anything nearly as illegal as the Unforgivables he’d seen Rabastan using within the very walls of Hogwarts mere weeks ago. And that Rabastan had probably actually used on people before.

Instead he said, “I’m sorry, it was stupid. I knew you wouldn’t want—”

But his friend cut him off by closing the distance between them until Sirius was forced to backpedal and found himself stopped by the wall at his back.

“It’s an intimate thing, you know, letting somebody use your wand. Usually only done between close family and lovers. Why would you have thought to come to me?” Sirius was too frozen by the odd, frightening blaze of Rabastan’s eyes to respond, but his friend apparently took his wide-eyed silence as confirmation of something, because he smiled. “Are you going to convince me the same way you convinced the girl?”

“Wha—” began Sirius, but he was quickly cut off again with a loud, “Oomph!”

Rabastan had violently grabbed the front of his robes in one large hand and brought their mouths together in a clash of tongues and teeth. Mostly Rabastan’s tongue and Sirius’s teeth, at least until Sirius found himself responding almost unconsciously to more gracefully accept the invasion. Rabastan’s lips were rougher than Janice’s, but he was considerably less shy with his tongue, and his large, hard frame blocking Sirius in was almost too much for him to process. He had never been particularly dominant with Janice, but he realized now, by comparison, that he was the more dominant party in their physical encounters. He could only submit to Rabastan.

Rabastan released his hold on Sirius’s robes and brought his hand around to the small of Sirius’s back. Sirius brought his own hand up to drag the other boy’s hand away, but for some
inexplicable reason he found himself clutching onto Rabastan’s arm instead. Then he felt his friend’s other hand wrap around his own, and he thought for a moment that they were going to hold hands until he felt the polished wood of the Slytherin’s wand pressing into his palm. He clumsily closed his fingers around it as Rabastan pulled his hands and his mouth away all at once.

“Do not get caught with that,” Rabastan demanded harshly, his voice thick. “I will go to Azkaban, or worse, if anybody finds out what that wand has done.”

Sirius, still utterly dumbfounded by what had just happened, was further struck by the utter truth of that statement and the trust the Death Eater had placed in him. He could only nod mutely.

Rabastan released an almost hysterical laugh and ran his hand through his hair, thoroughly messing it up. “Salazar but you make me stupid. So. Fucking. Stupid.”

Sirius could not but agree, but even in his currently befuddled state he knew that offering the other boy’s wand back at this point would be some kind of ultimate insult. He swallowed thickly.

“Rab… erm, well… I promise.”

“Be safe,” the other boy whispered as he reached out to squeeze Sirius’s shoulder gently, completely at odds with the violence of their kiss. Then he turned and made his way back down the alley, his polished boots crunching in the snow.

Sirius collapsed backwards against the wall, his head spinning and his heart racing. What in the world was that? he wondered. His thoughts bounced around wildly between memories of Rabastan that had confused him but now made sense, confusion at his own response, worry about how their friendship could possibly go on after this, and maybe—just maybe—renewed curiosity regarding those things he’d read last summer about homosexuals. But none of that mattered now; he couldn’t let it distract him. So he gathered his thoughts, shoved them into the deepest recesses of his mind where even a Legilimens would have a hard time finding them, and started his journey back to Hogwarts.

He knew that he was uncharacteristically quiet that evening, but James seemed to put it down to nervousness about their upcoming adventure, and Peter and Remus to sulkiness about his upcoming detention, and none of them pressed him about it. By the time the three of them finally made their way to Professor McGonagall’s office, he had pulled himself together sufficiently to be getting on with it. He covertly pressed Janice’s wand into James’s hand as they followed Peter out of the portrait hole.

Their Head of House confiscated their wands and separated them, as James and Sirius had counted on her doing; Peter was sent to polish the suits of armor on the fifth floor, James the candelabras in the Charms corridor, and Sirius the various plaques and other awards in the trophy room. Sirius polished by hand for a good half hour before James suddenly appeared out of thin air beside him.

“Bugger that, mate.” He indicated the cloth Sirius was holding in his hand. “She’s gone back to grading essays in her office, and Filch is properly distracted by some dung bombs and fireworks in front of Ravenclaw Tower.”

Sirius pulled Rabastan’s wand out of his innermost pocket and cast the proper charms to carry on his work without him. Rabastan’s wand felt foreign yet somehow right in his hand. It yielded to his commands willingly, though Sirius could feel the underlying tension and a deep, sensuous whirl of Dark magic.

“You got two wands?” asked James incredulously. He had barely expected that Sirius would be able to scrounge up one, and he must have thought that Sirius had given him their only wand since
he had the Invisibility Cloak and was meant to make sure that McGonagall and Filch were distracted. “Whose wand is that?”

“Narcissa’s,” answered Sirius, knowing that James would never actually get close enough to the Slytherins to confirm or deny it. “Oh, don’t look at me that way, James. She’s my cousin, and I knew that she’d help without breathing a word to anybody.”

It was true, he realized as soon as he’d said it. Why on earth hadn’t he gone to Narcissa? What had made him think first of asking Rabastan bloody Lestrange to hand over his wand? He quickly shoved those thoughts aside just as firmly as he had all the others.

“Let’s go,” he said, rather more tersely than he’d meant to. James shot him a look but refrained from asking any questions, no doubt because he assumed that it was all about Sirius still being unhappy with this little mission.

They had long since worked out their system for both staying simultaneously covered by James’s Invisibility Cloak. That wasn’t the problem, and neither was navigating the maze of corridors and moving staircases until they reached the outer door nearest the vegetable garden, which they had agreed previously was the least conspicuous route. The problem was trekking over half an hour around the edge of the lake, skirting the Forbidden Forest as much as possible but inevitably having to enter it at some points. The journey was tense and silent, with both of them jumping at the tiniest rustle of leaves or snapping twig. At one point, the giant squid broke the surface of the lake a mere thirty feet from them, and Sirius nearly knocked James down in his surprised panic. But finally, mercifully, they reached the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

They entered the village through the alley that ran beside Madam Puddifoot’s, and from there it was a short way before the side street merged with High Street. They could see the lights of the Three Broomsticks and hear the people inside, but the streets were mercifully almost empty at this time of night. Hopefully the proprietor of the apothecary was having a drink at the pub along with what seemed like most of the village.

They ran into a bit of trouble when a simple Unlocking Charm wouldn’t open the door, but fortunately both Sirius and James, pranksters and all around rabble-rousers that they were, had plenty of previous experience with more complex versions. Eventually they hit upon the correct spell and the door clicked softly. They looked at one another in trepidation, the silvery swirl of the Invisibility Cloak casting a soft glow on both of their faces as it filtered the moonlight. Then James reached for the doorknob, and Sirius knew that there was no going back.

They had both used their last couple of visits to the village to scope out the apothecary, specifically the layout and where the dangerous items were kept. It would have been easier if they had split up, but neither of them was willing to forego the safety of the Cloak. Thus, they shuffled awkwardly side-by-side down the narrow aisles gathering ingredients.

“What are you doing?” hissed James when Sirius picked up several ingredients that they didn’t need. “We should only take what we need. You can come back later and buy that!”

Sirius found it simultaneously annoying and endearing that James’s personal brand of morality allowed for stealing some things but not others, but he was too nervous for a long argument. He hissed back, “If we only take what we need then they’ll know why the ingredients were taken, because they’re only used in combination for one potion. We need to take a few other things to throw them off the trail.”

James reluctantly agreed, although it was clear that he wasn’t happy about it. He watched silently as Sirius selected several very expensive items off the shelf. Before they left, James withdrew several Galleons from his pocket.
“What are you doing?” asked Sirius, even though it was pretty obvious that Potter had planned to leave money in the register to cover the cost of the items they’d taken. “Don’t you realize that Galleons are traceable, especially if you took those directly out of your Gringotts vault?”

Honestly, Sirius knew that James had not an ounce of Slytherin in him, but he really was going to have to break his friend of this horrible streak of nobility if they were going to keep doing highly illegal things. Potter scowled and put the money back into his robes.

It wasn’t until they were halfway back up the side street that they heard several pairs of footsteps rushing towards them. Sirius grabbed James’s arm and yanked him towards the nearest alleyway. Seconds later, a group of at least half a dozen witches and wizards rushed by them. There must have been some sort of alarm. They looked like they had indeed come from the Three Broomsticks, or else some other establishment where they’d been drinking heavily. James and Sirius waited for several seconds to make sure there were no stragglers following them, then they reentered the street and rushed as quickly as they dared back towards the other side of town, where they could begin the journey back to Hogwarts.

Then the edge of Sirius’s boot caught a garbage can that had likely been put out for morning collection, and in the otherwise silent night the terrible clatter seemed to be as loud as an explosion. He froze for a second in horror and shock, but then James grabbed his wrist and hissed, “Run!”

He didn’t need to be told twice. They bolted down the street, turning in the wrong direction in their rush. As soon as they were on the outskirts of town, James dragged Sirius determinedly until they were both huddled behind a rocky outcropping, listening to the commotion they’d left in their wake.

They were silent for long minutes, just listening; Sirius couldn’t tell exactly how long. Then James said, “We have to get back soon or McGonagall will know we’ve gone. Then it won’t matter if the villagers are the ones to catch us or she is.”

Sirius agreed with that assessment. They really didn’t have a choice. He sighed in defeat and allowed himself a moment of despair. As soon as he leaned back against the rock behind him, it gave way and he tumbled backwards with a cry, desperately grabbing for purchase. He landed heavily on hard, compact earth, and he blinked a few times in confusion before seeing that James was staring at him with wide eyes through a narrow fissure in the rock some five feet above him. He realized that he had grabbed the Invisibility Cloak during his fall, and he was still clutching it tightly in one hand and Rabastan’s wand in the other.

By the time James had clambered down to join him, Sirius had managed to stand and brush himself off. He wondered why his friend hadn’t offered him a hand up, but when he turned to face James he saw the long passageway that extended further than his friend’s wand light could illuminate.

