

Mature

Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

M/M

Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Sirius Black/James Potter

Euphemia Potter/Fleamont Potter

Sirius Black & Remus Lupin & James Potter

Sirius Black & Remus Lupin

Sirius Black

James Potter

Remus Lupin

Peter Pettigrew

Regulus Black

Euphemia Potter

Fleamont Potter

Marlene McKinnon

Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody

Minerva McGonagall

Orion Black

Walburga Black

Bellatrix Black Lestrangle

Andromeda Black Tonks

Pandora Lovegood

Background Sirius Black/OMC

Gay Sirius Black

Bisexual James Potter

Friends to Lovers

Protective James Potter

Mutual Pining

Pining James Potter

Pining Sirius Black

Sharing a Bed

Domestic Fluff

First Kiss

Love Confessions

Slow Burn

Sirius Black is So Whipped

James Potter is So Whipped

Near Death Experiences

Past Child Abuse
Abusive Orion Black
Abusive Walburga Black
Sirius Black Needs a Hug
Sirius Black Gets a Hug
Morally Grey Regulus Black
Not Actually Unrequited Love
Marauders Era (Harry Potter)
Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence
NO Lily Evans bashing
Supportive Remus Lupin
Remus Lupin is So Done
Sirius Black & Marlene McKinnon Friendship
Good Parent Euphemia Potter
Good Parent Fleamont Potter
prongsfoot - Freeform
Starbucks
Fluff and Angst
Eventual Smut
Fluff
Potions as Substance Abuse (Harry Potter)
James Potter Loves Sirius Black
Sirius Black Loves James Potter
Angst and Fluff and Smut
Marauders Friendship (Harry Potter)
Auror James Potter
Auror Sirius Black
First Wizarding War with Voldemort (Harry Potter)
Angst and Hurt/Comfort
Fluff and Hurt/Comfort
Minor James Potter/Lily Evans
Possessive James Potter
Jealous James Potter
Emotional Hurt/Comfort
Emotional Sex
Feelings Realization
Blood and Violence
English

Object Permanence

Nyx_21

Summary:

“Promise me something, Siri.”

“Anything,” Sirius said quickly. There was nothing he would be unwilling to do for Euphemia Potter. He owed the Potters everything.

“Don’t let James run off and marry her without telling him how you feel.”

Sirius froze, shock rendering him momentarily speechless. Effie just stared at him, eyes brimming with soft understanding.

“I - I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sirius stammered.

She raised an eyebrow. “I think you do.”

After Hogwarts, everything is perfect for James Potter and Sirius Black – best friends, roommates, and now partners in the Ministry’s Auror training program. But with the spectre of war looming, Sirius seems determined to put himself in danger and James finds himself wrestling with increasingly intense feelings for his best friend.

Or, James and Sirius realise they are far more than platonic soulmates.

A slow-burn, post-Hogwarts, Marauder Era story filled with angst, fluff, unhinged pining, unprofessional workplace behaviour, and shameless meddling from Effie and Monty Potter.

Notes:

- Translation into Русский available: [Постоянство объекта](https://archiveofourown.org/works/60809140) (<https://archiveofourown.org/works/60809140>) by [twarchess](http://archiveofourown.org/users/twarchess/pseuds/twarchess) (<http://archiveofourown.org/users/twarchess/pseuds/twarchess>).

Welcome to my little Marauder AU fic where I indulge in my sudden obsessive adoration for Prongsfoot.

I hope you enjoy the story. Please make sure that you keep an eye on the trigger warnings at the beginning of each chapter as some dark themes will be covered. However, a happy ending is guaranteed.

Chapter 1 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/151208995>): **A new world is born**

Summary:

Sirius glanced up to discover several of the glowing bubbles hovering over his head, taking a shine to him.

“It’s the blatant favouritism that gets to me,” James said playfully, reaching out to nudge one of the floating orbs with his fingers. It drew slightly closer to Sirius; he could feel the warm glow on his face.

“Can’t help it Prongsie. It’s my raw charisma.”

“You already have an unfair advantage,” James grouched half-heartedly. “You shouldn’t get the extra good lighting as well.”

“I assume you’re referring to my outrageous bone structure?”

James rolled his eyes but did not deny it.

Notes:

Welcome to my little love letter to Prongsfoot. I hope you enjoy this first instalment.

Soundtrack:

Each chapter I'll try to share the one song I listened to on loop while I wrote. For this chapter it's "Youth" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/4AmcmraFjVzFb9SQDNTRYl?si=7433c38e9ec74eba>)_by Daughter.

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_1_endnotes\)](#).)

“Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.”

- Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Vol 1*

James Potter shifted uncomfortably on his seat. His supervisor – Auror Akeem Adl – leafed through his hastily drafted situation report with a thoroughly unimpressed expression on his face.

James could not pin down the precise sequence of events that had led him into this claustrophobic basement office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. However, he was certain that Sirius Black was mostly to blame. As usual. Not that James would ever admit that to anyone outside of the Marauders. Not even an Imperious Curse cast by Voldemort himself would compel him to betray his best friend.

Nonetheless, James firmly believed Sirius could at least pretend to be contrite. Sprawled elegantly in the chair next to James, Sirius was a picture of relaxed unconcern. How did he even stay in the chair while sitting at that angle?

James settled his gaze on his friend, raising his eyebrows pointedly. Sirius simply smirked in response, sinking even further into his artful slouch. James rolled his eyes. No one worked harder than Sirius to look utterly unbothered.

Auror Adl pressed his hands to his forehead and let out a deep, steadying breath.

“So let me get this straight,” he ground out. “You were sent on a simple reconnaissance mission at a Muggle farm. But instead of recording the suspects’ movements, you took it upon yourselves to launch an unauthorised raid and apprehend them after a fire fight in broad daylight.”

James winced. “When you put it like that it doesn’t sound great,” he conceded.

Collecting his thoughts, Adl scanned the report again. “After which you attempted to convince passing Muggles that you were performing a pantomime to promote a travelling circus?”

James kicked Sirius in the shin when he snorted. Although Sirius straightened in his chair, James suspected he was focused on repelling any future attacks rather than taking the conversation more seriously. Clearly, James would have to slip into his usual role as their spokesperson. No longer at Hogwarts, James could not rely on the soft spot Minerva McGonagall had for the two best players on her beloved Gryffindor Quidditch team to get out of trouble.

“We also apprehended two of the most wanted smugglers of dark artefacts in Europe,” James reasoned. Although their approach was unconventional, James and Sirius always achieved results, which was more than most of the fledging Aurors in their training cohort could claim.

“We obliviated *most* of the Muggles,” Sirius added. “And no one believes kids when they talk about magic anyway.”

This was the weakest point in their case. Protocol required they wipe the memory of the seven-year-old son of the German tourists who had witnessed their raid. James had been ready to comply with the handbook, lifting his wand to perform the memory charm. But then Sirius had grabbed his wand arm. James had not resisted him when he saw the haunted look on his friend’s face. Protocol be damned.

During an unhappy childhood with Orion and Walburga Black, Sirius had often felt powerless to

defend himself and remained unwilling to put other children in the same position. Although unorthodox, Sirius was firm on the point that he did not perform spells on kids. It was one of the many things James liked about him.

At the time, James had not cared about the consequences, far more focused on reassuring Sirius. He still believed that Sirius was correct in his assessment that no one would believe a seven-year-old talking about magic wands and squawking chickens.

Auror Adl leaned back in his chair, appraising them. “How long have been in the Auror training program?”

“We started right out of Hogwarts,” James responded. “A year of basic training at the Academy and 12 months of workplace training at the Ministry.”

“So less than a year out from completing the program,” Adl observed. “Seeing you graduated from the Academy at the top of your class - ”

“Well,” Sirius said smugly. “Technically James was *second* in his class.”

This time, Sirius dodged the kick James aimed in his direction.

“First in Duelling,” James retorted. “And Concealment and Disguise.”

“I was having an off day,” Sirius shrugged.

“More like an off 12-month period of consistent testing in two core subjects.”

“In light of your considerable training,” Adl interrupted. “Perhaps you can name, Potter, the single most important piece of legislation passed by the Wizengamot.”

James frowned, casting his mind back over their cadet syllabus and Lily’s frequent soliloquies about the unjust legislation she wanted to overturn as a law clerk. “The Unforgivable Act?”

Adl clenched his fist, visibly struggling to avoid slamming it down on the table. A familiar response from any authority figure who interacted with James and Sirius. Honestly, James admired his restraint in not surrendering to the urge.

“I am referring to the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy,” he said through gritted teeth.

“It is an inherently subjective question, though,” Sirius mused, his brow furrowing in thought. “If you were a werewolf, then the most important law would be the Werewolf Code of Conduct.”

“If you were a Muggle, it would probably be Muggle Protection Act,” James added.

“Good point, Jamie. Are we werewolves or Muggles in your hypothetical?”

“We should also check if we are magical artefacts,” James said. “That would completely change the game.”

With a sudden bang, Adl struck the tabletop, making them both jump.

“How about we talk about whether you’re still going to be Aurors?” Adl retorted sharply.

A silencing charm would not have been more effective. Perhaps the department would hesitate to dismiss them after investing so much in their gruelling training program, but there could be other consequences. Worst of all? Separating them.

It had felt like a stroke of unbelievable luck when they were paired together for the remainder of their training program. The Marauders could hardly believe their fortune.

Peter had struggled to wrap his head around the idea. “But, have they *met* you and Sirius?”

Moony had gaped – horrified. “Merlin’s beard, it’s the end of the justice system in the wizarding world.”

“I feel like I should be offended by this reaction,” Sirius had said, slinging an arm around James. “But I’m honestly flattered.”

At the time, Lily had asked James if he worried that he and Sirius might grow tired of each other, given they already worked and lived together. But for Sirius Black and James Potter, there was no such thing as too much. There were moments in their friendship when they even resented sleep for interrupting their time together.

It was irrelevant anyway. Their jobs were far too dangerous for such petty issues to stand in the way. James loathed the idea of Sirius going on a dangerous mission without him. Though naturally brilliant, Sirius had absolutely no common sense. James felt it was his duty to keep an eye on him—or at least

charge into the fray right alongside him.

“That seems to have gotten your attention,” Adl said grimly. “You can both relax; you won’t be dismissed this time. But you’re on desk duty for three months, and probation for six.”

Sirius groaned loudly at the mention of “desk duty.” Paperwork was not his strong suit.

“Thank you, sir,” James interjected quickly, before Sirius could say anything to get them fired. “We are big fans of paperwork. Huge fans.”

“That passion is definitely not coming through in this report,” Adl replied drily, gesturing to the document James had thrown together about five minutes before the meeting.

“That’s what makes this a great development opportunity,” James said cheerfully. “We’ll go get right onto it.”

Adl rolled his eyes. “Get out of here. Both of you.”

James hauled Sirius to his feet and dragged him out into the hallway. Although it was completely windowless and rather dank, to James it felt like breaking out of prison. He sighed in relief, leaning against the wall as Sirius slumped dramatically next to him. Another close call – it really was just like Hogwarts.

“Desk duty,” Sirius moaned, as if he had been sentenced to death. “I would genuinely prefer that they put me in stocks at the entrance to the Ministry.”

James shrugged half-heartedly. “Well, you’re an exhibitionist.”

Sirius tilted his head toward James, flashing one of his signature grins. “A face this beautiful deserves to be seen by an adoring public.”

James poked the dimple on Sirius’ left cheek. The asymmetry of it had always irritated Sirius – the vain git. James secretly adored it; it was a tiny piece of punctuation on an otherwise flawless face. It suited him perfectly.

“Very charitable of you,” James replied, rolling his eyes. “You know, you could have been slightly more helpful in there.”

Sirius leaned his head onto James’ shoulder. Despite his claims to the contrary, James knew Sirius was only a couple of inches shorter than him. Years of physical conditioning as a Beater, followed by their intense Auror training, had given him broad shoulders. But like everyone in his family, Sirius was naturally lithe and slim. He sprawled against James as if he was a piece of oversized furniture.

James did not mind – nor did he take the trust Sirius showed in him lightly. During the early years of their friendship, Sirius had been guarded, stiffening when James wrapped a friendly arm around his shoulder or ruffled his hair affectionately. The fact Sirius accepted the affection James was eager to show him was a rare gift – one he valued fiercely.

“I thought I made some very cogent points about subjectivity,” Sirius said.

“And yet, shockingly, Adl did not seem grateful for your insights.”

It was only when Sirius started fiddling with a loose thread on his Auror robes that James realised they needed mending. His family house elf, Melly, would be able to mend the uniform when he and Sirius visited his parents tomorrow. James took great pride in his Auror uniform and the opportunity to do his part to protect the wizarding world, particularly with the growing forces of darkness gathering power around them.

Although Sirius was equally committed to their career path, he had little interest in the uniform code, always wearing an assortment of rings and at least three earrings. His only concession was to pull back his gleaming curls during their shifts. After gauging his natural talent for defensive spells, their instructors no longer punished Sirius for his uniform transgressions.

“Sorry for getting you in trouble, Prongs,” Sirius said. “I just...saw an opening and wanted to go for it, you know? It was stupid.”

Despite his confidence, Sirius was far too hard on himself. James had always believed their jobs required at least a bit of improvisation.

“Come on, Pads,” James said, nudging Sirius until he earned a shove in response. “We caught the bad guys. And you got to pull a rabbit out of a top hat for a small German child. It was exactly the sort of

ridiculous day that made me want to get this job in the first place.”

Sirius turned to regard James more closely, huffing a laugh. Something vulnerable appeared in his expression. “So, you’re not wishing that you never met me and planning on cutting me from your life?”

“Never,” James said, pressing a hand to his chest as if wounded by the mere suggestion. “Come on. It’s Friday, let’s get out of here. I sent word to Lily, Moony, and Wormtail that we were probably getting fired to guilt them into coming to drinks.”

Sirius followed James back to their shared office, groaning again. “Lily definitely wishes you had never met me and would cut me from your life.”

“Rubbish,” James grinned. “She knew what she was getting into when she agreed to date me.”

Still completing the training program, it was unusual for them to have such a large office, filled with four desks although only Sirius and James used the space. To cheer up their shared office, they had stolen two training dummies usually used for duelling practice, drawn cheerful smiley faces on their blank faces, and christened them Dummy Moony and Dummy Wormtail. Merlin knew what they would do when two other trainees were allocated to their space and found their seats taken by inanimate objects.