“Where do you think it goes?” asked James.

Sirius blinked a few times in surprise, as if the sight would alter. Finally he managed to answer, “Away from the mob of angry villagers, hopefully.”

James laughed once. “It can’t be worse than it already is, right?”

“We could end up in the middle of the Forbidden Forest,” Sirius told him. They paused and looked at one another for a few seconds before both seeming to come to a decision at the same time. Sirius let out a breath and took a step towards the unknown. “Well, I’d rather be eaten alive by whatever’s in the forest than eaten alive by McGonagall.”
I hope certain parts of that made some of you happy! As always, I sincerely appreciate the comments, kudos, and bookmarks.
"Remember that we have to get together this summer," James reminded Sirius as they waited their turn to step off the Hogwarts Express. "You can't get out of it this year."

Sirius pinched his lips together just a bit, because this was at least the ten billionth time James had repeated the same thing, and glared over the sea of students who were clogging up the corridor as if his displeasure alone would make them hurry up. They had apparently chosen a compartment surrounded by every Mudblood who attended Hogwarts, and now they had to wait while dozens of people loaded heavy trunks and cat carriers onto trolleys by hand. Sirius was reminded unpleasantly of the one time he had shared a compartment with Mary MacDonald, and his frown deepened even more.

"Don't give me that look," complained James, who was apparently not at all bothered by the hot, stuffy press of bodies surrounding them.

Sirius chose to let James think that his expression was entirely aimed at him, which was much easier than explaining that he was annoyed by a bunch of incompetent Mudbloods. He turned his head to look down at James, who was pressed close to his side.

"I already told you that I'll do my best to come, but I don't know if my parents will let me."

"Well, I'll definitely come," injected Remus. Then a queer expression passed briefly over his face, drawing even more attention to the pink scar that ran from his forehead to his cheek. "Well, you know, if the timing is right."

James offered the other boy a tight smile. "Don't worry, Remus. I already have all of your, er, prior engagements marked in my calendar, so we can plan around you."

If Remus noticed that his friend's smile didn't reach his eyes, he didn't say anything about it. He probably just thought that James was still angry with him over the fact that he'd become friends with Lily Evans without anyone knowing. (He actually still was, a bit.) Or, knowing the werewolf's penchant for self-loathing, Sirius thought it was also possible that he assumed James was annoyed or angry at having to plan around his condition. The truth was that Sirius and James
had planned to only invite Peter so that they could fill him in on their project and spend the summer brewing the necessary potion, but Remus had overheard them talking about it and they'd had to act like they had always intended to invite everybody.

Now they would also try to have a few visits where they included Remus, just to allay suspicion (and because they wanted to spend time with him over the summer, but mostly just to allay suspicion as far, as Sirius was concerned).

By the time the four Gryffindors were finally able to alight onto the platform, much of the crowd had begun to queue at the single exit to King's Cross Station, and the rest had formed isolated groups. Sirius spotted his parents standing with their usual friends, and as always he suffered a moment of uncertainty about how to separate himself from his friends so that he could rejoin the ranks of the respectable pure-bloods.

This year, Peter saved him the trouble by announcing, "I told my mother to wait for me in the station. Avoid having to deal with the crowd in here, you know."

"That was probably a good idea. The platform seems to get more crowded every year," said Remus.

Sirius thought it was probably just that they were larger now than they'd been as first years, not that Hogwarts was more crowded.

Peter offered an affirmative noise, but Sirius knew that the truth was he was a bit embarrassed by his mother, Mudblood and fat and uncultured as she was, and hadn't wanted to risk her being introduced to James or Sirius's mothers. It had been quite bad enough, Peter had confided in Sirius only the night before as they'd finished packing, when his mother had met Sirius's father during their first year.

After Peter's announcement, any lingering awkwardness about goodbyes seemed to evaporate, and the boys offered their promises to write and went their separate ways.

"They'll be along shortly," Sirius heard Rabastan telling his parents' group as he approached.

Sirius could only assume that he was referring to Malfoy and Cissy, who were nowhere to be seen. In fact, the group consisted only of Rabastan, Sirius's family, and Mr. Malfoy.

Sirius experienced a moment of near panic as he approached. He could almost feel the older boy's mouth and hands pressed against him like phantom limbs, and he knew that anyone who saw him in those brief seconds would have known immediately that he was thinking about something extremely improper. In the end, he managed to arrange his face into an indifferent mask as he stepped into the narrow space between Rabastan and Walburga. Although they weren't quite touching, in such close proximity Rabastan's body heat seemed to sear right into Sirius's skin through their Muggle-friendly clothing.

"There you are, my darling," greeted Walburga with a slight air of reprimand in her otherwise-even tone. "I had begun to wonder if you had missed the train."

He dutifully leaned forward to kiss her cheek and realized with some surprise that he was almost exactly her height now. "Hello, Mother. I was delayed trying to get off the train; it seems that fully a quarter of Hogwarts students haven't figured out yet how to shrink their belongings to manageable sizes."

A round of laughter went through the group, and Sirius noticed as he pulled away from his mother that Evans, Vance, and MacDonald were standing nearby with their parents and had all turned to
look. He studiously ignored Vance and Evans's glares and turned back to his own, reaching out to
shake his uncle's and Mr. Malfoy's hands and reluctantly pressing a kiss to his aunt's proffered
cheek.

"Where are you parents?" Uncle Cygnus asked Rabastan as soon the commotion had died down.
"I had hoped to extend a personal invitation to your father when I saw him."

"Oh, yes, and I should like to see your dear sister," inserted Walburga, sending her eldest son a
pointed glance that he refused to acknowledge.

Nobody except Sirius seemed to notice the look of embarrassed discomfort that flitted over
Rabastan's face, but then again nobody here knew Rabastan (and his face) as well as Sirius did.

"They have already collected my sister and gone," he answered levelly. Sirius knew that he was
only allowing the other adults to assume that his parents had greeted him before they'd gone, but
that they really hadn't at all. He had to fight the urge to raise his fingers up to his lips as he thought
about what he'd learned regarding why Rabastan's family had chosen to exclude him. With a small
smile at Uncle Cygnus and Aunt Druella, Rabastan added, "I am staying with my brother and his
lovely wife, so I will Apparate straight there."

Anymore uncomfortable questions on that or any other subject were automatically forgotten when
Malfoy and Cissy appeared. Nobody else had a chance to say anything before Aunt Druella
noticed the new piece of jewelry adorning her youngest daughter's hand and promptly exclaimed,
"Oh!"

Walburga quickly followed suit, but neither Uncle Cygnus nor Mr. Malfoy looked the least bit
surprised. Sirius supposed that Lucius had asked Narcissa's father for permission at some point.
Mr. Malfoy's expression was more inscrutable than pleased, but Sirius knew that Lucius wouldn't
have asked anybody to marry him without discussing it with his father beforehand, even if he
might've had to fight for his father's blessing due to recent circumstances.

Sirius and Rabastan found themselves quickly shoved aside, along with Orion and Regulus, so
that the couple's parents and the bride's excited aunt could crowd around the two. The four shared
amused looks, and Orion addressed his sons with a jokingly accusing glare.

"It was very cruel of you two not to warn me about this. I would have worn more comfortable
shoes if I had known that we were going to have to stand here waiting for your mother to finish
congratulating her niece."

The three younger wizards laughed, and Rabastan added, "Somebody probably ought to have
warned Lucius what would happen if he proposed before we left school."

Indeed, Malfoy was standing stiff and unhappy next to his fiancée, clearly not at all pleased by all
of the very public attention their families were drawing from everybody nearby on the platform.

"Why didn't you warn him, then?" asked Regulus. "You're his best friend."

Rabastan's cruel laugh sent a shiver up Sirius's spine, and not because it made him afraid or
uncomfortable.

"I just imagined the look on his face—see, that one he's making right now—and couldn't bring
myself to stop him."

Sirius couldn't turn to look at Lucius's expression because he was having too much trouble tearing
his eyes away from Rabastan's face. When he finally managed it he found himself instead looking
again at the crowd of Gryffindor girls and their families, whose attention had yet again been
drawn to Sirius's own group. Mrs. Vance was whispering something to the MacDonalds and the Evanses, and even from this distance it was clear that they were discussing the size of Narcissa's ring. He couldn't blame them for noticing, since the thing was the size of a small island, but he felt his lips form a sneer at the ill breeding. If his mother hadn't been wearing delicate gloves made of the finest lightweight Acromantula-spun silk, they would have been able to see a ring of similar size on her finger, too.

But nobody ever talked about such things in public. It was all about being seen and taking notice, and gossip was reserved for the privacy of one's own home.

He turned back to his father, friend, and brother in time to hear Orion say, "Well, Sirius certainly has my permission to go. His mother won't be pleased, but at least one of us menfolk should be allowed to escape if he can."

Sirius blinked, quite in the dark about exactly where he had permission to go, since he hadn't been paying attention. He only had a moment to register Regulus's jealous expression and his father's teasing look before Rabastan had made his farewells, hooked a hand around Sirius's wrist, and begun pulling him towards the now nearly-clear exit.

"Where are we going?" he asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

Rabastan turned to look at him with an arched eyebrow and laughing sapphire eyes. "To Diagon Alley, of course. Should I be hurt by your inattention?"

Sirius blushed and ducked his head so that the older boy couldn't see, not that it seemed to do much good. Rabastan loosed a single laugh and tugged on Sirius's arm as he shoved his way past the families waiting to exit the platform. There was a lot grumbling and a few loud protests as they broke the queue, none of which seemed to bother Rabastan at all. He laughed again as he pulled Sirius through the barrier and past several confused Muggles, and then suddenly they were spinning and being sucked through a space the size of a straw.

Sirius's feet hit the cobblestone street hard. He pitched forward with a groan, trying desperately not to vomit, and only Rabastan's strong grip kept him upright.

"Bellatrix wasn't kidding," his friend said, clearly trying to cover the amusement in his voice with something that he probably thought approximated concern. It didn't work. "You really are horrible at Apparition."

"You didn't even warn me!" croaked Sirius.

Rabastan's hand came up to rub his back. "You have to admit that, for a pure-blood, your difficulty is pretty amusing...."

As far as Sirius was concerned, he didn't have to admit any such thing. Especially not to Rabastan Lestrange of all people. Instead of answering, he stood upright with as much grace as he could muster and straightened his silk shirt with precise movements. Partly because he was curious but mostly because he wanted to change the subject, he pointed out, "This isn't Diagon Alley."

They were standing at the mouth of a narrow, filthy alley next to the Gleaming Gytrash, Knockturn Alley's biggest apothecary. It was at the dead end of the street and was populated only by an apparently homeless witch who had set up a ramshackle shelter for herself and a few mangy cats. She was staring at them as if she'd never seen anything like them before, and Sirius wasn't sure if it was because of the unseemly display he'd made out of himself or because the sight of two wizards in clearly expensive Muggle clothing was a rare sight in Knockturn Alley.
He felt Rabastan shrug and realized suddenly how close they were to each other.

"Do you reckon your father would have let you come if I had said I wanted to bring you here?"

"Probably," replied Sirius, although he wasn't able to give a clear yes. "My mother wouldn't have, though."

"Well, I wasn't going to risk it. I've been waiting to get you alone since Hogsmeade."

Sirius swallowed and nodded, but he couldn't find any words to speak. The truth was that he had somewhat avoided being alone with his friend. He had waited until breakfast the morning after his adventure to return the other boy's wand, and after that it had been relatively easy to simply fail to find any time to meet alone between Rabastan's NEWT preparations and their Quidditch practices and James's new obsession with finding Hogwarts' secret passageways and Sirius's multiple detentions.

He didn't think Rabastan could have blamed him for it; honorable pure-blood boys simply did not go around snogging other boys without being a bit confused by the whole thing, and Sirius had needed time to think. But he also figured it would be best if he just allowed his friend to think that they'd just been unlucky, not that Sirius had been avoiding him.

Rabastan, who still had one hand wrapped around Sirius's forearm and the other splayed across his back, pulled him deeper into the narrow alley. Sirius followed reluctantly. He wasn't reluctant to accompany the older boy alone into a dark alley, exactly, but he was a bit anxious. Plus the closeness of the grimy walls and the gleaming eyes of the tramp watching their every move were unappealing, to say the least. When they were halfway between the mouth of the alley and the witch at the end of it, Rabastan spun Sirius to face him.

Their eyes met for a few seconds, and unlike in Hogsmeade, this time around Sirius could have stopped the whole thing from happening. He didn't.

Rabastan leaned down and pressed their lips together. The kiss was sweet for only a few seconds before their tongues met in a salacious tangle in Sirius's mouth. This time instead of freezing or thinking of pushing the larger boy's hands away when Rabastan wrapped them around his waist, Sirius let his fingers trail up Rabastan's soft sleeves until he could twist them into the short hairs at the nape of his neck.

Sirius was so caught up with mentally cataloguing the differences between kissing Rabastan and kissing a girl (the way he had to tilt his face up instead of down, a hard chest pressing against him, just a hint of stubble scraping against his skin) that they might have kissed for hours for all he knew.

In reality they had probably only stayed leaning against the dirty bricks for a few minutes before Rabastan pulled back and rested his forehead against Sirius's. Their hair, damp from the oppressive summer heat, tickled Sirius's face.

He opened his eyes and saw Rabastan's blue eyes gleaming back at him. He thought for a moment that the other boy was going to say something nice or romantic, and he panicked for half a second wondering what he would say in return.

Then Rabastan said, "You taste like a pumpkin pasty."

Sirius's lips, still wet from their kiss and only just beginning to swell slightly, parted in surprise quickly followed by indignation.

"Well, you are developing a worrying habit of shoving your tongue down my throat next to trash
"I hate pumpkin," added Rabastan, as if he hadn't heard.

"I deserve better than a back alley, Lestrange," retorted Sirius.

Rabastan sobered all at once, the teasing smirk slipping off of his face. He pulled back with a severe frown marring his previously happy countenance.

"You do," he confirmed, "but we can't exactly share a sundae at Fortescue's, Sirius."

"I know."

And he did. After all, Rabastan's parents had forced him out to live with his brother and hadn't even waited to speak to him at King's Cross. Sirius could only imagine what his family would do.

"I thought that I had enough freedom as a second son that I didn't have to hide my preference completely," said Rabastan, his expression still severe and serious. "I never expected my parents to let me bring a boyfriend home for tea, of course," he added, a brief smile flitting across his full lips at the thought, "but I thought that if I told them, then at least they would stop pressuring me to marry Cousin Eloise of the French Lestranges. Obviously they didn't take it well."

Sirius's stomach tightened at the thought of Rabastan marrying anybody. His nostrils flared as he exhaled the breath he'd been holding.

"And I have even less freedom than you do—"

"And an even stricter family," interjected Rabastan.

"—and a grandfather who has made his feelings about Uncle Alphard's preferences quite clear," Sirius acknowledged. He grimaced at the thought of his grandfather saying some of those hateful words about him. "I understand, Rab. Really." Then, in an attempt to lighten the mood, he added, "But if you promise to find a better location, then I'll promise to clean my teeth if I've been eating pumpkin pasties."

Rabastan laughed aloud. The witch at the end of the alley flinched visibly at the sound, which drew Sirius's attention to her. He couldn't believe that he'd forgotten her presence and snogged another boy right in front of her. His expression must have displayed the alarm he felt, because Rabastan drew his wand and turned so quickly that the resulting breeze ruffled Sirius's hair.

The Slytherin relaxed perceptibly when he saw that it was only the homeless woman from before, as opposed to someone who actually mattered. Still, Sirius thought, for all their talk about being careful, a public alley wasn't the smartest choice.

The sickly green glow had filled the alley before Sirius had time to process Rabastan's muttered "Avada Kedavra," and the witch at the end of the alley fell backwards until the upper part of her body disappeared into her haphazard shelter.

Sirius stared with wide eyes at her legs protruding out into the alley.

"Erm…" he finally began cautiously, although he wasn't actually afraid that Rabastan would do anything to him. "Was that… strictly necessary?"

Rabastan shrugged and turned his wand on himself, nonchalantly casting a Cleaning Charm as if nothing exceptional had happened.
"I'm hopeless at Memory Charms," he said as if that explained everything. He turned his Cleaning Charm on Sirius. "Besides, she was the first human I managed to kill without having to muster up the proper emotions. Dolohov will be excited."

Sirius tore his eyes away from the tatty stockings and worn boots and met Rabastan's gaze. His friend's sapphire eyes were warm and open as he surveyed the results of his handiwork on Sirius's clothes. There was no trace of anything in his eyes or his expression that gave away what he'd just done, and Sirius realized that he didn't see it as anything significantly different from the mice he'd practiced on.

It was a somewhat sobering realization, but if Sirius were honest with himself then he would have to admit that he was more troubled by the fact that he didn't really mind what Rabastan had done than actually troubled by what Rabastan had done.

"Bloody Death Eaters," he mumbled under his breath.

It must have been audible enough for Rabastan to hear, because he grinned in amusement and leaned down to press an affectionate but brief kiss to Sirius's lips.

"Come on," he said when he pulled back. "I did actually bring you here for a reason besides just that I wanted to kiss you."

They exited the narrow alley cautiously, staying back in the shadows as a hunched man in worn robes wobbled down the steps from the apothecary and made his way down the street. It wouldn't do to be caught in an alley with a dead body, after all. When the coast was clear, Rabastan led Sirius out onto the street.

As they navigated carefully over the uneven cobblestones, Sirius asked, "Well, what are we doing then?"

"Getting spare wands. Not that I really minded letting you borrow mine, but it made me think how useful it would be to have a second, unregistered wand."

He looked extraordinarily pleased with himself for the idea, and Sirius had to admit that it was a good one. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of it himself after having gone through so much trouble to borrow Rabastan's and Janice's wands.

"It's illegal to have an unregistered wand," he pointed out, although he knew that would hardly matter to a Death Eater who had just performed the Killing Curse a few minutes previously.

Sure enough, Rabastan turned to pin him with an incredulous stare. "Siri, love, that's why we're in Knockturn Alley."

Life at Grimmauld Place was even more unbearable than usual because of all the wedding shit. (That's what Sirius called it in his head, but not what he'd ever dare say out loud if any Black female was anywhere in the same building.) He still refused to spend any time with his grandfather—he had even started coming down to breakfast late, after Kreacher assured him that Arcturus had left the table—but he did spend a lot of time in his father's study.

He had invited Regulus to join them, but his brother usually declined. Apparently he enjoyed the extra attention Arcturus heaped on him in Sirius's absence, plus the attention he got if he spent time with all the twittering wedding planners.

Orion had shrugged when Sirius had related this news to him. "He's always been your mother's son more than mine, Sirius, and you've always been my son more than hers."
Sirius wanted to snidely ask if his father meant that both Sirius and himself were great disappointments to his grandfather, but he knew that would hurt his father, so he determinedly pressed his lips together to keep it from coming out.

Instead they focused on lessons and determinedly avoided any uncomfortable topics. His father had taken over his lessons, since Sirius had flatly refused to go to Arcturus's study when summoned. The consequences of this arrangement were that Sirius became even more exceptional at Transfiguration and Charms, because his father was also brilliant in those subjects, but he learned absolutely nothing about Potions, because his father was even more hopeless than he was.

Their arrangement continued comfortably for several weeks, until one day Orion announced, "I want to go to Diagon Alley this morning."

Sirius looked up in surprise. "All right. Do you want me to ask Regulus?"

"No, this needs to be just the two of us," clarified his father, an expression on his face that Sirius couldn't quite read.