Piles of paper were multiplying on their desks, their inboxes already overflowing with forms and reports for their review. Ministry memos flew through the door like little birds – though mercifully none were marked urgent.

Sirius stared wide-eyed at the growing pile of admin as if it were his personal vision of hell. James made a note to keep an eye on his friend; boredom did him no favours. In truth, James would also miss the adrenaline of field work for the next few months.

“Do you think they’d reconsider not firing us?” James asked glumly.

Sirius sighed before pulling off his Auror robes to expose torn jeans and a Led Zeppelin t-shirt. Both Sirius and James preferred wearing Muggle clothes – for Sirius this was driven by his burning passion for their music and culture, while James just enjoyed annoying his snootier Pureblood colleagues.

With no particular interest in fashion, James was naturally conservative with his clothing. With his glasses and unruly mop of hair, James felt he already looked sufficiently chaotic without the band t-shirts. In contrast, Sirius always looked ridiculously cool. It certainly did not hurt that his preternatural good looks made him look like he had just stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine.

“Don’t worry, Prongsie,” Sirius consoled, placing a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll fuck up royally and be thrown out on our arses any day now.”

“Well,” James sighed. “We can only hope.”

Sirius had never planned to become an Auror. In Seventh Year, when pressed about his career ambitions, he had decided to become David Bowie, raving on and on about it until Marlene McKinnon explained to him that Bowie was not a title but a person. Swallowing his disappointment, Sirius decided to follow James’ lead, as usual.

James always knew the right thing to – when it counted at least. He was thrillingly open to doing the wrong thing when it came to trivialities like curfew and pranks. James had a lot of good qualities. He was funny, intelligent, and talented. Everyone always wanted to be his friend – not just because he cut such a striking figure in his Quidditch kit. There was an inherent *goodness* to James, probably because he was raised by Euphemia and Fleamont Potter. It had always confounded Sirius, even as he was drawn to it.

Sirius was disappointed – but unsurprised – to discover they would not be joining a professional Quidditch league. Brave James Potter would never pursue something as frivolous as Quidditch with a war going on – albeit one playing out in shadows and out of sight from polite society. James was drawn to the Auror corps like a moth to flame. Sirius went wherever James led him.

James insisted that Sirius be there to inform his parents about their plans.

“This really feels like a private family moment, Prongsie,” Sirius had said, desperate to avoid Effie’s ire.

“That’s exactly why you’re coming,” James retorted. “Also, I’m going to use you as a human shield when my mum starts losing her mind about it.”

Although not thrilled by their decision to pursue such a dangerous career, Effie channelled her concerns into a gruelling first aid course, sharing everything she had learned as a brilliant nurse at St Mungo’s in her day. The improvised training program rivalled the sadistic drills of dictatorial Quidditch Captain James Potter.

For his part, Monty was proud. After embracing his son, he had turned to Sirius and hugged him too. It was one of Sirius’ most treasured memories, matched only by the bear hug James had given him when they escaped back upstairs to debrief.

Then came the fear. Fear of letting everyone down. Sirius had never done well with rules or boundaries and the glossy brochure they received from the Auror Academy made clear that their training program had an abundance of both. Luckily, his fear of failure drove him to study for the first time in his life, no longer relying on his innate test taking ability to ace his exams. For a year, he rivalled even James in terms of discipline and commitment.

Nonetheless, Sirius was shocked when he topped their year. Although he had briefly worried that his competitive friend would resent him for stealing first place, James was endearingly elated for him. Sirius suffered through an embarrassing family dinner in their honour with Effie and Monty. James had also gone on and on about it to Peter and Remus at one of their weekly pub visits, unfazed by their bemused looks.

“See Pads,” Remus had said sardonically. “Tests are even easier when you actually study for them.”

With his cheeks burning under James’ praise, it had taken genuine effort to summon his usual smirk. “Well, when you’re as naturally brilliant as me and James, you don’t really need to study.”

“Must be nice,” Remus said good-naturedly.

Sirius was annoyed at himself for his thoughtlessness. They all knew Remus would have made an incredible Auror, but since signing the Werewolf Register at seventeen, he had been disqualified from most roles at the Ministry. Lily was determined to use her position as a law clerk in the Wizengamot to reform werewolf rights. James always went starry eyed during her righteous rants on this issue. Lily and James shared lofty ideals of justice.

Despite the success Sirius had attained at the Auror Academy, their workplace training was far more challenging. At the Ministry of Magic, the Black surname did him no favours with his peers, given the rumours of dark wizards infiltrating the organs of government. Sirius had no doubt the rumours were true when it came to his relatives.

It would have been wise to keep his head down. But Sirius never excelled at keeping a low profile, and after months of abiding by all the rules and sub-clauses that restricted their behaviour, Sirius was itching for some chaos. During their stake out, he had rushed into things – even though he had known that James would be right behind him.

The sight of James hurling curses with feathers in his hair while chickens squawked in outrage had been the perfect way to release some stress. At the time, Sirius had not considered that their actions might damage James’ career. Their punishment could have been a lot worse than a month of administrative work. More evidence that James would be better off without him.

“Cheer up,” James ordered, throwing open the door of their favourite bar near the Ministry. Sirius could not help but smile in response; it was impossible to resist the James Potter positive attitude this close to a licensed bar.

“Firewhiskey makes me cheerful.”

“Actually, it makes you morose and sleepy, but I suppose you do make a brief pitstop at cheerful on the way.”

The ceiling of the bar had been charmed to resemble a perfect sunset. A cloud of glowing gold orbs, slightly transparent like bubbles, floated around the room, casting a warm and inviting light. Nonetheless, all the patrons spoke in hushed whispers and stared at James and Sirius as they passed. Everyone could feel the growing tension in their community, fears coalescing around the shadowy figure of You-Know-

Who.

James led them to their usual booth. He gestured to the house elf bartender, holding up two fingers and receiving a nod in response. Their drinks appeared on the table. A perk of being regulars.

James lifted his glass towards Sirius before taking a long sip, scrunching his nose so that he had to push his glasses back up. As Sirius mirrored his movements by lifting his drink, James seemed to catch sight of something just above him. Sirius glanced up to discover several of the glowing bubbles hovering over his head, taking a shine to him.

“It’s the blatant favouritism that gets to me,” James said playfully, reaching out to nudge one of the floating orbs with his fingers. It drew slightly closer to Sirius; he could feel the warm glow on his face.

“Can’t help it Prongsie. It’s my raw charisma.”

“You already have an unfair advantage,” James groused half-heartedly. “You shouldn’t get the extra good lighting as well.”

False modesty was an unconvincing look on James Potter. Back at Hogwarts he had scarcely been able to finish a meal without one of his admirers attempting to slip him a love potion.

“I assume you’re referring to my outrageous bone structure?” Sirius asked with over-stated smugness.

James rolled his eyes but did not deny it. Although he knew James was free with his praise, his stomach flooded with warmth at the implicit compliment. Sirius moved the conversation along quickly, not wanting to dwell on his inappropriate reactions to his best friend.

Soon enough, they were lost in their own world. Even though they spent almost every waking moment together, Sirius and James never tired of each other. The conversation careened around on wild tangents. James always understood his thought processes and vice versa.

“Evening lads.”

Sirius was startled to discover Peter Pettigrew smiling down at them in an ill-fitted suit with his hair slicked back with *Sleekeazy’s*. It was a source of endless delight to Sirius that the hair smoothing potion that had made Fleamont Potter even wealthier was powerless to tame that unruly Potter hair.

Sirius was under strict instructions not to mock Peter for his new look. Old Wormy fancied a witch he worked with in the Department of Magical Transportation, who shared his bewildering interest in the mind-numbing bureaucracy governing Portkeys and the Floo Network. For some reason Pete thought his attempt at courting her would be assisted by dressing like a Muggle accountant. Sirius deserved a medal for holding his tongue.

“Fired before you even complete the training program,” Peter tutted, placing his monogrammed briefcase onto the floor. “Surely that is a record.”

“I may have embellished slightly,” James admitted. “But we’re on admin for the next few months, so emergency drinks were required.”

“Admin,” Sirius groaned, burying his face in his crossed arms. The warmth abandoned him as the orbs floated away to find greener pastures. Sirius felt oddly put out by their rejection.

“He’s been doing that a lot,” James said fondly, fiddling with Sirius’ hair, which he had taken out of its half-bun on the way to the pub. It felt ridiculously good to have James stroking his fingers through his hair; Sirius had to bite back an inappropriate moan.

“Poor Padfoot,” Peter said good naturedly. “Can I get you a drink, mate?”

“You’re a marvel, Pete,” Sirius mumbled, not lifting his head. “I hope that witch from work shags you.”

James laughed loudly. Unable to resist, Sirius turned his head to scrutinise James through one eye. An orb had settled on his shoulder, casting a golden glow on his smooth skin and strong jaw. His warm hazel eyes kindled in the soft lighting. It was a grave injustice that he had inherited those long dark eyelashes from his mother. Talk about unfair advantages.

Of course, it was not just that James was handsome; Sirius could have dealt with his feelings if it was just about looks. But it was that face combined with that warm heart that made the situation impossible. Nor did it help that James made Sirius laugh until his stomach hurt. No one could ever

compete.

“Really, Sirius,” Peter sputtered. “You’re so childish sometimes.”

“I’m truly incorrigible.”

“A bad seed,” James added, tugging gently on a curl for the pleasure of watching it spring back into place. “Mother warned me about boys like you.”

“There are no boys like me,” Sirius retorted regretfully. “Trust me – I’ve looked.”

Peter cleared his throat, before mumbling something about ordering more drinks. Sirius lifted his head slightly to watch him scurry to the bar, side-stepping a goblin who was having a very somber conversation with an elderly wizard in a long green cloak.

“I knew that would work,” Sirius said, a satisfied grin spreading on his face as he settled his head back on his arms. “He always bolts when I mention fancying blokes.”

James paused, frowning as he contemplated this statement. “Are you serious?”

Sirius went to speak – usually his friends were careful to avoid saying things like that and risking the overuse of the tired pun. James quickly caught himself.

“Don’t say it or I’ll pull your hair,” he warned, a playful glint in his eyes.

Sounds good to me, Sirius thought but refrained from saying. Even with James, it was safer not to flirt so directly. His friends had been surprisingly accepting when he had come out, but there was no need to push the boundaries – even just as a joke.

Focused on glaring after Peter, James had tragically forgotten all about Sirius’ hair. Maybe he should just turn into Padfoot and whine until James noticed him. But it was clear that James was too comfortably perched on his high horse to be easily distracted.

“Relax, Prongs,” he soothed. “I like making him uncomfortable.”

“He shouldn’t be uncomfortable,” James said sternly. “I’ll have a word with him.”

Before Sirius could respond, the pressure in the room shifted as bar door swung open. Lily Evans strode in and James immediately sprang to his feet, rushing over to greet her. Every inch the gentleman Euphemia Potter had raised.

Like Peter, Lily always dressed smartly for her job at the Ministry. Her conservative clothes couldn’t hide her striking features; that vivid red hair and those bright green eyes. Sirius had to grudgingly admit she was a beautiful young woman. He watched glumly as James leaned in to kiss her briefly before leading her back to their table.

“Sirius,” she said with a nod of acknowledgement.

She had stopped referring to him by his surname as soon as she learned about his experiences with his horrible family. She was a thoughtful type of person, even though she clearly considered Sirius a miscreant and all-round terrible influence on her boyfriend. Sirius was magnanimous enough to concede that it was an accurate assessment overall.

Lily and Sirius shared an unspoken understanding to tolerate each other, sparing James a potentially uncomfortable position. It was not that they disliked each other; they were just too different to find common ground. Lily was a rule-abider who staunchly believed in quaint ideas like justice – a foreign concept in the Noble House of Black. Sirius hated to be constrained and was most comfortable operating in shades of grey. James was the bridge between them – a perfect balance of impulsiveness and order.

“Lily,” Sirius responded, forcing a half-hearted smile.

James sat back down next to Sirius, gesturing for him to move further around the booth to make room for Lily. Sirius was pleased to have him back, although James continued to glare at Peter as he progressed in the bar queue.

Lily peered at James curiously. “Why do you look like you’re planning on murdering Peter?”

“He’s being homophobic.”

Lily frowned, narrowing her eyes. “That’s very disappointing to hear.”

James had never quite mastered this type of severe look during his time as Head Boy. In contrast, it came incredibly naturally to Lily. Together, they turned their disapproving looks on Wormtail.

“James is going to teach him about tolerance,” Sirius said sarcastically.

“Good,” Lily said with an approving smile at her boyfriend, prompting James to puff out his chest. “And while he does that, Sirius is going to get smashed,” Sirius added in the same tone of voice. “A very mature response,” she sniffed. “Now I promised James that I wouldn’t have a go at you, Sirius. But honestly what were you thinking launching an unauthorised raid?”

“Wasn’t thinking, really,” he shrugged.

“That’s not true,” James interjected, tearing his eyes away from Peter to defend Sirius. “You saw an opportunity to break up a smuggling ring. Who cares about bureaucracy? Our jobs are about keeping people safe”

“Your job is about enforcing the law, not taking it into your own hands,” Lily frowned, a line forming in the centre of her forehead.

Sirius let their debate to wash over him, not in the mood to discuss politics and the philosophy of law enforcement. James was a master at explaining his actions for him – Sirius usually only made matters worse when he attempted to contribute.

Fortunately, Peter arrived with a round of drinks, presenting an extra shot to Sirius as an apology for scolding him. As far as Sirius was concerned, Peter could scold him all night if he kept the drinks flowing.

James, Lily and Peter chattered merrily, trading updates on their jobs and stories about encounters with their old classmates. It was a relief when Moony finally arrived. They always avoided talking about the Ministry when he was around. Since graduating, Remus had bounced between different jobs, both wizarding and Muggle. No matter how hard he worked, his mysterious monthly illnesses always complicated matters.

Remus’ experience reinforced Sirius’ belief that justice was not the natural state of the world. Remus was one of the most intelligent and diligent people Sirius knew. In a just world, he would be soaring to the top of a demanding profession instead of just surviving.

“Save me, Moony,” Sirius said, reaching out with both hands as Remus shrugged off his threadbare coat. “They want me to talk about work on a Friday night.”