"He thinks you love me more than you do him," Sirius had said before he realized he'd said it. He regretted it almost the moment it left his mouth, when he saw the pained expression cross over his father's face. Still, even if it was unkind, it was the truth.

Orion wore a pinched expression and looked warily at the door, as if somebody would come bursting through it at any moment. Then he deliberately smoothed his face into its usual calm expression.

"That can't be helped today, I'm afraid."

Diagon Alley was always crowded in the summer. The press of the crowd was beyond stifling—even in summer magical folks seemed to think it was necessary to wear full robes. Sirius wondered, not for the first time, why no one had ever cast cooling spells over the alley. The cooling spells people cast individually on their clothing could only go so far.

Sirius followed Orion down the cobblestone street, past the street vendors and the crowd of kids always loitering in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies, in complete silence. Something was definitely off with his father, but Sirius couldn't begin to guess what. He didn't bother to ask questions when Orion turned into Knockturn Alley. He caught a glimpse of Emmeline Vance emerging from Gringotts; she glared at him when she realized that he was heading down into the Dark district, and he offered a sardonic smile before turning his back and following his father down the narrow stone stairway.

There seemed to be a lot more respect aimed in his direction when Sirius was with his father. When it had just been him and Rabastan a few weeks earlier, nobody had threatened them or anything, but people certainly had not had any compunctions about openly staring at them or trying to talk to Sirius. With Orion, the street vendors and other denizens of Knockturn Alley seemed to avoid so much as looking in his direction.

Sirius wondered what sort of things his father must have done to earn that level of deference, and he wondered how soon he would be able to match them himself.

"Now then," said Orion as they finally approached one of the buildings, "we have to meet here because home isn't safe, but don't speak to anyone else, and for Merlin's sake don't touch anything."

He'd never noticed the plain wooden door in the very corner of Knockturn Alley, but it was where
Orion led him now. Orion's smart leather shoes clicked with purpose against the uneven stone steps, and when he was standing at the stop of the stoop he shot Sirius a put-upon look and wrapped his handkerchief around his hand before knocking on the door.

Sirius normally would have laughed at his father's aversion to touching the grimy wood with his bare skin, but under the circumstances he tried his best to be a good pure-blood son and keep his expression perfectly straight.

A small hatch in the door opened at eye level, which for Orion meant that it opened at about neck level. Sirius watched the watery blue eyes on the other side of the opening take in the fine robes and elaborate tie pin his father was wearing (the Black family crest done in exquisitely wrought platinum with green diamonds) before they traveled slowly up to Orion's face. Without uttering a word, the man stepped back and closed the hatch again, and a few moments later the door swung open with an ear-rending squeak.

Orion swept through the doorway with all the confidence of his station, and Sirius could only follow, although he was sure that he didn't make anywhere near as impressive an entrance.

The establishment turned out to be a pub. It was dimly lit, so Sirius couldn't make out any of the features of the wizards and witches sitting at the heavy wood tables. He supposed that was probably the point, now that he thought about it. The bar itself took up most of the wall next to the front door, and across the way a fire was roaring in the surprisingly ornate fireplace, even though it was the middle of summer.

"Mr. Black, please," the doorman said, eyeing Sirius with something between distaste and panic and placing a hand on his shoulder to keep him from moving further into the room. "This is no place for children!"

Orion, who was several steps ahead by then, smoothly came to a halt. Sirius could tell from the way his father held his shoulders and head that he was in no mood for games, and it was confirmed when he turned slowly and pinned the doorman with a look cold enough to freeze fire.

"Are you questioning how I choose to raise my son?"

His tone was as frigid as his expression, but it was calm and even. Conversation around the room stilled as everybody strained to hear what was being said. The doorman sputtered for a few moments, and when he failed to make any real reply, Orion sniffed disdainfully.

"No, I thought not. Unhand him immediately."

The command hung in the air, no doubt buoyed by the thick tension. When the man failed to release him after a few moments, Sirius took matters into his own hands and shrugged the man away, physically removing himself from the grip and taking a step further away for good measure.

He could still smell the stale whisky that seemed to have soaked into the doorman's very being, and he wrinkled his nose in disgust. He hoped his robes would be salvageable; he really liked them.

"But Mr. Moribund—!" exclaimed the doorman.

"You may tell your proprietor that his debts are past due, and that if he has anything to say to me it had better be on that subject and nothing else," Orion interrupted. Sirius could see the glint of humor in his eyes, but he doubted that anyone else would have been able to read his father's expression so clearly. He didn't wait for the other man to speak again but spun on his heel and said, "Come along, Sirius."
Nobody else tried to stop them as they crossed in front of the bar towards a small door in the back of the room. Conversation slowly resumed as soon as it was clear that the confrontation was over, but if anyone was talking about Orion Black and his son, they were wise enough to say it quietly enough that Orion himself couldn't overhear them.

Orion, who seemed completely unfazed by the incident, walked into the back room of the pub as if he owned it, and his son quickened his steps to follow after him.

"That was quite a commotion," Sirius heard as he approached the doorway, but he didn't recognize the voice.

His father responded, "Yes, well, if you had not insisted that we meet here…"

"I wouldn't have insisted that we meet here if you had not insisted that we couldn't meet in Muggle London," replied the second man just as Sirius entered the room and realized who he was.

Alphard Black looked more like his sister than like any of the other men in the family. Of course, Walburga was a very attractive woman, and the resemblance worked to Alphard's advantage. His jawline was narrower and his nose a bit more upturned than Sirius's or Orion's or his own brother's, but the biggest similarities between him and his sister were in their dark curls and even darker eyes.

Those eyes stayed trained on Sirius as he closed the door at his father's request and crossed the room to take a seat at the large table.

Finally, the man leaned back precariously in his chair and said, "Hello, nephew."

Sirius couldn't imagine why his father was bringing him to a meeting with his uncle, or why his father was even meeting with his uncle in the first place. The last time he'd seen Alphard had been at Bellatrix's wedding, and he couldn't even remember the last time before that. Of course, he understood better now why his uncle probably wanted to avoid family functions, since the family members who knew of his homosexuality despised him for it, and it must be really uncomfortable to have those who didn't know (like Grandmother Irma) constantly try to set him up with marriageable women.

For a few terrible moments, Sirius thought that maybe this meeting was because his father knew. Did Sirius have some sort of sign on his forehead that made it clear that he'd been having just as many dreams lately about Rabastan naked as he had about Janice naked? Was his father kicking him out, like Rabastan's had done, and making him go live with his gay uncle?

He looked between his father and uncle with wide, frightened eyes and failed to respond to the greeting.

"What's wrong with the boy?" Alphard demanded of Orion.

"I've no idea." Orion turned to pin him with a questioning look. "Son?"

Sirius looked up and quite accidentally met his uncle's eyes as an image of Rabastan danced in front of his mind's eye and he remembered every detail of his friend's slick tongue and strong arms and sweat-damp hair. The memories made him flush with arousal and not a little embarrassment even at the best of times. Now, with his uncle's eyes boring into his, he felt as if his thoughts were exposed to the world and any hint of arousal was swamped by sick embarrassment.

"Erm, noth—nothing!" Sirius finally managed to reply. "Hello, Uncle Alphard."

Both men stared at him with curiosity and disbelief as he smoothed his expression and took his
seat. Finally, Orion seemed to decide that he'd better just get to the point.

"Your uncle has agreed to help you train with Dolohov behind your grandfather's back."

Sirius's mouth fell open. "Why?"

It wasn't that he was ungrateful. He just couldn't image why on earth his father would have intentionally disobeyed Arcturus like this, or why his uncle would have agreed to go along with it. He'd never known Orion to so directly go against his father's wishes, and he'd never known Alphard to have anything in particular to do with his nephews.

"Why not?" returned Alphard. His tone made him seem amused, playful even, but his expression was serious bordering on stern. "You are my nephew, and Antonin spoke highly of you. And it isn't as if I owe any allegiance to Arcturus."

Growing up the eldest son of a wealthy, pure bloodline meant that generally Sirius had never learned the lesson that if something sounds too good to be true then it probably is. He'd always been able to get pretty much anything he'd ever desired, no matter how outlandish it seemed. The only times he'd ever been denied anything major were when he hadn't ended up in Slytherin and when Arcturus had taken away his dueling instructor.

Accordingly, after just this briefest of assurances, he completely accepted his good luck and didn't question what this might cost him and his father in the future. He smiled brilliantly at the two men, his entire expression more joyous than it had been in a long time.

Orion smiled back, clearly unable to maintain his usual serious expression in the face of his son's happiness.

"But this must be strictly secret," he warned after a few moments, when he'd managed to regain some of his composure. "If your grandfather gets wind of this, there's no guessing how serious the consequences will be."

Sirius could guess how serious they'd be, so he had to agree with his father.

"I know. But how?"

The heavy wooden legs of his chair clattered loudly against the uneven stone floor when Alphard let himself fall forward. He poured himself several fingers of whisky and then poured some for Orion as well, sliding it across the small table to him.

Alphard leaned back again in his chair and tossed back the whisky in one go.

Orion took a sip of his whisky, clearly taking time to savor the taste before answering. "We'll have to find excuses to get you out of the house as often as possible. Of course, there is simply no way that you'll be able to manage three days a week every week, or even any sort of set schedule at all."

"That's all right," interjected Sirius. "Anything is better than not seeing Dolohov at all."

Uncle Alphard's thin lips twisted into a small smile at that, but he didn't seem to have anything to contribute.

Orion's bark-like laugh filled the cramped space. "I'm glad you're so excited, seeing how much we are both risking for this."

It occurred to Sirius that he ought to be curious exactly why his father was willing to risk it just so
that his son could have dueling lessons. But his eyes slid back over to his uncle, who was still scrutinizing him with that same surprised, stern gaze, and he figured that this was neither the time nor the place to ask his father to answer that question.