“How inhumane,” Remus said, shaking his head with a wry smile.

Remus remained softly spoken and bookish, just as he had been at Hogwarts, but over the past couple of years he had grown more comfortable in his skin. He no longer stooped to speak to them, nor did he hide the scratches the wolf left on his face. They made him look striking. Danger wrapped in a fuzzy cardigan.

James and Sirius eagerly tripped over one another to recount their raid and the ensuing probation, and even Lily could not help but laugh at their antics. Sirius felt his mood lifting; there was nothing he enjoyed more than being surrounded by his friends. He leaned heavily against James, feeling pleasantly drunk.

When his gaze dipped, he noticed that James and Lily were holding hands under the table. Although it was sweet, his stomach twisted at the sight. A reminder that nothing ever stayed the same. Sirius was under no illusions. James and Lily had a future together. Soon enough, James would step forward into that future, leaving Sirius behind.

Notes:

I hope you enjoyed Chapter One. Comments and kudos always appreciated.

Chapter 2 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/151213768>): **Trouble with families**

Summary:

“Two more years,” Sirius said softly, staring at their joined hands. “Then I’ll be seventeen and I can leave forever.

“We can get a flat together,” James said suddenly. “After school.”

“Really?” Sirius asked, surprised. “You’d want to live with me?”

“Of course,” James grinned. “I live with you now and it’s bloody brilliant.”

A tentative but genuine smile grew on Sirius' face. “I wouldn’t have to hide my records.”

“You had better not hide them,” James teased. “They’re like half the reason I’m friends with you.”

Notes:

Each chapter from this point will start with a flashback, indicated by the bold location and date. The rest of the chapter is all present timeline - hope that's not too confusing.

TW: Implied physical and emotional child abuse courtesy of the Great and Noble House of Black.

Soundtrack: "Blindsided" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/4mOqHhznOkkYrhfgsstkZ?si=be0ea653cdb34fc8>) by Bon Iver.

“This was the trouble with families. Like invidious doctors, they knew just where it hurt.”

- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

Kings Cross Station, London – 1974

Platform 9¾ was chaotic, filled with Hogwarts students eagerly reuniting after the summer break. James scanned the crowd while his parents took turns embracing him.

“I put the mandrake leaves in your trunk,” Fleamont whispered while giving him one of his signature bear hugs. “I’m choosing to believe you boys are just interested in learning more about medicinal potions.”

“Thanks, dad,” James replied, smiling innocently.

Monty delighted in the Marauders and the havoc they wreaked at Hogwarts. Of course, they only ever told him about their milder exploits. He was particularly fond of the anecdote about the time they enchanted the coats of armour in the castle to belt out Queen songs. Although not generally a fan of Muggle music, Monty had a soft spot for Queen after Sirius introduced him to their tracks. Now he was even considering buying a record player.

Euphemia stepped forward, insisting on another hug from James before he headed back to school. He was still adjusting to being taller than his petite mother. After his growth spurt, he resembled his tall, broad father even more closely, although his eyes remained distinctly hers. He had always loathed his long eyelashes, but Sirius insisted they were a vital part of the “James Potter Appeal.” He only wished he had inherited his mother’s neat brown hair.

“Tell Siri that he should spend Christmas break with us this year if he can,” Effie said as she released him.

James felt his stomach twist. It had been weeks since he had last heard from Sirius, a worrisome change from their usual routine of constantly owling each other and scheming to get Sirius out of Grimmauld Place and into Potter Manor as quickly as possible.

James had received a hastily written note delivered by an owl that he recognised as belonging to Sirius’ brother, Regulus. It was strange for Sirius to use a family owl instead of Bowie – the beloved and

comically awkward owl the Marauders had chosen for him together.

Dear James,

I'm fine, but the Great and Nobles are being an even bigger nightmare than usual. They'll be intercepting my mail from now on, so probably best not to write. Unless you want to share a heartfelt message with Walburga.

Apparently, I need some serious re-education this summer. I doubt I'll be able to escape for a visit before we head back to school. (Assuming they let me go back.)

At least I've had plenty of time to read up on our furry little project for this year.

Tell your parents I said "hi" - Moons and Pete too when you see them. Try not to have too much fun without me.

S.B.

Every time James re-read the note, he found something new to worry about. The handwriting was shaky, and the last sentence was almost illegible. A small smudge marred the page - and James had the horrible feeling that it was a tear stain. His parents had exchanged worried glances when he insisted they read it. Although they tried to be reassuring, he could sense their concern.

During his first holiday home after starting at Hogwarts, James had raved about his new best friend, Sirius Black. Effie and Monty had not known what to make of this information. Orion and Walburga Black were the antithesis of everything they believed in. Even the fact that Sirius was a Gryffindor had shocked them. But their scepticism vanished five minutes into meeting Sirius when he came to Potter Manor for the first time.

James had listened to his parents talking about Sirius through their bedroom door after he left.

"I just can't believe that such a sweet boy came from Walburga Black," Effie had said.

"Or that any son of Orion would have a sense of humour," Monty added.

James felt a swell of pride that Sirius had won over his parents so easily - a vindication of his immaculate taste in friends. That feeling had never truly faded over the years.

After the letter arrived from Sirius, James had tried to reason with his parents.

"We have to go get him," James insisted, folding and refolding the letter in his hands.

Effie and Monty exchanged one of their telepathic glances.

"It's not that simple, Jamie," his father finally replied. "They're his family."

"They're bad people," James said stubbornly. "He doesn't belong with them."

Monty shook his head, his expression grim. "The Ministry won't see it that way."

"Sod the Ministry," James spat.

"James," Effie scolded rather half-heartedly.

Frustrated, James stomped out of the kitchen, throwing his parting words over his shoulder. "He should be here with us and you know it."

It was a miserable summer after that. James spent his days brooding over half-baked plans for a prison break. He was angry at his parents for their inaction, and frustrated with Peter and Remus for not taking the situation seriously enough.

Mostly, he was angry with himself for being just as useless to Sirius as the rest. If their roles were reversed, Sirius would have come for him. James knew it.

At the train station, the Potter family gave up any pretence they were doing anything other than waiting for Sirius. He was nowhere to be seen. When the Hogwarts Express whistled insistently, James began to panic. "What if they don't let him come back?"

"He's going back to Hogwarts," Monty said firmly. "Not even the Blacks can deny their son access to an education. I will go there myself to remind them of that if I have to."

James bit back a sharp comment about his father's refusal to do just that over summer, reluctantly boarding the train. Remus and Peter were similarly concerned, staring fixedly at the platform from their usual compartment. It was unusually quiet.

“He’s cutting it awfully fine,” Pete said, peering nervously at his watch. Remus chewed on his nail, staring out the window.

“He’ll be here,” James insisted with more confidence than he felt.

By the time Sirius finally entered the compartment, the train was already moving. James noticed his posture was stiff, his movements lacking his usual fluid grace.

“*Sirius!*” James cried, throwing himself at Sirius, who winced under his tight grip. James retracted his arms, his heart sinking as he realised his best friend was injured.

“Are you alright?” James asked urgently

“Course,” Sirius responded flatly, pulling away and taking his usual window seat opposite James. Sirius watched the passing scenery, leaning his head against the window. It was a tense journey. Instead of competing with Sirius over who could tell the loudest story, James searched his face for clues about what happened in that icy house with his horrible parents.

Remus and Peter went to visit the girls – or more likely to give James and Sirius a moment alone. After they left, James sat forward until his knees were interlocked with Sirius. “What happened?” he demanded.

When Sirius stared at him vacantly, James pressed a hand to his knee. Not just to centre his friend, but also to reassure himself that Sirius was really sitting there.

“It was fine,” Sirius said.

“Fine?” James asked incredulously.

Sirius winced, shaking his head. “It was normal.”

“You clearly have a pretty loose definition of normal.”

“Yeah, well, I sort of have to,” Sirius said, breathing on the glass and drawing an idle circle with his finger. “By my parents’ standard it *was* normal.”

“You’re hurt,” James said stubbornly. “What did they do to you?”

Sirius huffed in exasperation. “What do you want me to say, James? My parents fucking hate me. There’s nothing either of us can do to stop them from making those feelings known.”

James recoiled at the sudden show of aggression. His heart started hammering as his imagination ran wild about what could have happened to Sirius.

“You can tell someone. Tell Dumbledore - ”

“My family will call me a liar,” Sirius retorted. “Or they’ll say that I’m crazy and lock me up. Most likely, they’d just kill me to shut me up.”

James shook his head stubbornly. “There has to be something that we can do - ”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sirius snapped, his eyes narrow and cold. “So maybe you should shut up for once.”

James was still searching for a response when their friends returned with Chocolate Frogs and gossip from the other compartments. James did not get a chance to corner Sirius before he disappeared – probably to visit the Hospital Wing. Usually, Sirius let James fix his injuries; Effie had taught him the basics of healing as a former nurse.

James scribbled a note to his parents to let them know that Sirius had arrived at Hogwarts. He did not tell them that Sirius had missed the feast.

James climbed into bed with a book on Quidditch strategy, leaving his bed curtains open a crack. It was close to midnight when Sirius returned, exchanging quiet words with Remus as he crept towards his bed. James listened to Sirius change into his pyjamas, but refused to be caught looking at him after his friend's sharp words on the train. The floor creaked with tentative footsteps. James pretended to be engrossed in his book.

Sirius stood next to his bed with his eyes downcast, rubbing the back of his neck. Noticing the remorse written over his posture, James slid over to make room for him. He murmured a quick silencing charm as Sirius climbed into his bed and closed the bed curtains.

They stared up at the canopy as they lay side by side. It was tighter fit than usual; both had grown over summer. Despite the tense silence, James felt like he could breathe again having Sirius so close to

him.

“Listen,” Sirius explained in a rush. “I know I was a prick before and I’m really sor - ”

“Don’t be,” James interrupted. “You were right. I don’t know what it’s like for you.”

There was a beat of silence.

“I’m glad you don’t,” Sirius said. “I would never want you to be like me.”

Sirius kept staring at the ceiling while James turned over to look at him. He looked tired, but at least he was safe – he was *here*. That was what mattered. James fiddled with a lock of Sirius’ hair, spread over his pillow. Sirius flashed him a slight smile, always amused that James was so fascinated with his hair. No one else was allowed to touch it.

“Being like you wouldn’t be so bad,” James said softly.

Sirius snorted. “That’s a minority opinion.”

James wanted to tell him that no one else mattered – no one knew Sirius the way he did. Even considering the possibility that Sirius may not return to Hogwarts had tipped the world on its axis. James would never cope without him.

“I was really worried about you, Siri. We all were.”

Sirius closed his eyes, as if pained by the words. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” James said quickly. He settled into his position on his side; it was easier to stare at Sirius this way. “I just – I really hate your parents.”

“Yeah,” he said wanly. “Me too.”

This time, Sirius turned over to face him. His grey eyes were soft in the low light. Many of the girls at Hogwarts were obsessed with Sirius. Dorcas Meadows had once described him as “cold and perfect looking.” James had been offended; nothing about Sirius was cold. He was passionate and warm - just careful about who he allowed to see behind his mask.

Carefully, James reached out towards the hand that Sirius had planted on the mattress between them and threaded their fingers together.

“Two more years,” Sirius said softly, staring at their joined hands. “Then I’ll be seventeen and I can leave forever.”

James nodded supportively, even though that sounded like a long time to withstand the Great and Noble House of Black. Sirius looked the part, with his sharp jaw and cheekbones and the way he looked elegant even in one James’ ratty Quidditch t-shirts. But, he did not belong in those draughty hallways at Grimmauld Place; he belonged with James.

“We can get a flat together,” James said suddenly. “After school.”

“Really?” Sirius asked, surprised. “You’d want to live with me?”

“Of course,” James grinned. “I live with you now and it’s bloody brilliant.”

A tentative but genuine smile grew on Sirius’ face. “I wouldn’t have to hide my records.”

“You had better not hide them,” James teased. “They’re like half the reason I’m friends with you.”

Sirius laughed and James basked in the sound. Two more years. Then Sirius could stay with the Potters while they finished school. James knew his parents would insist on it. When they moved into their flat, James would let Sirius play music as loud and as often as he liked.

Sirius would be happy. James would make sure of it.

“Are you sleeping here?” James asked, as exhaustion made his eyes droop.

Sirius bit his lip. “Do you mind?”

James absolutely did not mind. He loved their impromptu sleepovers, waking up to find Sirius hogging the covers, unguarded and sleep rumped. It was reassuring to open his eyes and find Sirius in touching distance. Already sleep was claiming both of them.

He did not dignify the question with a response, simply squeezing his hand. “Night, Siri.”

Sirius mumbled incoherently in response. But James thought he heard his name before he fell asleep.

Sirius woke up at 9am with a pounding headache. He lifted his head blearily and groaned at the sight of James Potter with wet hair and fogged glasses.

Sirius buried his head back into his pillow. "What could you possibly want right now, Prongs?"

"Oh dear," James mocked. "Is my Pads feeling a bit worse for wear?"

Sirius groaned, vaguely recalling that James had carried him home and tucked him into bed the night before while he suggested one more drink. "Death would be a welcome release."

James chuckled. "Well, I draw the line at killing you, but I did get you coffee. And croissants from that bakery you like."

Sirius lifted his head again, before deciding it was criminal how healthy and functional James looked. No doubt he had already gone jogging. While James was pathological about his desire to seize the day, Sirius just wanted to seize his comforter and go back to sleep. Unfortunately, James was already stripping it away from him and dragging him out of bed.

Sirius reached for his bathrobe before remembering it was currently enchanted and fighting with James' robe in the living room. For weeks their clothes had wrestled on the ground and duelled with invisible swords, but there was no clear victor. Not a fan of these sorts of hijinks, Lily had suggested that perhaps they could just call it a draw. She laughed at the matching looks of horror on their faces.

James practically skipped towards the kitchen, delighted he had lured Sirius into the waking world. Both Sirius and Lily liked to sleep in on the weekends, so James often found himself at a loose end. Because he was James – and he was ridiculous – he usually dedicated the time to thinking up excuses to get them out of bed. On good days, he resorted to bribing them with sweet treats and caffeine.

Poor Lily was already slouched at the dining table, fully dressed in a smart skirt and stockings.

"Morning," she said weakly, stirring honey into her tea. "You look the way I feel."

After dropping down onto the seat next to her, Sirius buried his head in his arms. James had dumped a mountain of pastries on a large serving platter – probably gifted to them by Effie. Almost everything in the spacious flat was a gift from the Potters, although Sirius and James had put their own personal touches on the space. Sirius liked the way his record player looked next to James' broom stand. Photos of their friends and James' families had pride of place on the bookshelf.

"Lily," Sirius groaned. "What would I have to do to make you feed me pastries while stroking my hair and telling me I'm a good boy?"

Lily tilted her head as if considering her fee. "You would have to go to brunch with my sister and her dreadful boyfriend in my place."

Sirius scoffed. "Forget it – I have too many issues with my own family to volunteer for other people's drama."

"Fair," Lily conceded.

James placed a steaming mug of black coffee in front of Sirius before taking a seat opposite them. He beamed as Sirius took a long, scolding sip and braced himself for a hopelessly sentimental comment.

"Here we go," Sirius murmured, balancing his chin on his hand and regarding James fondly.

"What?" Lily asked, glancing up from the whirlpool she had mindlessly stirred into her tea.

"Jamie is about to say something that will make us vomit."

James grinned, tearing into a croissant with gusto. "I'm just happy to see my two favourite people awake before midday."

"Your obsession with getting up early is sociopathic," Sirius groaned, taking another restorative sip of coffee.

"I have to agree with Sirius on this one, darling," Lily added. She reached for a danish, making James smile even wider. A true mother hen.

"You should know I tried to give you both hangover cures," James commented. "Pads was already dead to the world by the time I tucked him in. Lily, you refused to drink the potion out of Muggle solidarity. You kept going on and on about the Muggle hangover cures you knew and asking me to bring you a raw egg."

Muggles were truly brilliant, Sirius mused as the coffee worked its magic. When James slid the

pastry plate towards him, Sirius picked out a pain au chocolat, although he was not sure he would be able to keep it down. Even so, it made James happy to see him take a pastry from the generous pile.

James leaned back in his chair, sipping a coffee that was unforgivably milky and sweet. “What time is your brunch, Lils?”

“We’re meeting at 10am,” Lily said before glancing at the clock on the wall. “I should probably head over there soon.”

James reached for another croissant. Lily’s family had requested that he sit out from gatherings after his disastrous first meeting with her sister, Petunia, and her boyfriend, Vernon. Apparently, it had ended with Lily in tears and James threatening to hex Vernon. Her parents had decided that it would be better for James to keep his distance for now.

Sirius could not understand it; James Potter was every parent’s dream. But Lily, as the family peacemaker, held her tongue at the time.

“I can always talk to my parents,” she offered hesitantly. “I think they were just trying to placate Petunia.”

James waved an easy hand. “Don’t worry about it. Pads and I have plans today anyway.”

Sirius looked up in alarm. “Oh Godric, do we?”

“Afternoon tea with my parents, Pads,” James reassured him. “My mum has owled us about it every day this week. Apparently, my dad is plotting something.”

Sirius brightened. “This is why Monty is my hero.”

“Because he’s a massive drama queen just like you?”

“Exactly,” Sirius grinned.

James insisted that Lily take some of the pastries to her family brunch. Sirius sniffed at the mounting evidence that the Evans family was insane for snubbing him.

Finally, he felt strong enough to make himself another coffee, fiddling with his complicated espresso machine while James settled on the couch. When Sirius padded back into the living room, James patted the seat next to him – as if there was anywhere else where Sirius would consider sitting.

James stroked Sirius’ hair back from his forehead as he settled against him, balancing his coffee on his knees.

“Prongs?” Sirius asked innocently, melting into the sensation of those clever fingers in his hair.

“Padfoot,” James responded, a note of teasing in his voice.

“Will *you* feed me pastries and call me a good boy?”

Sirius loved making James laugh; it was the sort of shameless belly laugh that made other people laugh as well. He hid his smile in his mug.

“Merlin the things you convince me to do,” James cursed, before summoning over an almond croissant.

Perhaps 9am was not so bad after all, Sirius mused as he opened his mouth to let James feed him.

Sirius and James arrived outside the boundaries of the majestic gates that marked the entrance to Potter Manor.

It was important to show respect for these ancient ancestral houses; the wards needed a chance to recognise them. James felt a familiar tingle as they crossed over the boundary. This place and his magic recognised each other – a link between blood and soil that stretched through generations. This would always be home for James – and he hoped Sirius felt the same way.

“My boys,” Euphemia enthused as she threw open the imposing front door before they could knock. “I had almost forgotten what you looked like.”

She pulled James into a tight hug. She was dressed casually, but always managed to make her gardening gear look like a fashion statement. Like Sirius, she was effortlessly stylish. James took after Monty in this regard too. Left unsupervised, he would have worn his old Puddlemere United t-shirt every

day.

“Mum,” James complained as she released him from her grip. “We were here a few weeks ago.”

“That was hardly an hour,” she said dismissively, rounding on Sirius to give him an equally suffocating hug. “I didn’t even get to feed you.”

“And that is a terrible injustice,” Sirius said, throwing an arm around Effie with a charming grin. “One that must be rectified immediately.”

She laughed indulgently as she showed them inside. “I told Melly you were coming, so she’s prepared all your favourites.”

“Treacle tart?” James asked hopefully, his mouth watering in anticipation.

“Do you really think I’d invite you to afternoon tea and not provide treacle tart, James? What kind of mother do you think I am?”

James smiled winningly at her. “The absolute best mother.”

“That’s right,” she said primly. “Now I want to hear all your news, but I’m under strict instructions to send you both straight to Monty. He’s in the coach house.”

James and Sirius obediently walked through the kitchen and out towards the coach house. One of James’ ancestors had collected thestrals, which he used to pull his carriage. Although this was long before thestrals were categorised as an XXXX beast, they had always been considered an ill omen. Monty considered it a point of family pride that his great-, great-, great-grandfather had been unconcerned with such superstitions.

As they entered the coach house, James grimaced at the sound of the wizarding wireless playing at full volume. He did not know whether to thank or curse Moony and Padfoot for opening his ears to how woeful wizarding music was.

“Dad?” James called as they rounded the corner.

Monty had cleared out the usually chaotic space – a workshop far enough away from the house that Effie would allow him to brew dangerous or toxic potions. A misshapen object hidden under a throw-sheet dominated the freshly cleared space. Sirius and James exchanged looks of confusion.

“James!” Monty exclaimed, appearing from behind them. “Sirius! You’re just in time.”

Monty was dressed in grubby overalls and his hair was in disarray. A few sparse grey hairs had appeared in recent years, but it was still mostly as dark and messy as James’ own. Regarding his father was like seeing a future image of himself. He felt it could have been a lot worse.

“In time for what?” James pressed. “What’s this big surprise?”

“James,” Sirius scolded. “Trust the process.”

“Thank you, Siri,” Monty said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Now as you know, I’ve been making a bit of a nuisance of myself at the Ministry.”

That was an understatement. As a renowned potions master and the patriarch of one of the oldest Pureblood families in Britain, Monty sat on several highly influential Ministry committees. Unlike most of his peers, Monty was horrified by the increasingly repressive and draconian Ministry policies – as he never shied away from telling the Minister for Magic.

“A nuisance? You?” James mocked.

“Quite,” Monty responded cheerfully, not at all offended. “Now I was having lunch with young Arthur Weasley the other day.”

James glanced at Sirius to gauge his reaction. Arthur was a distant relative - his mother, Cedrella Black, had been disowned for marrying “blood-traitor” Septimus Weasley. Although Arthur was older, Sirius and James had met him and his wife, Molly, through the Order of the Phoenix. James often suggested that Sirius connect with Arthur to build some positive family ties, beyond his cousin, Andromeda.

Unfortunately, Molly was unreasonably suspicious of Sirius – a fact that constantly irked James even though Sirius took it in stride. Sirius had cut ties with his family at sixteen; what more did he need to do to prove his loyalty?

“He gave me a tour of the Department of Muggle Artefacts,” Monty continued. “And boys, the

moment I saw it, I knew I had to take it home.”

Monty hurried to the centre of the room and whipped off the drop sheet with a flourish, revealing a gleaming chrome motorcycle. James glanced at Sirius, admiring the look of awe on his face. While James generally preferred brooms, Sirius had covered his bedroom walls with motorcycle posters.

“Holy shit, Monty,” Sirius breathed.

Monty barked a loud laugh. “That was exactly what I hoped you’d say.”

“Can I touch it?”

“Be my guest,” Monty beamed, before standing alongside his son. Together, they watched as Sirius reverently approached the motorcycle.

“Hello gorgeous,” Sirius murmured, gently pressing his hands to the handlebars.

James could tell that they had lost him for the moment, so he turned back to his father. “Why was it confiscated, Dad?”

“Some issue with the engorgement charm. A bit of an overreach to repossess it, but they’re cracking down on all enchanted objects. Afraid the Death Eaters will use them to attack Muggles. Luckily, I have a friend in the permit office.”

Sirius whipped his head up, still lovingly stroking the bike. “What are you going to do with it?”

“Well,” Monty said, clearly very pleased with himself. “She needs some work; she’s not even running at this point. But Arthur was going on and on about his new flying car, so I thought - ”

“Yes,” Sirius interrupted, almost bouncing on the spot with excitement. “You absolutely have to make it fly. And please, *please* can I help you?”

His enthusiasm was infectious. An image of Sirius dressed in leather while straddling a flying motorcycle appeared in James' mind. The thought was a little too interesting, and he forced himself to put it away.

“Well, actually,” Monty said, rubbing his hands together. “I was thinking this could be an early birthday present, Siri. After all, twenty-one is an important milestone.”

Sirius gaped at him, frozen in shock. James strolled over to Sirius, waving a hand in front of his face.

“I think you broke him, Dad,” James commented. “Are you still in there, Pads?”

Sirius glanced between Monty and James, as if trying to figure out the joke. James felt a pang in his chest as he realised Sirius assumed it was a prank.

“F-for me?”

“Of course, it’s for you,” Monty said kindly. “You’ve wanted one since you were a boy.”

Sirius had not yet closed his mouth. “I – uh – I really don’t know...I don’t know what to say.”

“You could start by promising to let me ride it,” James demanded cheerfully.

An odd expression flickered across Sirius’ face – too fast for James to decipher. Sirius could not quite meet Monty’s eyes, overwhelmed by his gesture.

“I – thank you, Monty,” he stuttered. “This is just really. Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Monty said, before turning to his son. “But before you start planning your joyrides, we need to get it back up and running.”

The three of them chatted about their plans to fix up the motorcycle. Sirius kept stealing little glances at it, as if worried it might disappear.

Monty sent them back inside to get started on afternoon tea while he cleaned up. James led Sirius back inside, but as they filed into the entranceway, Sirius suddenly tugged on his wrist. Noticing his worried expression, James stepped closer to him.

“What is it, Pads?” he asked, concerned.

“I, uh, I – I just wanted to make sure you don’t mind. About the bike.”

“Why would I mind?” James asked, confused.

“It’s just, I mean, he’s *your* father. And, this is just, it’s a lot. So, I want to make sure...”

Suddenly, the anxious lines of his friend’s shoulders made sense. Sirius was afraid that James would resent him, as if he had not grown up in a house brimming with loving gestures just like this one. That was the difference between them; Sirius always assumed love was conditional.

James pressed his hands to Sirius' shoulders, smoothing them down until his posture loosened. James left his hands on his shoulders as he spoke gently.

"Siri," James said. "Please tell me you're not actually worried about this?"

Sirius looked down, tugging at one of the platinum rings on his fingers. "I'd understand if you were upset."

As he spoke, James started tracing a comforting line along his sharp collarbone. Sirius looked up to meet his gaze, his eyes clouded with worry.

"Padfoot. Dad doing something nice for you doesn't take anything away from me. There is plenty of parental love to go around.

"As long as you're sure," he said, biting his lip. "I've just never gotten a present like this before and ..."

James could not help but wrap his arms around his friend. He ran his hand down his back, smiling when Sirius relaxed into his embrace.

"I know. But just to clear things up, I *like* that my parents love you so much. And I like seeing you happy. You haven't done anything wrong."

James felt no desire to move, standing the quiet entrance hall with Sirius in his arms. Somewhere in this house was a treacle tart with his name on it, but for now James was content to breathe in the scent of Sirius' expensive shampoo, which Sirius insisted was a vital necessity for curly hair.

In his arms, Sirius was gearing up to speak. James could feel his breath on his neck.

"I know we never really talk about it," Sirius said haltingly. "But you know that meeting you saved my life, right?"

Overwhelmed, James shook his head. "Pads - "

Sirius pulled back to regard him, eyes wide and earnest. "No, it did. *You* did. I owe you everything. You and your parents."

Sometimes when they shared this kind of private look, it seemed like they were alone in the world. Sirius' grey eyes shone with emotion, although his lips were pressed into a thin line as if to stop him from saying too much. James felt a strange impulse to trace a thumb along that bottom lip until his face relaxed. Anything to convince Sirius he deserved all the affection he could handle.

"You don't owe me anything, Pads," James reassured him. "That's not how family works."

James was relieved when Sirius nodded silently. He was always so unpredictable; James half expected him to clam up at the sentiment.

James pressed a loose lock of hair behind Sirius' ear, receiving a crooked little grin in response. James could not help but trace a finger down the soft skin behind his ear. It seemed ridiculous that he had never seen that little patch of skin – that there will still parts of Sirius that were a mystery to him. James was just so *fond* of him – it was overwhelming.

"Boys," Effie called.

James had not realised that his mother was watching their embrace and he startled at the sound of her voice. He reluctantly released Sirius.

"Melly is very insistent that we get started on the food, now," Effie continued, a note of regret in her voice.

"Sounds great, Mum," James responded.

James pressed a hand to the centre of his friend's back, gently steering him forward towards the dining room. Effie regarded them closely from her vantage point leaning against the doorframe. When they passed, she squeezed James' hand. He ducked his head; clearly, she had heard every word of their private moment.

James could not find it in him to mind when she smiled at him so approvingly.

Chapter 3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/151411924>): **A lacerating injury**

Summary:

“Weird vibe tonight, babe,” Marlene commented.

“Picked up on that did you?” Sirius asked sarcastically.

“It was subtle but I’m very observant.”

Sirius nodded towards Monty and James. “Do you think they’ll tell me when they finish planning out my life?”