"Quidditch practice," Sirius said into the silence that had settled over the cramped stone room, part of a plan already half formed in his mind. "James takes Quidditch more seriously than anybody I've ever met, and he's determined to be Seeker next year and to be named captain. If I were to suggest that we practice over the summer, I know that he'd immediately set up a schedule. For, say, two afternoons a week…"

"And we'd tell your mother and grandfather that it's four days a week," filled in his father, a smile tugging at the corners of his thin lips.

Sirius smiled back. "Exactly. Plus if either of them ever wants to verify it, we can just make sure that they visit on days when we're actually practicing."

"In all lies there is wheat among the chaff," said Alphard with a wry grin cutting across his serious mien. "Are you sure the boy isn't in Slytherin?"

"It amazes me as much as it does you," replied Orion with another laugh.

Probably even a year ago Sirius would have read some sort of censure or disappointment into his father's words, but now he only smiled back.

The deep red gemstone eyes of his ring glinted in the candlelight, as if the golden, roaring lion were daring anybody to question Sirius's status as a Gryffindor. It was in stark contrast to the silver-colored snakes he could see coiled around his father's and uncle's fingers, but it no longer bothered him nearly as much as it had in the past.

After all, there was nothing that said Gryffindors couldn't be sly and cunning, even if bravery happened to be a more dominant personality trait.

Sirius himself had thus far managed to walk the tightrope between his friends like Potter and his friends like the Lestranges with what he thought was a fair amount of success. He'd managed to keep his girlfriend a secret from all of his family except his father, whom he'd told on purpose, and now he was doing a pretty good job of keeping his relationship with Rabastan a secret from his family and his friends and his girlfriend.

And now he was conspiring to lie to his family in order to disobey his grandfather's express instructions. If he hadn't been there when he'd been sorted into Gryffindor, he probably wouldn't quite believe it himself!

"Yes, well," Alphard cut into his musings, "now is as good a time as any."

The front legs of his chair clattered against the stone again as he let himself fall forward, then scraped quite noisily along floor when he pushed back from the table and stood to his full height—perhaps as tall as Arcturus, but not as tall as Orion, and with a significantly narrower frame than either of them.

Sirius opened his mouth to say something—what exactly he hadn't figured out yet—but Orion beat him to it.

"His mother expects him home for lunch."

Alphard waved his hand dismissively. "So he ran into some of his friends in Diagon Alley and you allowed him to spend the rest of the afternoon with them. A boy needs some freedom from his
It was as good a plan as any, and Sirius couldn't deny that he was dying to start dueling again. Right away sounded good to him. He had his wand tucked into the sheath strapped to his forearm (and his spare wand strapped into a new sheath on his opposite arm, just in case), and he really didn't need anything else.

He stood to follow his uncle with a lot of excitement and only a little trepidation. He knew from the indulgent look on Orion's face that his father wasn't going to deny him; it was the same expression his father always wore before Sirius got a new treat or just one more toy than he'd been promised or a smile instead of a punishment when he'd pulled some prank against his brother.

Sirius offered his father another smile. "I wouldn't tell Mother that last part, though."

"Certainly not!" answered Orion over his brother-in-law's loud laughter.

It turned out that Alphard lived in Muggle London quite near the Leaky Cauldron. Sirius had never really thought about where his mostly absent uncle lived, if not with his parents and not at any of the family homes Sirius knew about, but it still startled him to learn that it was in Muggle London of all places.

"We can take a cab or the underground, or we can Apparate," his uncle informed him once they'd left the safety of the Leaky Cauldron and joined the crowd of Muggles on the sidewalk outside. "Or we could always walk. It's only just over a mile."

The summer heat was oppressive even though Sirius had stripped off his wizard robes before leaving the pub, and he turned a baleful look on Alphard for that last suggestion.

Alphard laughed, just once, as he stepped out of the way of a Muggle woman pushing a baby carriage with one hand and trying to keep hold of a young child with the other.

Sirius felt indescribably uncomfortable to be left standing alone in the middle of the sidewalk as Muggles rushed past him on all sides, so he followed the older man into the shadow of an awning, where Alphard was standing against the brick wall and patting his own pockets in search of something.

Walking was out of the question. Apparating would be easiest, but Sirius did hate Side-Along Apparition with a passion, and he didn't want his first impression on Dolohov after such a long separation to be him hurling all over the man's shoes when they landed. Sirius wasn't particularly keen on riding in a Muggle automobile, but he could admit that he was curious from the books he'd been reading while waiting for Janice in the Muggle Studies section of the library. And he had no idea what the underground was supposed to be, but it didn't sound promising and he had no desire to find out.

"I think a cab," he finally answered.

A Muggle man wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase jostled him then and didn't even stop to apologize, and Sirius glared after him with an expression that could only have been learnt from being as privileged and spoilt as he was.

Alphard smiled again as he finally removed a small silver box from his pocket, but he didn't comment.

Sirius watched curiously as he flipped part of the box open and held it up to his mouth, where a small tube that looked like a rolled up bit of parchment was dangling from between his lips. The
flame appeared almost like magic, although Sirius could see that his uncle wasn't holding a wand, and then a sharp, acrid smell wafted over to Sirius along with the puff of smoke Alphard exhaled out his nostrils.

"You've never ridden in a car, have you?" asked Alphard.

It was a silly question, in Sirius's opinion. When would he have ever had a reason to ride in a car? He was surprised that his uncle had even offered.

"I am as pure-blooded as any of you," continued Alphard as Sirius followed him to the curb and watched him raise his arm up above his head to signal the passing cars, "but the Muggles do have some wonderful indulgences."

If Alphard was referring to the awful thing he was puffing on, then Sirius would have to disagree that it was wonderful in any way at all.

However, the next few minutes that he spent crowded into the backseat of the Muggle car were something like wonderful. Sirius was fascinated by the mechanics of the whole thing, which he had read about in his books but had never thought he'd ever see in person. He leaned forward so that he could peer over the front seat and watch the driver's feet and hands maneuver the vehicle down the busy London streets.

Soon, though, he found himself distracted by the people and the shops they were passing. There were so many different kinds of cars along the streets that Sirius could hardly believe that Muggles would need so many options. Since he was used to the relatively limited number of shops in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, he was absolutely floored by the sheer number of shops in Muggle London and the astounding selection of wares they offered. Furthermore, the Muggles in the cars and the shops and on the sidewalk were dressed in such a variety of different types of clothing that Sirius was sure he'd be overwhelmed if he had that many to choose between.

The cab finally came to a smooth stop in front of a large redbrick house with white friezes at every story and black wrought iron along the balconies. Alphard unfolded himself gracefully out of the car and onto the street, crushing the remains of his smoking parchment beneath his foot as he went, and Sirius followed somewhat reluctantly.

"Have you ever ridden a motorbike?" he asked his uncle as he trotted after him up the small staircase towards the front door of one of the houses.

Alphard paused as he was fitting his key into the door (very similar to a Gringotts key, Sirius noticed, and assumed that his uncle had goblin-made security measures) and turned his head to face his nephew with a surprised expression on his face.

"A motorbike? Why would I have?"

Sirius shrugged and, suddenly embarrassed, turned to study the molding around the door. "No reason, I suppose. I just thought that if you ride in cars then you might have ridden a motorbike."

Alphard made a sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh. "I think that only a certain type of Muggle tends to ride motorbikes, and I certainly do not qualify."

He pushed the heavy door open then and ushered Sirius into a narrow entryway. But no sooner had they entered than he was walking briskly down the hallway, so Sirius rushed after him and didn't have time to take in the interior of his uncle's house beyond a few brief glimpses into open doorways. His uncle led him into a study, which was roomier than Orion's study at Grimmauld Place, and closed the door behind them.
"Have a seat, Sirius."

Sirius watched in confusion as Alphard took a seat on the small settee sitting along one wall and gestured for Sirius to take one of the chairs across from him.

"I thought I was coming to see Dolohov," he said, letting just a bit of indignation creep into his voice.

"And perhaps you will, later," came the calm response. "First I think we need to have a chat just between us."

Sirius pressed his lips together reflexively in annoyance. He couldn't imagine what on earth his uncle, who had barely spoken to him at all in his entire life, would suddenly have to say to him in private.

He demanded, "About what?"

Alphard frowned at him, whether at the tone Sirius had taken with him or at the reluctance to cooperate, or both, Sirius couldn't have said. Then his face lightened dramatically all of a sudden, as if he had just realized how difficult the situation was going to be for his nephew. Sirius was even more wary of the pitying look than he was of his uncle's anger. Anger he could handle; pity he could not.

Finally, Alphard quietly said, "About the Lestrange boy."

He didn't have to elaborate. Sirius knew immediately what he meant, and it felt like the floor had dropped out from beneath him and his stomach had plummeted a mile beneath the surface of the earth, while the rest of his body got left behind in his uncle's study in Muggle London. He hadn't realized that he'd nearly fallen over until he felt one of his uncle's arms wrap firmly around his back to hold him steady.

"How… How do you… How?" spluttered Sirius. His voice sounded pathetic even to his own ears, but he was past caring.

Alphard led him the few steps to the chairs he'd offered earlier and unceremoniously dropped his nephew onto one.

"Calm down," he ordered. His tone was firm but not harsh, and he pressed a glass into one of Sirius's clammy hands. "Sip that. Your mind is incredibly open, Sirius, and you were thinking rather colorfully about him."

"You read my mind?" Sirius demanded. Sirius ignored the glass in his hand and turned to level an impressive, hurt glare at his uncle. How was he supposed to calm down! He didn't want to calm down! "How dare you!"

Alphard rose back to his full height then and towered over Sirius in a way that would have been menacing if Sirius hadn't been so angry and panicked already that he was beyond the ability to be menaced.

"Your father asked me to risk my reputation and possibly my very place in our family by bringing you into my home, to meet with my—" he began, but just as he had built up a good head of steam he stopped suddenly and seemed to deflate all at once.