“Love makes people do crazy things.”

Sirius felt a flash of irritation that she was not automatically on his side.

“Monty isn’t my dad. James is definitely not my brother.”

“No. I wouldn’t characterise James Potter’s feelings towards you as brotherly.”

Notes:

Thank you for your feedback and kudos for the last couple of chapters! I decided to post this chapter a little early because I was unusually organised - I hope you enjoy it.

Like last time, we're kicking off with a flashback before returning to the main timeline.

TW: Mentions of stalking, implied child abuse.

Soundtrack: "["happiness"](https://open.spotify.com/track/0EFdoyXHPRHhEmsOIQhIXO?si=77e3c35126204054) (https://open.spotify.com/track/0EFdoyXHPRHhEmsOIQhIXO?si=77e3c35126204054) by Taylor Swift.

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_3_endnotes\)](#)..)

“Desiring another person is perhaps the most risky endeavour of all. As soon as you want somebody—really want him—it is as though you have taken a surgical needle and sutured your happiness to the skin of that person, so that any separation will now cause a lacerating injury.”

- Elizabeth Gilbert, *Committed: A Love Story*

Hogwarts School, Scotland – 1978

Sirius crossed the threshold of library, peering around the dim room until he spotted long, red hair gleaming in the midday sun. Judging by the piles of dusty books surrounding her, Lily was pulling a mammoth study session in anticipation of their N.E.W.T. exams.

Sirius had never liked the smell of old books; they always transported him back to the library at Grimmauld Place. Nonetheless, this entire situation had gone on far too long. He had left James lying face-down on his bed in the dorms, moaning about yet another humiliating interaction with Lily Evans. Frankly, Sirius was sick of hearing about it.

Sirius paused to examine Lily where she sat next to the window in a particularly quiet corner of the library. Given that James was obsessed with her, Sirius was aware that she was a beautiful young woman. She was also brilliant and determined, with a sizable chip on her shoulder. She had long ago dismissed Sirius as a privileged dilettante.

Nonetheless, Sirius had noticed a softening in her bearing recently. Her eyes often lingered on James when he came to breakfast in his Quidditch kit. Sometimes she even let him walk her to class. She was increasingly permissive when it came to the Marauder’s pranks, laughing instead of threatening them

with detention. She had even started greeting Sirius in the hallways.

She clearly wanted to give in to James. All she needed was a shove.

Hidden by the shelves, Sirius considered his motives. He wanted James to be happy. He wanted that more than anything. So, what if James was happy with someone other than Sirius? Jealousy was foolish. James would always be his best friend. It was greedy to want more from him than friendship. To want all of him – all his time, his attention, his affection. Everything he could get.

Sirius owed James so much. Helping him with Lily was the very least that he could do. Steeling himself, Sirius strode over to her desk and sat down opposite her.

Lily was clearly surprised to see Sirius Black in the library. Despite his passion for magic, Sirius had little interest in their schoolwork. He preferred to follow his own interests. He only deigned to study for their upcoming leaving exams because Moony insisted on it.

“I thought you turned into ash if you entered the library,” Lily commented, focusing on her parchment.

“You’re forgetting about my great love for the Restricted Section.”

“Oh God,” she winced. “Can you please not add to my study stress by doing some ridiculous prank this week?”

Sirius lifted his chin defiantly. “Our pranks are fantastic and you know it,” he retorted.

“Your pranks are juvenile and sometimes *moderately* amusing.”

“You have no appreciation for artistry,” Sirius complained.

“And you have no appreciation for the rules of the library,” she said, gesturing for him to lower his voice.

“That is not the scathing insult you think it is,” he commented, before gesturing to her book. “What are you reading anyway?”

She lifted her book so he could read the title: *Advanced Potions*.

“You know who’s great at Potions?” Sirius said with a winning grin. “Fleamont Potter. Easy access to Potions expertise is just one of the many benefits of dating James.”

Lily heaved a long-suffering sigh, placing her quill carefully in her ink bottle. “Please tell me you’re not here to nag me about James Potter.”

“James is the only thing we have in common,” Sirius commented, raising an eyebrow. “Why else would I be here?”

“I would not exactly describe Potter as something we have in common.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about,” he said, leaning his elbows on the desk with a bored expression on his face. “You’re making a huge mistake.”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion, Black,” she retorted, turning her attention back to the thick tome on the desk before her.

Sirius scrutinised her as she tried to ignore his presence. “When I see someone doing something monumentally stupid, I feel duty-bound to intervene.”

She settled a glare on him. “Did Potter put you up to this?”

“No,” Sirius replied matter-of-factly. “And if you tell him I talked to you about it, I’ll deny it.”

Lily’s cold demeanour thawed slightly. Sirius could tell she was curious.

“Fine,” she said, sitting back in her chair with her arms crossed. “You have five minutes.”

This is for James, Sirius reminded himself sternly. It felt strange to give away this piece of himself to Lily. Nonetheless, he swallowed down his misgivings and met her green, guileless eyes.

“I know you heard that I ran away from home,” he said. “My parents wanted me to pledge myself to You-Know-Who, but we all knew I would never agree to it. That didn’t stop them from taking turns casting the Cruciatus Curse on me.”

Lily gasped. She settled a pitying look on him while he focused his attention on the bookshelf over her shoulder.

“I knew it was going to end that night, either way. Regulus got me out. I would probably be dead if he hadn’t.”

Regulus had not said a word to him since that night. Clearly, he considered it his final act a brother to save Sirius.

“I went to James. To the Potters. He sat with me all night. He told me everything was going to be okay and that I was safe now. He let me cry all over him. He and his parents asked me to stay for good after that.”

Sirius was grateful when Lily held herself back from touching his arm reassuringly. “Why are you telling me this, Sirius?”

He could not recall Lily using his first name before.

“I know James better than anyone,” he explained. “He is the best person I know; he’d do anything for the people he loves. He’s brilliant, he’s funny, he’s kind – and I know you’ve noticed how he looks. So, what exactly is the problem?”

Sirius waited for her to respond as she examined her hands. He had no doubt she would tell the truth; her inflexible ethical code would demand it after his candour about his family.

“I don’t think he’s serious about me,” she admitted, an unexpected note of vulnerability in her voice. “Not really. I’m just a challenge for him.”

“James isn’t like that,” Sirius retorted. “And if you think he is then maybe you should turn him down, once and for all. But trust me when I say it would be the biggest mistake you’ll ever make.”

Sirius stood up to leave, only making it a few steps before Lily called after him.

“Why are you trying to convince me to go out with him, anyway?” she asked. “You think I’m a stuck-up kill joy.”

“True,” Sirius responded playfully. “Luckily I’m not the one who has to date you.”

Amusement spread across her features and he felt a momentary hope that she might grow on him with time. “Are you sure about that? You and Potter are glued at the hip. I always assumed you were a package deal.”

“Also true,” Sirius conceded. “But I love James way more than I dislike you.”

The next day, she agreed to go on a date with James to Hogsmeade. Sirius helped James pick out his clothes and listened to him talk incessantly about their plans. On the big day, Sirius sat in an armchair in the common room, armed with a Muggle novel, and watched the pair exchange shy looks and soft smiles. When James glanced back at Sirius for reassurance before climbing through the portrait hole, he responded with a thumbs up and a confident wink.

Sirius dropped his smile as soon as the portrait hole closed, pressing a hand to his head to massage his temples. It was hard to swallow. When his eyes started heating, he closed them.

Sirius did not notice Remus until he was standing before him. His friend sat down carefully on the couch, a long and boring book resting on his lap. Even longer and less interesting than *Advanced Potions*. Sirius stared at the tome, avoiding Moony’s sympathetic expression.

“How long have you felt that way about him?” Remus asked gently.

Sirius let out a bitter laugh. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Pads. I really think you should just tell him that - ”

Sirius shook his head firmly. “Just drop it. Please.”

For a moment, Remus examined him carefully. Sirius felt the urge to lash out, only just holding himself back.

“Alright,” Remus said at last. “Consider it dropped.”

Sirius nodded with finality, picking up his novel from his lap. He pretended to read as the words blurred across the page. Watching James walk away with the love of his life was more painful than Sirius had expected.

“So long that I can’t even remember when it started,” Sirius said softly, not sparing a glance at Remus. “Probably since the beginning.”

Although Sirius could feel Remus examining him, he did not look up – or say a word – for the rest of the afternoon.

Unsurprisingly, James was late to meet Remus and Lily for lunch at the café in the Ministry.

Lily had invited Remus to attend a lecture by Newt Scamander, who was receiving an Order of Merlin for his services to magizoology. James had tried to coax Sirius into joining them, but he had thrown himself into their administrative tasks with an oddly nihilistic enthusiasm, barely reacting when James promised to bring him lunch. James sensed that Sirius was on the brink of a meltdown; he rarely went this long without instigating a bit of chaos.

James felt restless and constrained. Prongs was eager to stretch his legs, his frustration bubbling just under James' skin. At least James could take Padfoot to the park. It was endlessly amusing to watch Sirius in his oversized and shaggy dog form charm the local dog-walkers.

"So intelligent," a woman had gushed that weekend, marvelling as Padfoot picked up a book she dropped and nudged it into her lap, opening it to her bookmark.

"He has his moments," James had responded, earning a playful bark.

Lily and Remus chatted animatedly at a round table near the windows. Their enthusiasm was infectious as he pulled up a chair and asked them about the lecture.

"He was brilliant, unsurprisingly," Lily said, her green eyes sparkling. "Though I think he's a lot more comfortable with animals than he is humans."

"He signed my book," Remus added proudly. "He clocked me as a werewolf right away – the scars were probably a dead giveaway. He wanted to know all about my transformations."

James noticed a witch at the next table quickly gather her papers and move to the other side of the room after hearing Remus announcing his werewolf status. James hoped that Remus was too distracted to notice.

Lily and Remus continued dissecting the lecture. Both passionate about their academic pursuits, Lily had been friends with Remus long before she had even tolerated James. Though no slouch academically, James sometimes struggled to keep up with their discussions. For him, magic was not an intellectual exercise; it was a force he felt deep within. Lily would probably consider that an elitist Pureblood perspective.

Nonetheless, the first time James transformed into Prongs, it was not just a physical change – it felt like something he drew out from within himself, like he and Prongs had always been together. Sirius felt the same way about Padfoot.

The conversation between Lily and Remus washed over him as he peered curiously around the lunchroom. He and Sirius were usually out on missions during the working day. Ministry bureaucracy and daily timetables remained largely a mystery to him, despite working in the building for more than a year.

Suddenly, James' eyes landed on a familiar figure seated with two men, their backs turned. "Regulus is here," he announced abruptly, interrupting the conversation.

As an only child, James had always been intrigued by siblings. He was disappointed to discover Regulus and Sirius only resembled each other superficially. Regulus was haughty and disdainful, with prominent eyebrows and a pale face – much like Orion: aloof, cold, and impeccably dressed. Sirius, on the other hand, took after their stunning mother. Nonetheless, James strongly believed that his irrepressible charisma – something that was entirely his own – was his most striking feature.

"I wonder what brings Regulus to the Ministry," Remus mused.

"Nothing good," James said sombrely. "I'm glad Pads is too busy having a nervous breakdown to take a lunch break."

"Is he doing that weird thing where he becomes wildly enthusiastic about something completely inane, and you start worrying that he's lost his mind?" Remus chuckled.

"Pretty much," he grimaced, before his gaze turned once more to Sirius' brother.

James felt conflicted about Regulus. Without him Sirius might have died in that house. But every time Regulus had ignored Sirius at Hogwarts, his best friend had become uncharacteristically quiet. Not

to mention the fact Regulus was far too comfortable in his position as heir to be entirely trustworthy.

Regulus and the rest of his table stood up. James tensed when he recognised one of his companions. He had hoped never again to see those disconcerting eyes – one emerald, one hazel. Though generally even-tempered and quick to forgive, James loathed Nicholas Gaunt from the depths of his soul.

“Well, that is a development,” Remus commented, glancing at James.

“Why? Who is it?” Lily asked.

“Nicholas Gaunt,” James said flatly.

“He was a few years ahead of us at school, so you probably never came across him,” Remus added. “He and Sirius had a brief fling. He didn’t take it well when Sirius ended it.”

James whipped around to stare at Remus. “That is the understatement of the century,” he fumed. “He put a bloody tracking spell on him and stalked him for months.”

Remus held up his hands placatingly. “He’s a complete arsehole – you don’t need to convince me.”

It still bothered James that Sirius had hidden the relationship from him. He had naïvely assumed they shared everything. He had been blindsided when he came home last year to find Sirius shirtless in front of the bathroom mirror, a half-empty bottle of firewhiskey next to the sink.

“It’s a tracking spell,” Sirius had said feverishly, craning to see his back. “It has to be. You have to find it for me, Prongs.”

The full story spilled out in jagged fragments: Gaunt’s jealousy and tendency to lurk in the shadows to catch Sirius alone, appearing unexpectedly late at night in places he had no business being – even in the alley behind their flat where they tended to apparate, out of view of the Muggles on their street. James had nearly stormed out of the flat to confront Gaunt himself. He only stayed because he could not leave Sirius alone in that state.

Instead, James had reassured Sirius and urged him to lie on the couch while he examined his back. He found the spell mark at the base of his spine – tiny white letters spelling *omnes videntes*.^[1] Dark magic. A terrible violation of trust. It took them a week – and help from Moony – to find the counter-curse.

Even now, James felt the urge to march over and punch Gaunt square in the jaw, but he and Regulus left the café before James could act on it.

“Maybe you should warn Sirius,” Lily suggested tentatively, hesitant to weigh in on matters concerning Sirius.

James nodded, immediately standing up. He had already started jogging back to their office before realising he had never actually responded to her. No time for that now; the last thing he wanted was for Sirius to be ambushed by his brother and his stalker ex-boyfriend.

Sirius was still at his desk when James returned. Dummy Wormtail sat next to him, helpfully holding a stack of neat papers in his stiff arms.

“I’ve had a breakthrough, Prongs,” Sirius exclaimed, eyes gleaming with manic glee. “The secret is you have to *want* to be bored.”

“Pads, listen,” James said panting. “Regulus is here.”

Sirius faltered for a moment before resuming his careful stacking. “Showing an interest in government. Good for him. Doing the family name proud.”

“Siri - ”

“It’s fine Prongs, really. Reg has no interest in being my brother anymore; he’s made that perfectly clear.”

James bit back his feelings about that, instead sliding along the desk to get closer to his friend. He pressed a reassuring hand over Sirius’ where it lay on the desk, lacing their fingers. Sirius blinked down at their linked hands, puzzled.

“There’s something else, but I don’t want you to freak out,” James said gently.

Sirius grimaced. “Well, I’m absolutely freaking out, so you better tell me what’s wrong.”

James bit his lip. “Gaunt is in the building.”

Sirius gave him a perfectly blank look. “So?”

“*Nicholas* Gaunt.”

“I used to shag him, James,” Sirius huffed. “I know who he is.”

Something unpleasant twisted in James’ stomach at that. “Right,” he said shortly. “Well, he’s here. Like he literally just left the café.”

“That’s hardly surprising,” Sirius said in a tone that made clear that he thought James had lost his mind. “He works in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

Sirius shrugged. “I’ve seen him around.”

“Were you planning on telling me?”

“No. Because I knew you’d overreact.”

James dropped his hand, standing up to his full height. “Overreact? He *stalked* you, Sirius.”

Sirius waved a hand dismissively. “He apologised for that.”

“Oh, okay, that’s fine then,” James retorted sarcastically.

“He knows he fucked up,” Sirius explained. “But it was a hard time; he’d just cut off contact with his father. He just wasn’t thinking straight.”

James felt a muscle in his jaw tick. “That’s not good enough.”

Sirius steepled his fingers under his chin. “What do you want me to say here, James?”

James wanted him to say that he would make sure he was never alone with Gaunt. He wanted Sirius to say that he would never trust the man again. But he could already see that Sirius had forgiven him. Gaunt had probably known he would when he brought up his father; Marfin Gaunt had a similar approach to raising children as Orion Black.

James knew that pressing him would do no good. He swallowed his frustration, instead settling a serious gaze on Sirius. “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” he responded nonchalantly.

“You’ve literally never been careful,” James complained. “Not even for a minute. Not once.”

Sirius wheeled his chair until he was directly in front of James. He peered up at him with ridiculous puppy dog eyes – looking exactly like Padfoot. James could not help but let his posture relax.

“Prongsie?”

“Yeah?”

“Where’s my lunch?”

James groaned, before reaching down to grab his hands and haul him to his feet. “Come on, you need to entertain me while Lils and Moony figure out how they plan on proposing to Newt Scamander.”

Sirius glanced back longingly at the pile of paperwork. “But my beloved admin...”

“You’re ridiculous,” James said fondly. He pressed both hands to Sirius’ shoulders and propelled him towards the door.

“You love it,” Sirius teased, peeking over his shoulder.

Despite himself, James chuckled. “Yeah, I do.”

It was a cause of constant consternation for Fleamont Potter that Effie insisted on treating the Order of Phoenix meetings hosted at Potter Manor as if they were dinner parties.

“Honestly, Effie,” Monty tutted as he looked at the platters of food floating in the direction of the living room. “You realise this is a secret meeting to discuss our strategy to battle the forces of darkness, right? I’m not sure serving canapes set the right tone.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why exactly should we be expected to battle the forces of darkness on an empty stomach?”

No one was surprised when Effie won the argument. She usually did. Despite his protests, Sirius noticed that Monty seemed perfectly happy to plough his way through a cheeseboard while they waited

for the other Order members to arrive.

James had wanted to join the Order before he even finished Hogwarts. Because Sirius could not allow his best friend to fight evil without him, he expressed the same eagerness. Lily joined because she was determined to create a more just wizarding society. Wormtail joined because James and Sirius did.

Moony had the most misgivings; he feared that the Order would not take kindly to a werewolf in their ranks. In fact, the Order seemed far more concerned by the presence of a member of the Black family at their meetings. Sirius thought they were being short-sighted. If anyone could understand the Pureblood mania growing in their community it was a person who had grown up with the family motto *Toujours Pur*. Always pure.

The meetings were more impressive than Sirius had expected – largely thanks to Mad-Eye Moody and his default warlike posture. He appeared to have taken on a de facto second-in-command role to Dumbledore. Both James and Sirius were starstruck to meet the man who was legendary within the Auror Corps. Unfortunately, Mad-Eye considered them far too green to make any useful contribution.

Sirius sprawled in his usual spot on an elegant couch in the Potter's living room. James sat next to him, his back straight and shoulders squared in his Quidditch Captain pose. It showed off his sturdy frame – his strong arms and shoulders.

Sirius repressed the urge to trace a finger along his spine. At school, Sirius had often fantasised about exacting Captain Potter ordering him onto his knees for failing to hit a bludger. But that was a dangerous line of thought.

Sirius strongly suspected that it was Prongs who was causing the tension in James' back. Before becoming an Animagus, Sirius had not anticipated the symbiotic relationship he would have with the animal buried deep inside him. Padfoot reflected Sirius, but he also shaped his behaviour, particularly when he went too long without letting his alter-ego run free.

It was a smaller group than usual for the meeting that evening. Most of their friends with roles at the Ministry were detained at work. The Ministry had become a key battleground for those who supported the inclusion of Muggle-borns against those fixated on safeguarding blood purity. Lily was working late scrutinising the latest amendments to the laws governing the regulation of Muggle artefacts. Peter had been called in to conduct a full review of Floo access to the Ministry.

Nonetheless, Moony and Marlene McKinnon were both in attendance. Effie put together an entire dinner plate of food for Remus, tutting about his skinny frame. He looked so flustered by the fuss that Sirius could not even find it in himself to be jealous. Marlene was one of the last to arrive, her platinum blond hair in such disarray that Sirius could tell that she had flown over. Sirius winked at her as she sat on the floor and she responded with a shaka sign.

James shot Sirius a disapproving look. “Having fun?”

“Lighten up James,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

Mad-Eye stomped into the room with a dramatic swirl of his cloak. He did not acknowledge any of them before he launched into a grim update on developments in the past week.

Dark objects were disappearing. People were avoiding crowded places, like Diagon Alley and Quidditch matches. A Muggle family in Brighton had been tortured. There were growing whispers that Dark Lord loyalists were infiltrating the Ministry.

Sirius could sense James growing agitated beside him. He could relate to his friend's frustration; there was far more that they could be doing. It was time the wizarding world woke up to reality and accepted that this was war.

Sirius did not notice right away that Mad-Eye was staring at him. The moment he discerned the scrutiny, Sirius lifted his chin. Sometimes these meetings reminded him of the dining table at Grimmauld Place. He knew better than to show weakness or uncertainty in front of a judgemental audience.

When James noticed where Mad-Eye was focusing, he let his mask of earnest professionalism slip slightly, glancing between them with unveiled concern.

Mad-Eye continued to eye Sirius dispassionately. “Orion Black is dying,” he announced.

Sirius was excruciatingly aware of every eye in the room turning to look at him. The only exception

was James who sat forward in his seat, as if ready to launch himself at anyone who said anything he did not like.

“Very tactful, Alastor,” Monty said, a note of warning in his voice.

Monty was an intimidating figure, tall and confident – never afraid to express a contrary opinion. At eleven, Sirius was almost afraid of him. In the Great and Noble House of Black, strength meant cruelty. For Monty and James, strength was about protecting the people they cared about.

Mad-Eye was unapologetic. “I don’t have time to worry about feelings, Fleamont.”

“How long has he got?” Sirius interjected.

“Months at most. More likely weeks.”

Sirius briefly considered this information before nodding shortly. “Good,” he said.

The silence in the room deepened. James shifted in his seat, probably resisting a desire to shout at the far more senior Auror. Sirius felt an old phantom pain in his chest; it was exactly the spot his father had hit with a cutting curse when he was sorted into Gryffindor.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at Moody. “What do you need me to do?”

Finally, James turned to look at him – his face almost comically shocked. It had not occurred to him that Mad-Eye was bringing up this information to advance an agenda. Sirius, knowing better, held the older Auror’s gaze.

“Maybe you want to do a death-bed visit to your old man,” Moody suggested, spreading his hands as if painting the scene. “Maybe you’ve seen the light.”

“No way,” James interjected.

Ignoring James, Sirius leaned towards Moody and raised his eyebrow. “You think Orion Black will confide all his plans in his disappointing blood traitor son?”

James flinched as if the words had come from Orion himself. Mad-Eye sighed, looking older and more tired than usual. He still worked full-time at the Ministry, endlessly focused on his mission. There was scant room for niceties in his world.

“I think you’d be surprised how sentimental people get when they’re dying. Maybe if you go over there and tell him that you want to make things right, you can snoop around a bit and - ”

“Absolutely not,” James interrupted again, eyes blazing with intensity. “Sirius barely got out of that house the first time. There’s no way he’s going back there.”

Sirius pressed a soothing hand on his shoulder. “Calm down, James,” Sirius said in an undertone.

“No, I don’t think I will calm down,” James snapped, before focusing his attention on Mad-Eye once more. “No one who knows Sirius will believe that he’s had a change of heart, especially not his parents.”

“You never know,” Frank Longbottom reasoned from the seat next to Monty’s, earning a betrayed look from James. “Sorry, mate – it’s just that...well Sirius is the man’s son.”

Sirius snorted. “You clearly don’t know my father.”

“Exactly,” James said, before turning his stubborn gaze toward Moody once more. “You’d be putting him in danger for absolutely no reason.”

“He’s definitely more likely to hex me than drag out the family photos,” Sirius said. “But I’m willing to try.”

“You can’t be serious,” James said, turning in his seat until his back faced the rest of the room to gape at him.

“It’s worth a shot,” Sirius shrugged.

The look that James gave him was hard for Sirius to parse. He was confused by the overreaction. They had taken greater risks just for the hell of it at Hogwarts. Walking into the Shrieking Shack for the first time after they mastered the Animagus spell was a gamble – a theory at best. James never seemed to mind walking next to him into danger. It was only when Sirius acted alone that James responded this way. Not to mention that anything involving his family was guaranteed to set James on edge.

“You’re not going,” James said firmly, holding his gaze. “I won’t let you go.”

As much as he adored James, Sirius was incapable of simply backing down. Sirius was contrary by nature, but it was not simply a matter of pushing up against any limits placed on him. Sirius knew that he

had to prove himself to this group. James never had to doubt his place in this circle; the Potters had always been on the right side of history.

The affection James had for him blinded him to the truth. Sirius did not belong here. He was here because of James – because everyone recognised their friendship as a vote of confidence in Sirius. This status was reinforced by Monty and Effie whenever they treated him like a member of the family. The Potter family reputation opened doors that would otherwise have been closed to him because of his surname. But it was not enough.

“I’d like to see you stop me,” Sirius said, a note of challenge in his voice.

James sat up even straighter. As they stared at each other, something zipped between them. Sirius could almost see the protective instincts gathering within James’ frame. For a moment, he was convinced that James was considering throwing him over his shoulder and carrying out of the meeting. It was wrong to be so excited by the foolish thought.

He was dimly aware that everyone was staring at their silent standoff. Marlene sat on the floor peering at them with a miniature quiche suspended halfway to her mouth. Effie was looking between them as if watching a Muggle tennis match. Remus rubbed his chin with an inscrutable look on his face. For his part, Monty was too busy glaring at Mad-Eye to pay any attention to the tension brewing on the couch.

“This sort of display is why I was opposed to letting a bunch of glorified school children attend these meetings,” Moody commented, with a pointed look at Monty.

The attention in the room shifted to the two older men. Sirius felt there was an unfair note of accusation in Mad Eye’s tone. Monty always encouraged the younger members of the Order to share their perspectives, but it was Dumbledore who made the final decision on membership. A cynical part of Sirius thought Dumbledore almost preferred Order members to be young and inexperienced. Far easier to control a group fresh out of the school he ran than an opinionated wizard with a reputation in his own right, like Monty.

Monty looked Mad-Eye up and down, sizing him up. Then, he offered a chilly smile.

“Then let me speak for the adults, Alastor,” Monty said. “You’re sending Sirius to Grimmauld Place over my dead body.”

James relaxed back in the seat with a self-satisfied nod. That settled matters for him. No matter his formal status in the Order, Fleamont Potter had a deciding vote in this household – second only to Effie.

Sirius noticed that Moody did not seem the least bit intimidated. In fact, he had focused his attention on Sirius once more. His body language was clear; it was ultimately up to him.

“Maybe I could talk to my brother?” Sirius suggested tentatively.

“I thought you said Regulus didn’t want to be your brother anymore,” James interjected, his voice harsh.

Sirius grew unnaturally still for a moment, taken aback by the ease with which James broke his confidence. It was not a secret that Regulus hated him, but it was unlike James to share the information so casually in front of others. Sirius could see the moment James realised his mistake. Nonetheless, Sirius instinctively inched away, creating distance. James glanced down at the space between them, before looking up with a crestfallen expression.

“Regulus has been at the Ministry,” Sirius continued, addressing Moody. “Probably sorting out the estate.”

Moody nodded. “See what you can get from him – anything could be useful.”

Sirius agreed to do just that. When the meeting ended, he and James hurried in opposite directions. Sirius sat on the floor next to Marlene. For some reason, James had taken an unwarranted dislike to her while they were at school. She was Sirius’ favourite among the girls. They had even shared a silly drunken snog at a party, falling about laughing only moments after they kissed.

“Weird vibe tonight, babe,” Marlene commented.

“Picked up on that did you?” Sirius asked sarcastically, pulling up his knee and resting his elbow on it. James was in the corner in deep discussion with his father, both glancing over at Sirius every few

minutes.

“It was subtle but I’m very observant.”

Sirius nodded towards Monty and James. “Do you think they’ll tell me when they finish planning out my life?”

“Love makes people do crazy things,” she shrugged.

Sirius felt a flash of irritation that she was not automatically on his side. “Monty isn’t my dad. James is definitely not my brother.”

“No,” she mused, narrowing her perceptive eyes. “I wouldn’t characterise James Potter’s feelings towards you as brotherly.”

Out of habit, Sirius scanned the room to make sure no one was listening. “James is with Lily,” he said through gritted teeth.

“And yet...” Marlene trailed off suggestively.

“Marls,” Sirius said warningly.

She rolled her eyes and turned her attention to the platter on the coffee table, helping herself to another blini and moaning in pleasure.