He took a deep breath and a step backwards so that he could sink down onto the settee again and look his nephew levelly in the eyes. He began again much more calmly.
"I knew that if I agreed to this, then you could do immeasurable damage to my life just by opening your mouth. I am ashamed to say that I hardly know you at all, even if you are my nephew, and I was not willing to put my own neck on the line without taking a little peak first."

Sirius clenched his jaw unhappily. Nothing his uncle said would really be able to make up for the enormous violation of using Legilimency against him, but he could understand why Alphard had done it. He finally brought the tumbler of whisky to his lips and took a sip, more to give himself something to do than anything. Eventually, he gathered what remained of his courage—He was a Gryffindor, after all!—and met his uncle's eyes.

"I bet you saw more than you were expecting, then."

Alphard laughed, but it wasn't cruel or mocking at all.

The stifling tension that had filled the room began to ease, and he replied, "Well, I suppose it's what I get for eavesdropping, as it were."

He downed his own whisky in one go again, like he had earlier in Knockturn Alley, and Sirius wondered if he was a habitual drinker or if he was just particularly stressed out by the goings on of the day.

"Look, Sirius, you don't have to worry that I'm going to tell anybody or hold it over your head," he finally began again as he magically sent his and Sirius's (still half full) tumbler back to the sideboard behind his desk. "I am gay, too."

"I'm not gay," replied Sirius at once. It sounded too defensive to his own ears, and he winced a bit and tried again. "I mean, it's fine with me that you are. I already knew you were anyway, even before Rabastan and I—well, just before. But I like girls, too. I have a girlfriend and everything, and I like kissing her."

Alphard's black eyes studied him intensely, but Sirius avoided making direct eye contact. He didn't trust the older man not to invade his mind again.

Finally, his uncle seemed to determine that his relationship with his nephew was too new for him to go prying into the details of Sirius's love life, and he settled for asking, "How did you know about me?"

Sirius winced again at the memory of his grandfather's hateful words and of his own father's mocking reply. "Grandfather Arcturus spent all last summer going on about every blemish on the bloodline of my mother's side of the family, after Andromeda. He mentioned you once or twice."

Alphard's laugh was a humorless, chilling thing. "Yes, I shouldn't be surprised. It seems that everybody in our family knows except for my own parents."

Sirius didn't have anything to add to that—he didn't think there was anything he could add to it—so he stayed silent and watched his uncle tensely tap out an erratic beat with his fingers against the arm of the settee.

After perhaps half a minute in silence, Alphard declared, "Well, that is why you are lucky that I discovered this about you now. Arcturus may do many things, but he wouldn't violate your mind when you're so young, unless there was a life or death situation." Sirius refrained from asking what that made Alphard, if he was willing to do something so heinous to his own nephew that even Arcturus wouldn't do. "However, after your OWLs he will undoubtedly begin to train you in Occlumency, because you can't begin to take on any of the more colorful aspects of our family's affairs if anybody could gain access to your mind. You wouldn't have wanted him to be the one to
see your memories of the Lestrange boy."

Sirius couldn't deny that. It had never occurred to him before to worry that anybody in his family might pluck his secrets right out of his head, because that was one line that even the Blacks did not cross without good reason. It was horrifying to realize that in a few short years his grandfather (and his father, for that matter, and maybe even his mother) would have seen his memories anyway in the process of teaching him to shield his mind.

He eyed his uncle speculatively. "Are you saying that you'll help me?"

"Yes, I am. I will teach you Occlumency. You will be here anyway, when you meet with Antonin, and it shouldn't be too much trouble for you to stay another hour or two."

"Thank you," Sirius replied with complete sincerity and not a little gratitude.

He mentally added another thing to the long list of Slytherin-worthy deceptions he was engaged in at present.

"There's no point starting now," said Alphard. He turned to his side and ran his fingers along the spines of several books in the inbuilt floor-to-ceiling bookcase, and when he found the one he was looking for he plucked it from the shelf and tossed it to Sirius. "You can read that before your next visit. It explains all of the basics. But now I think we ought to invite in Antonin. He's been listening at the door for a while now."

Sirius blushed bright red, first with anger at having been eavesdropped on and then with embarrassment at what Dolohov must have heard. He turned in his chair in time to see the cherry oak door swing open and reveal his dueling instructor's dark, glowering face.

"I do not listen in at doors," he growled quite convincingly. His gruff voice was even deeper and more authoritative than Sirius remembered.

Alphard didn't seem particularly worried. He smiled another full smile and waved his hand dismissively.

"You are the worst liar I've ever met, and the biggest gossip. Now stop dawdling and come in so you can tell Sirius that you don't mind at all about anything you heard."

Dolohov frowned and stalked into the room. Sirius thought that he was going to pull out his wand and curse Uncle Alphard into next week, which is what he had always thought Dolohov was likely to do to anybody who disrespected him so enormously. Then Dolohov leaned down and roughly seized one of Alphard's arms, and Sirius thought for a moment that his dueling instructor might punch his uncle or something equally as Muggle. He only had a few seconds to wonder at how out of character that seemed before he realized that all of his preconceptions would have to be thrown out immediately.

Alphard craned his neck to look Dolohov straight in the face, and Dolohov leaned forward menacingly, and then their mouths met in a violent kiss and Sirius's mouth dropped open in wonder and shock.

Sure he had kissed Rabastan and let the other boy's tongue explore his mouth just as thoroughly as Dolohov seemed to be exploring Alphard's, but it was one thing to do it and quite another to watch somebody else do it.

And it was Dolohov! Sirius supposed that it seemed very silly, now that he was thinking about it, to have imagined that all men who were interested in other men, besides Rabastan and himself, were somehow not as strong or masculine as other men. He hadn't even really consciously thought
of it that way, but now that he was faced with the truth about Dolohov, of all people, he realized that he'd been subconsciously buying into the hateful, bigoted things his grandfather had said.

It was Dolohov who pulled back from the kiss, although he kept his hand resting on Alphard's shoulder. It seemed more an affectionate gesture now than the violent gesture it had seemed to be earlier.

"Does that answer your questions?" he demanded. The rasp in his voice was even stronger now than usual, and he was still staring down at his lover, but the question was unmistakably aimed at Sirius.

It occurred to Sirius to simply say yes, but instead he chirped, "Well, now I've thought of a few more you can probably answer."

Alphard's startled laugh in that moment resembled Orion's bark-like laughter.

Dolohov turned to look at Sirius with raised eyebrows, and his expression was as unclouded as Sirius had ever seen it in all the time they'd spent together. The burly man turned back to glance at Alphard.

"His smart mouth reminds me of yours."

"Is that why you like him so much?" returned Alphard immediately.

Dolohov scowled in a way that probably frightened most people. "Don't go telling the little brat I like him! I've been working for a year and a half to break him of that cockiness of his."

Sirius would have been offended, except that he fancied that he could now read the glint of humor in the intimidating man's eyes. He supposed it only made sense that watching a guy make out with your uncle right in front of you would have the effect of making him seem more human.

He grinned. "It's too late anyway. Rabastan already told me that you must like me if you haven't refused to teach me by now."

Dolohov rolled his eyes as he headed for the door, motioning for Sirius to come with him, and Sirius couldn't tell if it was real annoyance or only mock annoyance.

"That boy is almost more trouble than he's worth," said Dolohov as they exited Alphard's study and headed towards the back of the house. When Dolohov looked back and judged that Alphard wasn't following and that they were far enough away not to be overheard, he added, "I suppose that you are what inspired him to kill that tramp in Knockturn Alley."

Sirius felt his face redden again. "He was already plenty inspired to kill without my help."

"But he did kill her to protect you," insisted Dolohov, firmly but not exactly unkindly.

"To protect us," Sirius emphasized. "He can't exactly afford for the world to know about him either."

He was quite sure that Rabastan hadn't told the man that they easily could have avoided having to kill the woman at all, if they had simply chosen not to snog in that particular alleyway, so he decided not to mention it either. Undoubtedly Dolohov was under the impression that the woman had happened upon the scene in the middle of things.

Dolohov grunted noncommittally and turned to push open a pair of large double doors, so Sirius assumed that the topic was closed.
He followed his dueling instructor into an empty ballroom. It was much smaller and less elaborate that the one at Grandfather Pollux's manor, but it was certainly large enough for their purposes. Sirius's excitement grew with every passing moment as he watched Dolohov divest himself of his cumbersome robes until he was standing, like Sirius was, in only his trousers and shirt.

The instructor crossed to the other side of the room and spun to face his pupil with his wand already trained on him. "Now, let's see how much ground we have to make up."

Without any more warning than that, a bright purple jet of light streaked towards Sirius at full speed. A year ago he probably wouldn't have reacted in time to dodge it, but now he deftly spun out of the way, feeling the sleeve of his shirt get singed but no contact against his skin. He quickly shot his own curse at Dolohov even as he was judging the best way to avoid the man's second curse, which was already halfway to him.

Sirius lasted for several minutes before he was finally brought down by a particularly nasty Stinging Jinx that made his hand swell up so terribly that he dropped his wand. He thought about pulling out his spare wand, but he wasn't sure he wanted to reveal yet another of his secrets today. No, he'd much rather bask in Dolohov's tutelage for a while before he pulled out all of the stops.

"You're even quicker than I remember," commented his instructor.

Sirius felt his ego swell up even larger than his afflicted hand, but he knew that Dolohov didn't appreciate such things so he refrained from agreeing. Instead he smiled gratefully and said, "It's the Quidditch, I think, and the calisthenics."

Dolohov gave him a befuddled look. "The what?"

"Calisthenics," explained Sirius. "It's this Muggle thing that our Quidditch captain made us do, all these stretches and exercises that are supposed to make you stronger and improve your balance and agility."

The Death Eater still looked dubious about it, but eventually henodded his acceptance and allowed, "Hmm, well, I guess I can't argue with the results."

The summer continued with sweltering heat broken up only by the frequent rain. James had taken to the suggestion that they have summer Quidditch practice like a Niffler to gold. The unfavorable weather didn't stop him at all; he said that getting a bit damp couldn't dampen his spirits. Sirius thought that saying they got a bit damp was an enormous understatement, but he needed the Quidditch practices to continue so he didn't complain.