“I love when the Potters host these things,” she said through a mouth full of smoked salmon. “You always get dinner and a show.”

Despite himself, Sirius laughed.

James and Sirius left the meeting in silence. James felt annoyed with Moody, the Order, and even Sirius – but mostly with himself for his careless comment about Regulus. Sirius had looked genuinely hurt. The goodbyes they exchanged with his parents were subdued. Although Monty agreed that Sirius would be better off avoiding his family, he had been adamant that Sirius should be the one to decide, much to James’ disappointment.

The air was crisp and the night sky was unusually clear. Without warning, Sirius veered away from the front gate, leading them instead towards the sprawling grounds behind the house.

“Where are we going?” James asked, aware that he would follow regardless of the answer.

“You’re frustrated,” Sirius replied quietly. “You need to let off some steam.”

A pang of guilt hit James. “Siri, listen - ”

“Come on,” he interrupted. “Prongs needs to stretch his legs.”

James trailed after him as they reached the meadow at the back of the property. In warmer months, it bloomed with flowers, but the growing chill had hardened the ground – better for running, particularly with hooves. Anticipation grew in James’s chest as they navigated the dark but familiar landscape.

Suddenly, Sirius turned around to face him. He almost seemed to glow in the moonlight. “You’re angry with me,” he said quietly.

James shook his head, though it was true. “You just scare me sometimes, Sirius. It feels like you want to get yourself killed.”

“I thought joining the Order was about helping.”

“Moody doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” he retorted. “Not when it comes to your family.”

Sirius stepped back, arms wide as if drawing strength from the moonlight, looking both alien and beautiful – remote as the star he was named after. James moved forward to close the distance between them. Sirius had always been his centre of gravity.

“You worry too much, Jamie. You need to let go.”

James wanted to grab him and make sure that he was always safe. But he also wanted to run alongside him. These contrary feelings always bloomed within him when he was around Sirius.

Sirius transformed into Padfoot, letting out a delighted bark. For a moment, James watched his dark form race across the meadow. Prongs stamped his feet in frustration, eager to join his friend.

Unconcerned by their human squabbles.

Sirius was right; he needed to run. Sirius always knew exactly what James needed.

With a rush, James transformed, and the night sprang to life before him. As he ran, the last of the frustration melted from his body. Padfoot streaked around his legs. In these forms, life was more straightforward. For hours they raced, swam, and explored, collapsing in a heap by a stream at the edge of the meadow.

James was human when he woke up. Dawn was breaking and Sirius, now also human, was a warm weight on his chest, his arm and a leg draped over him. Although the cold ground was uncomfortable, James felt no desire to get up. He ran a hand along the arm that rested across his stomach, as if to reassure himself that Sirius was there.

“Feel better?” Sirius murmured, eyes still closed

“Yeah.”

“Still angry with me?”

James considered for a moment. “No. What about you?”

“I can never stay mad at you, Prongs. You know that.”

He did not say it like it was a good thing. James pulled him a little closer. “I’m sorry, Pads. About what I said about Regulus.”

Sirius shushed him. “Go back to sleep.”

But James could never do that once he was awake. Instead, he watched the sky lighten and traced constellations on Sirius’ shoulder.

Notes:

Thank you so much for reading. I'd love to hear what you think. Also, let me know if you have any preferences in terms of timing these posts for weekdays or weekends.

Notes:

[1] Translation: “all-seeing.”

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/151617427>): **Product of Parents**

Summary:

“You had lunch with Remus. Then Sirius got bored, so you decided to get matching tattoos?”

The logic sounded shaky under Lily’s scrutiny. James rotated his shoulder, enjoying the twinge of pain. They had made a pact to let their tattoos heal without magic.

“Not exactly matching,” James said. “More like corresponding tattoos.”

“I suppose you had better show me,” Lily said wearily.

James dutifully unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the pink, inflamed skin on his right shoulder blade. It was a perfectly rendered miniature dog’s paw print.

“What does Sirius have?”

James glanced over his shoulder, sensing danger. “Uh, he has antlers.”

Notes:

TW: References to child abuse

Soundtrack: "Twilight" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/4UPLIFF10U3St7PaaQGPgi?si=b53a96e941144f63>) by Elliott Smith

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_4_endnotes\)](#).)

“She had grown older. And he loved her more now than he had loved her when he understood her better, when she was the product of her parents. What she was now was what she herself had decided to become.”

- Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

Hogwarts School, Scotland – 1976

When Sirius told him that he had sent Snape down to the Whomping Willow, James was furious.

Sirius had appeared at the foot of his bed, wringing his hands. “I’ve fucked up, Jamie,” he said. “Really, really badly.”

It was an understatement. Sending Snape to the Whomping Willow could have been fatal. Even though Snape had escaped with his life, Sirius’ recklessness had threatened everything - especially Remus.

James had noticed a change in Sirius' anger towards the Slytherins since he ran away from home. It was darker, more personal. James insisted to himself that Sirius had simply failed to consider the consequences of his actions. However, he knew that part of Sirius had wanted to do it, even if just for a moment.

Worse was the guilt that gnawed at James for his own reaction. His first instinct was not concern for Snape but a desperate need to protect Sirius from the fallout.

When McGonagall and Dumbledore summoned Sirius, James was left to pace, anxiety twisting in his stomach.

“They can’t expel him,” Peter muttered nervously, stress-eating a chocolate frog. “He’s a Black, after all.”

For a moment, James almost wished he shared Peter’s faith in bloodline privilege. Hours ticked by until the door swung open and Sirius strode in, collapsing onto his bed and pulling his knees to his chest. James felt an overpowering wave of relief and anger at the sight of him.

“Three months detention. Weekends and evenings,” Sirius said, staring at his feet. “No Quidditch, no Hogsmeade.”

“What did I tell you, Prongs?” Peter said, his voice tinged with relief.

Now that the immediate danger had passed, James could not hold himself back from a modicum of spite. “You deserve worse,” he said, colder than he had ever spoken to Sirius.

Sirius flinched, his voice barely a whisper. “I know.”

“Good,” James replied, the word sounding foreign in his clipped tone.

The rest of the evening passed in silence.

James knew Remus had every right to be furious. He had spent the night alone, so his back was marred with bright red claw marks. He had not looked at any of them when he changed out of his clothes the morning after the full moon. Sirius apologised immediately, receiving no response.

Moony’s anger took on different forms as the weeks passed. Icy silences erupted into furious responses to minor issues. Mostly, Remus pretended that Sirius was invisible. He overreacted to minor issues because none of them could confront the real betrayal. Everyone at Hogwarts knew the Marauders were fighting.

James tried to keep his mouth shut, expecting Sirius to defend himself. But he never did. For his part, James was shocked at how quickly he forgave his friend – so quickly it felt like a moral failing. Guilt sometimes sparked another wave of anger, but even that subsided like aftershocks to an earthquake.

James simply wanted his best friend back, whatever that said about him as a person.

One evening, Remus was inordinately furious that Sirius had left his trunk in a mess before rushing to class. “You know what, Sirius?” Remus spat. “Your shit childhood doesn’t give you an excuse to just walk all over people.”

James was on his feet before he even realised it. “He’s apologised Moony,” he said sharply. “I get that you aren’t ready to forgive him, but that doesn’t mean you get to treat him like this.”

“Of course, you’re on his side,” Remus scoffed, as if he had always suspected it. There was a truth to his comment that James did not want to acknowledge.

“I’m not taking sides.”

“In this situation, not taking a side *is* taking a side,” Remus retorted before striding out of the dorm, probably to sleep in the common room.

“You should stay out of it,” Sirius said, still fixated on his knees. “I did a shitty thing, and he gets to be angry about it.”

“Your family is off limits,” James insisted.

Sirius looked up, the shadows under his eyes resembling bruises. James had been so focused on avoiding his gaze that he had not noticed how exhausted Sirius looked. His righteous indignation faded in the face of his best friend's misery.

“It’s like you said,” Sirius responded. “I deserve worse.”

That night, James tossed and turned, worry for Sirius leaving him sleepless. He wanted to slip into bed with him, but for the first time, James doubted he would be welcome.

The day Remus asked Sirius to pass the pumpkin juice in the Great Hall felt like a milestone. Yet when James tried to discuss this exciting progress, Sirius scarcely seemed to notice any change. Somehow, he had gone from a towering presence in Gryffindor Tower – the life and soul of the party – to a ghost.

His moods were flat, he hardly ate, and never slept. James coaxed him to the Great Hall for dinner, but Sirius never spoke. He spent most of his time outside of class and detention in bed. No matter how much time he spent in bed, he looked increasingly tired.

James planned an elaborate itinerary to celebrate the day Sirius completed his three months of detention. Out of respect for Remus, he waited until the others left before climbing onto Sirius’ bed to excitedly outline the plan – flying on the Quidditch Pitch, Honeydukes, butterbeers.

After he finished, Sirius merely rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “I’m really tired, Prongs. I might just stay in bed today.”

“That’s fine,” James responded lightly, although his heart sank. “We can just hang out here.”

James knew it was not an invitation, but Sirius was too defeated to argue. He settled in, maintaining a steady stream of conversation and games, playing Sirius’ favourite music, and even procuring food from the kitchens.

As the afternoon waned, Sirius lay flat on his bed. James spread out next to him. It took a moment for James to realise that tears were streaming down Sirius’ cheeks. James reached out to touch his cheek, as if catching his tears would somehow reverse the pain that produced them.

“Pads,” he said urgently. “What’s wrong?”

“Why do I always ruin everything?” Sirius asked quietly.

James watched a tear leak from Sirius’ left eye over the bridge of his nose. James caught it on his fingertip, feeling an inexplicable urge to press it to his lips. “You don’t,” he shook his head fervently. “You made a mistake. People make mistakes.”

“Moony hates me,” Sirius sniffed, wiping his eyes roughly. “You should all hate me.”

“Well, we don’t,” James said sharply, before softening his tone. “I could never hate you.”

That was the main lesson James had learned from the entire mess. Even when he was angry, he knew there was nothing Sirius could do to make him want to walk away. James was not sure it was entirely a good thing, but he was certain it was true.

Sirius seemed to sense the truth in his words. He slid across the bed towards James, as if uncertain he

was welcome. It had been months since they had been this close. James tugged Sirius closer until he lay partly on top of him, face buried in his shoulder. A piece of James slotted back into place as he stroked a hand through Sirius' unusually tangled curls.

"You're allowed to be sad, Pads," James murmured. "You can even blame yourself. But please don't disappear on me."

Sirius lifted his head, peering at James. Up close, those watercolour eyes seemed even more improbable.^[1] "Maybe you'd be better off if I did disappear."

Those words felt like a punch to the stomach. James realised in that moment that Sirius would never forgive himself for what he had done, holding it up as proof of some essential flaw deep in his DNA. He would be tormented by it for the rest of his life.

Mary McDonald had once shown James pictures of Muggles who climbed cliffs with ropes. Sometimes they would slip and be saved only by a friend's quick reflexes or the strength of the rope. Sirius stared up at him with wide eyes, as if dangling precariously over a great chasm.

"Impossible," James said. "I don't even know how to be James Potter without you."

If Sirius were to slip away from him on the edge of a cliff, James would throw himself right after him. Sirius contemplated his words, tracing letters and symbols on his chest – probably runes; he was fascinated by protective spells. Always afraid that the things he cared about would be taken from him.

"You know I don't deserve you, right?" Sirius said at last.

James breathed in the scent of his hair. "Too bad. You've got me."

Sirius flicked through the records, stealing glances at James. He estimated that he had about ten minutes before James would insist it was time to leave. Although James enjoyed Muggle music, he could not quite match Sirius's enthusiasm for passing hours searching through stacks of records.

As usual, Sirius had suggested they arrive two hours before they were scheduled to meet Remus. He adored the grimy neighbourhood brimming with avant-garde Muggles with wild hair and multiple piercings. Most importantly, every second block was crowded with records stores.

The Muggle who ran the shop they were currently exploring considered herself a Wiccan. There was a pervasive smell of incense, accompanied by an abundance of cheap gemstone necklaces. Nonetheless, the room had an impressive collection of rock LP records. James was distracted, eyeing the necklaces, probably debating which would complement Lily's green eyes. Romantic sod. But when the woman behind the counter – a green-haired punk with a nose ring connected to her earring – put on "Black Dog" by Led Zeppelin (<https://open.spotify.com/track/3qT4bUD1MaWpGrTwcvguh?si=7ce5d4560c234d99>), his face lit up.

"Pads!" he called. "They're playing your song."

"You're an idiot," Sirius replied.

"We have to dance!"

Given that James had endured over an hour of record store hopping, it seemed ungracious to deny his request. Sirius started dancing on the spot as James rushed over, grabbing his hand and spinning him until he felt dizzy. Just as Sirius stumbled, James caught him, and he wrapped his arms around James' neck for balance.

With a grin, James lifted Sirius off the ground and twirled him. Even the woman behind the counter chuckled at their antics.

"We're going to break something," Sirius shouted over the music.

"Probably our legs," James replied, slowing his spinning and gently setting Sirius back down.

Catching his breath, Sirius leaned against James. "Should we open a record store?"

"I thought we were opening a motorcycle slash Quidditch slash firewhiskey store?" James grinned.

"We can't be constrained by stupid things like practicality, floor space, or a clear vision of what we're selling. We're entrepreneurs, Prongs."

“I think we’re just idiots,” James laughed, before glancing down at his watch and paling. “And by Merlin are we late! Get your records and let’s go.”

Sirius proudly exchanged his Muggle money for albums. Since moving to a Muggle apartment in London, he and James had learned about such practicalities. James propelled him out of the store.

“Moony is going to think we got stabbed,” James fretted. Feeling generous, Sirius decided not to point out that James had never once been on time for anything.

“He’ll understand,” he said, glancing lovingly at his three new records.

James draped an arm over his shoulder as they walked. “That’s because you’re both bonkers.”

Sirius took it as a compliment and let James lead them toward the grimy pub Remus had suggested. Remus never invited them to his flat and rarely stayed in one place for long. As they approached the pub, James examined its façade before dropping his arm from Sirius' shoulders. He now knew that not all Muggle bars were accepting of their usual over-familiarity.

The pub smelled like mildew. An ancient television mounted to the wall played a football game, which James peered at with interest. The lack of brooms still bewildered him; Sirius knew this would be a key discussion point during their lunch. For his part, Sirius admired the juke box and flashing slot machines. Muggle technology was brilliant.