His grandfather was apparently unhappy that Sirius had chosen to spend his time with James Potter and dedicate it all to Quidditch, rather than to spend his time with his family and dedicate it all to furthering his lessons. Sirius did spend some time at home, of course, and much of it was spent holed up in his father's study so that he could be taught this or that, but he mostly spend his time either with James or with Uncle Alphard and Dolohov.

Walburga did nothing to hide her hurt and anger over the fact that Sirius wasn't spending as much time with her anymore, but Orion gently (and frequently) reminded her that teenagers all went through phases where they didn't want to spend time with their parents. Regulus was quite happy to fill the gap, and as a result his and Sirius's relationship was vastly improved over the summers when Sirius had soaked up the lion's share of their family's attentions and Regulus had been insanely jealous.

Still, both Arcturus and Walburga were extremely displeased when Sirius announced his intention
to sleep over for an entire weekend at the Potters' home in Godric Hollow.

"Absolutely not! I forbid it!" declared his mother over breakfast. She did not bother to regulate the volume of her voice, and Sirius, who was sitting right next to her, winced at her loud screech. "You already spend four days a week with that— that— boy!"

Sirius straightened his posture and steeled himself for the ensuing confrontation, but before he could reply his grandfather broke in.

"I agree with your mother. There is no possible reason for you to see your friend for an entire weekend when you already spend so much time with him."

Sirius's narrowed eyes were the only visible sign of his displeasure. He continued to calmly spoon eggs onto his plate and said, "All of the boys in my year will be there. I have worked so hard for them to accept me as one of their own, and I would hate to be left out of whatever it is that they do together at sleepovers."

"It is expected nowadays for children to spend the night at one another's houses," Orion added helpfully as he added sugar to his tea. "We mustn't cause Sirius to be ostracized from his group, especially now that Narcissa and her friends have left Hogwarts."

His grandfather remained unhappy but was convinced—after all, he'd been the one to tell Sirius three years ago that he ought to do whatever was needed to establish himself as a part of the Gryffindors.

Walburga remained unhappy and completely unconvinced, but she was overruled.

Sirius trudged down the stairs after breakfast with his Nimbus slung over his shoulder, but it was all for looks since he didn't really expect that they'd get any flying done. He'd Flooed back and forth so many times over the summer that he thought he had probably been quite cured of his difficulties with it. Today he stepped out of the Potters' fireplace with hardly any stumbling at all.

"Good morning, dear," greeted Dorea Potter.

The Potters' house was comfortable and very well-furnished but not any larger than it needed to be to house three people. There was only one room that served as both the formal drawing room and the family's living room. Whenever Sirius arrived, James's mother was usually sitting in the most comfortable chair with a book or her knitting.

He didn't react when she drew her wand and pointed it directly at him, although the first time she'd done it he had very nearly drawn his wand back on her. He was glad he hadn't, though, because she only intended to use a mild Cleaning Charm to remove the ashes from his person.

"Good morning, Mrs. Potter," he replied. "How is the project coming?"

She frowned and shook her head in exasperation. "Terribly! I'm afraid I know that my knitting skills are not up the task, but I refuse to admit any such thing to Bathilda Bagshot after I went on so about being able to handle it."

Sirius laughed and opened his mouth to ask after Professor Bagshot. He had grown quite fond of her during the brief times they'd met when she had been visiting Dorea at the same time he was visiting James. He thought that it was really quite a shame that she had retired from teaching, nigh on a hundred years ago, because she had probably been a much better History of Magic professor than Binns was, even before he'd died.

Then, without warning, Sirius's breath was knocked out of him with an "Ooomph!" when
something careened into him hard from behind.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Potter, rising from her seat and coming to stand over the two boys sprawled in a heap on her hearth. "Are you all right?"

Sirius impatiently shoved at Peter. "Get off!"

By the time they had straightened themselves out and were standing on their feet, Peter was still blushing furiously. If Sirius hadn't been so cross with him, he would have felt bad for his friend for having made such a first impression with Mrs. Potter.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Potter!" Peter squeaked in embarrassment as she took out her wand to set to rights the fireplace pokers and table that they'd sent askew in their fall.

She laughed good-naturedly. "Oh, it's no trouble, dear! But I've heard such stories that I can't tell from this incident whether you're Peter or Remus."

Remus and his friends had to spread the various stories of his extreme clumsiness in order to protect him from anybody finding out that all of his injuries were self-inflicted on full moons. Peter was quite clumsy with his spell work, though, which had some disastrous but quite funny effects in class. Sirius supposed that James had told his mother about some of them.

"Oh!" exclaimed Peter, blushing even deeper as he held out his hand. "I'm Peter. Er, Pettigrew."

"Remus can't make it until the day after tomorrow," Sirius informed her.

Actually there was no reason he couldn't have made it today, but Sirius and James had deliberately told him that the sleepover didn't start until the day after tomorrow.

James chose that moment to stride into the drawing room. His hair was as messy always and he had chosen a t-shirt rather than the more formal shirts Sirius and Peter were wearing, and he was carrying a scone in one hand and a muffin in the other.

"There you are!" he cried around a mouthful of one of his baked goods. "I was waiting for you!"

"I can see that you were on pins and needles," Sirius told him drily.

But Mrs. Potter put her hands on her hips and gave him what James called 'the look.' "James Potter!"

Sirius had learned over the course of the summer that "James Potter!" was a kind of shorthand for "James Potter, I have taught you better than to do this-or-that!" There was no need for her to elaborate about what exactly she had taught him better than to do in this case.

James swallowed down what he was chewing and dutifully said, "Sorry, Mum."

After saying goodbye to Mrs. Potter, the boys made a detour to the kitchen for more food before heading outside to the enormous treehouse in the Potters' backyard. It had belonged to James's father before him, and he had assured Sirius that it was the best place for them to brew their potion. He had double and triple checked that his parents didn't have any sort of monitoring charms on the structure, and he insisted that neither of his parents had climbed up into it since James had been barely more than a toddler and had needed help.

The treehouse was barely more than a platform with walls, but it was huge and clean and out of sight of the adults. James had moved the enormous cushions and various pieces of secondhand furniture out of the way and set up a large cauldron in the center of the space.
Peter eyed the cauldron as if something was liable to jump out of it at any moment. "What's that for?"

Sirius couldn't blame him for his suspicion. Things were rarely innocent or benign when James and he were involved. He saw that James was about to make a smartass remark and shot him a quelling look from behind Peter and over his head.

"It's what I said I would tell you about later, remember?" he filled in instead. "We've managed to gather everything we need now, so it's safe to tell you about it."

James gave Sirius a surprised and censorious look at the news that he'd told Peter anything at all beforehand.

"Yes, well," he said finally, "Sirius says that if we've got a potion to brew then we need you."

Sirius had told him that Peter was consistently third in their class in Potions, but James's impression of Peter from classes involving wand work was so strong that he still didn't seem to be totally on board with Sirius's claims. Sirius rolled his eyes heavenward for a moment before making his way across the space to snag the book that he and James had left there earlier. He tossed it to Peter.

"Look at the bookmarked page."

Peter looked as if Sirius had given him another ticket to a league final, and Sirius felt momentary guilty at having excluded Peter from their plans for so long. After all, Peter might not be Sirius's closest friend, but Sirius knew that he was Peter's closest friend. He had been there when nobody else had been, and he still was in some ways, especially in potions. Sirius knew that he really ought to treat the other boy better than he did.

Peter's eyebrows rose further up his forehead the further he read. Finally, after several minutes of studying the ingredients list and instructions, he lifted his gaze to look at Sirius, totally ignoring James.

"What in Merlin's name is this? I know that Bicorn horns are used in potions that change the appearance, like the Polyjuice Potion, but I've never heard of a potion that uses the blood."

"The Animagus Potion," answered Sirius quietly but surely.

Peter gaped at him for a moment, then turned to look at James as if he might be able to detect some deception on the other boy's face if he couldn't on Sirius's. When it became clear that both of them seemed perfectly serious, he incredulously echoed, "The Animagus Potion?"

"Yeah," responded James impatiently. "We're gonna become Animagi so that we can stay with Remus during the full moons."

If it were possible, Peter looked even more shocked than before. He stared at James as if he'd sprouted a couple of Bicorn horns himself, then he looked to Sirius. Whether he was seeking a denial or a confirmation Sirius couldn't have guessed.

"We know it's a longshot, but we figure why not try," he explained. He gave Peter a significant look to tell him that he didn't want him to argue with Potter on this one.

Peter looked at himsearchingly for a few moments. Eventually he asked, "You've already got the ingredients?"

"Yes," replied James.
"All of them?" Peter pressed doubtfully.

Sirius shrugged. "Yes, all of them. You're better off not knowing how. That's why I didn't want to include you earlier."

The break in at the apothecary in Hogsmeade had made the papers, and Sirius watched ruefully as several different reactions flitted across his friend's face as he put the pieces together. Fortunately, Peter knew enough to know that he really was better off not knowing for sure, so he didn't ask his friends to confirm or deny their involvement.

"I know you can do it, Peter," Sirius cajoled him, sensing that his friend only needed a little push in the right direction to agree to the whole scheme. "We might not be able to get the transfiguration part down, but I know that you can brew the potion."

James looked severely insulted at the implication that Peter was more advanced in Potions than James was in Transfigurations, but Sirius gave him a significant glare and he snapped his mouth closed without actually voicing his opinion aloud.

After a few moments, Peter took a deep breath and said determinedly, "I can do it."

Sirius felt a lot of the time like he was more a referee than a friend.

Towards the end of summer, Grandfather Arcturus summoned Sirius to the unused drawing room previously used for his lessons with Dolohov to meet his new dueling instructor. He was a tall, emaciated-looking man with short robes and an even shorter wand, and Sirius hated him immediately. Even his secret lessons with Dolohov couldn't quell his anger at the presence of this new man, because he was surer than ever that his grandfather had made an enormous and biased mistake in dismissing Dolohov in the first place.

"Friedrich Braun is the best dueling instructor in Germany," his grandfather informed him.

Sirius offered a smile that toed the line between polite and cruelly dismissive. "Oh, really? And how do you stack up against Antonin Dolohov? He was my previous instructor."

The pleasant smile remained plastered to Braun's face. "I assure you that vot I haff to teach you vill be just as good as—"

"Mal sehen, Herr Braun," interrupted Sirius coolly, the nasty tone of his voice clearly indicating how well he thought this new man would do.

The man appeared surprised and affronted at his pupil's attitude. The smile slid off his face, and he looked suddenly like he'd sucked on a lemon.

Arcturus looked as if he wanted nothing more than to take out his wand and give Sirius a good hexing. Instead, he said in a tight voice, "Braun is here to evaluate you, Sirius, to see if he will agree to be your instructor. He usually only takes pupils in fifth year and above, but when he learned that you had already been trained by Mr. Dolohov, he agreed to give you a chance."

"Well then, why don't we get right to it?" suggested Sirius.

He drew his blackthorn wand and executed a mocking bow.

Although he still appeared quite taken aback, Braun agreed and quickly performed his own niceties, while Sirius's grandfather went to stand stiffly on the opposite side of the room to
"First position!" the instructor barked suddenly. Sirius remained immobile, only blinking at the man in confusion. Braun tapped his wand against his palm authoritatively. "I said assume the first position, Black!"

Sirius raised an eyebrow and shot his grandfather a glance full of every bit of annoyance he felt before turning back to his would-be dueling master.

"What the fuck is the first position?"

"Vot do you mean vot is the first postion?" demanded Braun, shock coloring his voice and deepening his accent even further. "Vot has Dolohov been teaching you?"

"Dueling," replied Sirius at once.

Braun let his wand fall limply to his side and spun to face Arcturus. "I thought you said that he is experienced! He has not been taught anything at—"

With a thunderous expression that was at odds with the barest whisper of his voice, Sirius cut him off with a vicious, "Confringo Maxima."

Predictably, Dolohov's common-sense insistence that he not let his opponents hear what he was casting, even if he couldn't yet cast nonverbally, was right on the mark. The ball of pale blue light streaked across the enclosed space so quickly that Braun barely had barely noticed it before it hit him. His hastily cast Shield Charm was only halfway up and he only managed to leap partially out of the way when Sirius's curse crashed into his rudimentary protection with a loud bang and broke apart. Part of it hit Braun in the side and the rest of it ricocheted into the couch on the other side of the room, reducing a large chunk of it to bits.

The instructor hit the floor with a scream, his mangled right arm lying at a disgusting angle next to him as he used his left hand to clutch at his bleeding ribcage.

Arcturus was across the room in seconds, his pale face even whiter than usual.

"Don't move!" he ordered harshly, using a hand on Braun's good shoulder to force him down flat to the floor. He swiveled his head around to glare at Sirius. "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?"

Sirius looked down at him defiantly from his place still standing on the other side of the room.

"I was thinking that Dolohov would have been able to deflect that easily."

Arcturus closed his eyes and visibly took a breath, but before he could respond, the doorway was filled with people who had come to investigate the screaming.

Sirius crossed over to the remaining half of the couch and sank down into the sagging cushion, glancing curiously over the tattered fluff and bent springs of the other half.

There was pandemonium as his father and Uncle Ignatius, who was visiting with Aunt Lucretia for a short holiday from his job at the French Ministry, entered the room and crowded around Braun, quickly followed by his mother and aunt, who crowded around Sirius and clucked over him as if he were the one who were injured.

Through it all, Sirius sat calmly and quietly, absentmindedly twirling his wand in his fingers and watching the proceedings impassively. It was really less frightening that when he'd watched Rabastan cast the Killing Curse, he thought. There hadn't been any sickening glow or feeling of
panic, and he was too angry at this imposter of a dueling instructor to really feel sorry for him, whereas he'd felt sorry for the witch who hadn't done anything wrong except be in the wrong alley at the wrong time.

"My darling, what happened?" cooed his mother as she brushed his slightly disheveled hair out of his face and tried to cajole him into coming to her embrace.

A sudden silence fell over the other side of the room, and Sirius was vaguely aware of his mother's arms tightening around him and his aunt sucking in a sickening breath.

His father was the first to rise from his knees. He stared for a moment his bloodstained hands before a quick spell put them to rights, then he turned to stare at Sirius with eyes full of a depth of emotion that Sirius had never witnessed in them before.

"He's dead," Uncle Ignatius announced quite needlessly. Over his wife's gasp, he announced, "We have to contact the Ministry."

Orion stiffened and turned his piercing gaze on his brother-in-law. Arcturus, who was kneeling with his head bowed over the broken body of his erstwhile dueling instructor, didn't respond.

Ignatius pressed, "Arcturus, did you hear? We have to contact them immediately! You're a member of the Wizengamot; you know what has to be done."

"Absolutely not!" Orion declared so forcefully that he surprised everybody in the room. "The Ministry are not coming within a hundred miles of this!"

His brother-in-law stared at him in scandalized surprise for several heartbeats before he managed to respond. "Of course they must! A man is dead!"

Orion raised his wand and pointed it deliberately right between Ignatius's eyes, his own gaze as cold as ice.

"And Sirius killed him. So no, you aren't involving them."

"It was just a dueling accident, wasn't it?" asked Uncle Ignatius, although even he sounded unsure. He glanced briefly at Sirius before turning back to Orion, his hands outspread and his voice full of everything reasonable. "And he's only a minor. I'm sure this will all be over and done with before summer's done. Arcturus!"

Sirius, who felt mostly numb to the goings on generally, was kind of convinced that he'd broken his grandfather somehow. The man hadn't moved at all in ages.

"Father!" called Orion in a loud, authoritative voice.

Finally, slowly, Arcturus raised his eyes from Braun's body and looked up at his son and son-in-law. "Yes," he croaked. He swallowed as he rose to his feet and then he tried again. "Yes, Orion. Do it."

"Do what?!" exclaimed Ignatius, taking a step backwards from his brother-in-law's wand at the same time that Aunt Lucretia rose to her feet with a cry.

"He's my husband! I can't let you!"

Arcturus didn't appear to have anything to say to that. Orion didn't even bother to glance at her, but his icy voice was more than enough to get his point across. "If you try to stop me then I will do the same to you."
She gasped and raised her hand to her throat. Sirius was inexplicably reminded of that day, which seemed so long ago now, when Rabastan had rendered his sister momentarily speechless on the train. Now, as then, the effects didn't last very long.

"I'm your sister!" cried Lucretia in a voice that had gone all high and screechy.

"HE'S MY SON!" roared Orion, finally losing his ice-cold demeanor.

Sirius could barely breathe now, his mother's arms were wound so tight around him.

"Lucretia," she said beseechingly. "Lucretia, please."

His aunt's shoulders hunched just the slightest amount, and she lowered her head. "Fine. Fine... do it. But you had better not take any more than strictly necessary, Orion, and you can't make me stand here and watch it."

"Do what?!" demanded Ignatius, but he couldn't make any moves with Orion's wand and full attention trained directly on him. "Lucretia, do what?! Lucretia!"

But his wife didn't look back as she walked stiffly out of the room and shut the door behind her. Her brother did have the grace to wait until his sister was out of the room before he muttered, "Obliviate. Stupefy."

Ignatius collapsed onto the floor a few feet away from the cooling body of Friedrich Braun.

The four living and conscious occupants of the upstairs drawing room were silent for what could have been half a minute or half an hour.

In this quiet contemplation, Sirius knew that he really ought to feel guilt or remorse or something about what he'd done and what he'd caused, but he found that he simply couldn't muster up any such emotions. He thought briefly about the boy he'd been when he walked in on Rabastan practicing the Unforgivable Curses, months and life-changing experiences ago now. Would that Sirius have felt something different?

Right now all he could feel was that it would have been much less messy if he'd just been able to use the Killing Curse, like Rabastan had on that homeless witch. There hadn't been any drawn out death or blood or struggle when she'd died; she'd just toppled over backwards and been dead.

Finally, Arcturus seemed to gather himself sufficiently to return to some semblance of control over the situation. He spoke with the assurance of someone who had been in just this sort of situation before.

"He came to Grimmauld Place and conducted a perfectly normal lesson, and then he left. We have no idea what happened to him after that. He might have been waylaid here in England or back in Germany, or he might have simply never made it back to Germany at all. After all, I told him that he ought to apply for a Portkey or permission to use the Floo internationally, but he insisted on Apparating. Orion, you will dispose of the body. I will implant a false memory in Ignatius's mind corroborating our story and determine whether I ought to do the same to Lucretia."

"Fine," replied his son, "but are you proposing that we simply wait until somebody contacts us and asks?"

Arcturus shot him a disapproving look. "If nobody has reported him missing before when the next lesson was supposed to have been, then I will go through every reasonable means to contact him and, finding myself unable to locate him, will inform the German Ministry that I am worried he is
He strode out of the room without looking at his grandson, Ignatius Prewett's inert body trailing behind him.

Orion crossed the room and knelt down in front of Sirius, who was still sitting calmly on the sofa. Their eyes met and Sirius didn't see disapproval or disappointment there, only fear and a deep determination. His father put his large hand on Sirius's knee and squeezed it comfortingly.

"Nobody will find out about this. I won't let anything happen to you."

"Of course you won't!" cried Walburga. She rested her cheek against her son's hair and squeezed her arms ever tighter around him.

Even a year ago Sirius probably would have killed anyone if it meant his mother would show him such affection, but now he really had killed someone and he wanted no part of her embrace. He sat stiff and immobile in her arms and watched with calculating gray eyes as his father transfigured the body into something small enough that he couldn't tell what it was from this far away.