James spotted Remus sitting at a small table as far from the bar and other patrons as possible.

“Moony!” he called, standing on his toes and waving exuberantly. The mostly elderly patrons of the bar stared at them mistrustfully, but James seemed unfazed as he picked his way through the crowd. “Sorry we’re late.”

“I’m not sorry,” Sirius interjected. “And if you look in that bag you’ll understand why.”

Remus shook his head enviously, examining the Tom Waits album and carefully scrutinising the back of the Doors LP. James cheerfully offered to buy a round of beers while they dissected the records.

Sirius tracked James with his eyes. He looked fantastically out of place, exuding easy confidence and relaxed good looks. Leaning against the sticky bar, James began chatting with an old man in a naval cap. The man laughed. Sirius bit back a smile; there truly was no one that James Potter could not charm.

“I feel like I might have lost you there,” Remus said knowingly.

“What?” Sirius asked, whipping his head around guiltily.

“Relax, Pads. I was just teasing.”

Sirius regretted confiding in Remus about his feelings for James back at Hogwarts. He examined the menu, hoping the uncomfortable silence would prompt Remus to change the subject. No such luck.

“I need to tell you something.”

Sirius glanced up at the serious tone. “What’s up?”

Remus bit his lip, weighing his words. “Lily wants them to move in together. She’s trying to figure out how to bring it up without James freaking out.”

Sirius felt foolish for his surprise. It was ridiculous to feel as if a metal band were tightening around his chest. He had just thought he would have more time with James - though he knew it would never be enough.

“Why would he freak out?” Sirius forced a brittle smile. “That’s exactly what’s supposed to happen.”

Remus studied him carefully. Since the incident with Snape, he often scrutinised Sirius, even though they had mended their fractured friendship in the months that followed that unforgivable act.

At times, it felt as if Remus looked at him like a complex Arithmancy problem – a muddle of unbalanced equations that refused to coalesce into a reasonable conclusion. In paranoid moments, Sirius worried that Remus shared his belief that he did not truly belong with the Marauders.

He often wondered whether Remus had been forced to forgive him, albeit indirectly. James would never turn his back on Sirius, and Peter always followed James' lead. Did Remus truly have any choice but to forgive him?

“All I’m saying is that if there’s something you need to tell him, you should do it soon,” Remus replied.

“I’ll be fine if James moves out,” Sirius said, wilfully misinterpreting him. “Maybe I can move in

with you and your fifty housemates.”

Remus rolled his eyes, patting his hand patronisingly. “I don’t think my living quarters would meet your lofty standards.”

It was an ongoing joke. After his parents disinherited him, Sirius had piously asked Remus to explain budgeting to him. Not even six months later, his old uncle Alphard had died and left Sirius the vast riches of his Gringotts vault. Remus had been amused that it was physically impossible for Sirius to be broke for long.

“I’m very adaptable. You’ve always underestimated my adaptability, Moons.”

James returned with three pints, his eyes catching on Remus’ hand still resting on Sirius’.

“What did I miss?” he asked, an odd note in his voice.

“Nothing at all,” Sirius said quickly, artfully changing the topic to football. James immediately brightened, leaning in eagerly to clarify – for the fifteenth time – that there really was only one ball in the game.

Sirius wanted James to be happy. He wanted nothing but good things for him; James deserved it. If that meant that Sirius would need to let him go, then so be it. For now, Sirius would focus on enjoying the time they had left.

When Remus excused himself to the bathroom, James raised an eyebrow. “Why are you staring at me?”

Sirius blinked, startled to realise he had been. Gathering his wits, he shrugged nonchalantly. “What can I say? You’re nice to look at.”

He almost crowed in triumph when James blushed.

“So let me get this straight,” Lily said, stirring a pot of spaghetti bubbling on the stove in her apartment.

Her joyless flatmate, Joyce, was away for a week on holiday with her family in Majorca. Joyce, who worked at St. Mungo’s, had very particular views about the division of bills in their flat. She had even gone so far as to factor in the additional water usage associated with James occasionally staying over. Joyce had been less than impressed when he valiantly offered to shower with Lily to save water.

When Lily invited him for dinner, James had not expected her to cook the Muggle way. No matter what Sirius said about the superiority of Muggle cooking, James preferred magic for its efficiency. His stomach had been rumbling for an hour as a delicious aroma wafted from the cast iron pot. He suspected that her progress would not speed up because of his recent pronouncement.

“You had lunch with Remus. Then Sirius got bored, so you decided to get matching tattoos?”

The logic sounded shaky under Lily’s scrutiny. James rotated his shoulder, enjoying the twinge of pain. They had made a pact to let their tattoos heal without magic.

“Not exactly *matching*,” James said. “More like corresponding tattoos.”

“I suppose you had better show me,” Lily said wearily, wiping her hands on her apron.

James dutifully unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the pink, inflamed skin on his right shoulder blade. It was a perfectly rendered miniature dog’s paw print.

“What does Sirius have?”

James glanced over his shoulder, sensing danger. “Uh, he has antlers.”

When Sirius suggested they honour Padfoot and Prongs in their tattoos, James had needed no convincing. A swell of proprietary pride filled him whenever he thought of the antlers now adorning Sirius’s shoulder. They had grinned at each other all afternoon, unable to contain their excitement.

“So, your Animagus forms.”

James nodded, uncertainty creeping in. Lily did not seem angry, but he could see her mind working behind her expressive green eyes.

“Do you like it?” he said hesitantly.

Lily lifted her hand from his skin and stepped back. “I...I’m not sure.”

James stiffened, hurt. He pulled his shirt back onto his shoulders. “That feels like a no.”

“It’s not a no. I just, I mean...it’s a lot, James.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, rapidly doing up his buttons and turning to face her. This felt like a conversation that he should be fully dressed for. Perhaps in armour.

“You and Sirius,” she said hesitantly. “It’s just that. You’re so - ”

James had a sinking feeling that he knew where this was going. “You think it’s strange that we’re so close.”

“No,” Lily said quickly. “It’s not that. I just – well. Gosh, I really don’t know how to put this.”

“Maybe you should just say it then.”

His cool tone seemed to harden her resolve. She lifted her chin, a hint of challenge in her clear gaze.

“Fine. It’s not that you and Sirius are close. I know how much he means to you and your family. I would never want to stand in the way of your friendship.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” James said, some of the defensiveness draining from his posture.

Lily spoke in a rush as if afraid she would lose her nerve. “It’s just that sometimes it doesn’t seem entirely platonic between you.”

“W-what do you – I mean, he’s my best friend – we’re um, it’s not,” he stammered, his cheeks heating as he stumbled over his words.

“You spend almost every waking minute together,” she continued, holding up a finger as if compiling a brief of evidence. “You talk about him constantly when he’s not around. And when he is there it’s like he is the central point of your entire universe, and the rest of us are just orbiting around him.”

James crossed his arms. “That’s not true.”

“You know that it is. You’re both completely obsessed with each other. Not to mention the way he *looks* at you.”

James felt a sudden sharp desire to know how Sirius looked at him, but he sensed that asking for details would be a foolish move. Instead, he shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Lils.”

Lily let out a breath through her teeth. “We’ve been dating for more than two years now, James. I suppose I thought that with time Sirius would stop being your first, second, and third priority. I just... want to understand. What exactly is it between you?”

Answering that question should have been simple. James opened and closed his mouth, drawing in a shuddering breath as he attempted to order his thoughts.

“My parents wanted a big family,” he said, surprising himself with the words. “But it just never happened for them. I was lonely growing up. I mean, I had Pete and there were other kids around. But I just never clicked with them, you know?”

“Until Sirius.”

James sat down at the table, running a hand through his messy hair. Lily sat down opposite him, listening carefully to his words. He felt like he was participating in a job interview.

“I don’t think I even realised how alone I was until I met Sirius. He just changed everything for me, Lils. It was like the world lit up and everything bright and exciting. I mean, you remember what we were like.”

“Vividly,” she said, with a rueful smile. “I couldn’t stand either of you.”

James chuckled. “He came round to my house that first summer. He just filled up every inch of it. It felt really empty when he left – even my parents thought so. We all knew it right away. He belonged with us, not his horrible, bigoted family.”

“That’s nice, James. Really.”

She did not need to say that it was also not what she was asking him. He had noticed over their years together that Lily had never truly warmed to Sirius – and vice versa. He appreciated the effort they put in to getting along, aware it was for his benefit.

“I don’t think I realised at first how much of an impact it had on him, you know?” James mused.

“Growing up in that house with those psychotic parents of his. He always laughs it off, but sometimes it’s like he just slips away. I know I can be a bit protective towards him. I just feel like I really let him down back at school.”

Lily stood up and circled the table, settling into the seat next to him and leaning her head on his shoulder. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“I was the one who knew what was happening,” he said softly. “More than anyone else, anyway. I should have pushed harder, made him tell someone what they were doing to him.”

“You were just a child, James.”

“So was he,” James said, his voice wavering. “I thought he was going to die that night when he showed up at our door. I’d never felt fear like that before. He was different afterwards. I hated it. I wanted his parents to pay for what they did to him.”

“What did you do?” Lily asked.

“I’ve never told Siri, but I went to Grimmauld Place to confront them,” James admitted. “I knocked on the door, my wand drawn, all of sixteen. Regulus answered, thank Godric. He took one look at me and slammed the door in my face. I probably owe him my life for that.”

Lily nodded. “Did he say anything?”

“He just called me an idiotic Gryffindor.”

That was not precisely true. In fact, Regulus had looked James up and down before rolling his eyes. “*When will you idiotic Gryffindors realise that living for the ones you love is far more romantic than dying for them?*” James suspected that Lily would not appreciate this version of the story.

“It was brave of you to go there,” she said softly. “I mean, it was incredibly stupid, but it was also brave.”

James considered her words. In his younger days, he would have preened at the praise, but he had grown up in these last few years. “I think it was probably just stupid,” he admitted. “It would have been braver to just be there for him.”

“Probably.”

“I know I prioritise Sirius,” James sighed. “But that doesn’t mean that you’re not a priority, too. You are. A big one.”

For a moment, they sat in silence, her head still resting on him.

“You know what?” she said finally. “I like the tattoo.”

“Yeah?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah. It’s actually kind of sexy.”

She smiled warmly at him as he climbed to her feet, scurrying back over to the kitchen to tend to their dinner.

“Did you know Sirius actually convinced me to go out with you?” she mused, lifting the pot lid to release a billowing column of steam.

“What?” James asked incredulously. “No, he didn’t.”

“I can’t believe he’s never told you this,” she grinned over her shoulder. “He marched into the library and gave me a big talking to. He said that you were the best person he’d ever met and that if I turned you down it’d be the biggest mistake I would ever make.”

James felt a kick in his chest, picturing Sirius giving Lily a piece of his mind.

“I would have been mortified if I’d known,” he admitted.

“Well, it worked. I knew you had to be someone very special to inspire Sirius Black to visit the library.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t burst into flames,” he laughed.

A pleased grin spreading across Lily’s features. “That’s exactly what I said.”

For a while they focused on setting the table and decanting the pasta. Lily seemed lost in thought as they sat down at the table once more to eat.

“Has there ever been someone?” she asked suddenly. “For Sirius I mean.”

“There have been many people for Sirius,” James joked. “They basically line up down the street.”

She swatted his arm. “You know what I mean. Not just a one-night stand. Has there been someone special?”

“No,” he said, wiping his mouth with his napkin with a bit too much focus as his mind recoiled away from the possibility of Sirius dating someone... seriously. Lily hummed in response.

“Should I be worried by this sudden interest in my best friend’s love life?” James pressed, his tone playful.

“I think we both know I’m not his type,” she quipped.

“Thank Godric,” he grinned. “I’d never be able to compete. But seriously, why do you ask?”

Lily considered his words, always mindful and solicitous with her words. She reminded James of Remus that way. No wonder they had always gotten on so well.

As Lily measured her words, James found his mind wandering back to the tattoo parlor that afternoon. Sirius had insisted on going first, and the tattoo artist had agreed to let James stay in the room, seated on a stool on wheels. Sirius had watched him spin around on it with a fond smile, utterly unconcerned as the tattoo artist prepared his skin. He was spread out on his stomach, his shirt discarded in the corner of the room.

James slid the stool as close as it could get to Sirius. He looked like a painting lying on the chair. James was intoxicated at the thought of leaving his mark on that perfect canvas.

While the tattoo artist with the long ponytail readied the needles, James leant down to whisper in his ear. “Just say the word and I’ll do a quick Relevium spell to numb you.”

“No magic,” Sirius insisted, before offering James one of his wide, heart-stopping grins. “Sometimes you have to just let yourself feel it.”

James could hardly swallow. Sirius closed his eyes and settled more comfortably with his head pillowed in his arms, not reacting when the needles pierced his flesh. In contrast, James winced in sympathy (and anticipation ahead of his own torture).

“What’s the significance of the antlers?” asked the tattoo artist as he worked.

“They’re a reminder of my favourite person,” Sirius responded without opening his eyes.

James had not known what to say. Wordlessly, he pressed his hand to Sirius’ forearm, hoping the gentle stroke of his fingers would convey everything he felt.

Presently, Lily finally seemed to settle on the source of her interest in the topic of Sirius’ love life.

“I used to think that Sirius took everything really lightly,” she explained. “But I realised a while ago that I was wrong about that. The more I get to know him the more I feel like Sirius would be someone who would love really deeply, you know?”

James could not say exactly why her words made his chest ache.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “Me too.”

Notes:

Thank you so much for reading! Next chapter things get a little more heated between our heroes.

Your kind comments and kudos have kept me motivated to write quicker.

Notes:

[1] A reference to “Dear Arkansas Daughter” by Lady Lamb:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/3MOFjpuUDhYCAXYcjYb3FI?si=8f1a0f8731bf4df9>

Chapter 5 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152108983>): **The more you love**

Summary:

“I thought you might have told me,” James said softly. “Before telling everyone, I mean.”

It was hard to force words out of his tight throat. “Sorry.”

James looked troubled. “Did I...do something. To make you think I’d mind?”

“No,” Sirius said, leaning his head back against the wall behind them. “I just didn’t want things to change between us.”

“This doesn’t change anything,” James insisted.

“Of course, it does.”

“It doesn’t!”

“Come on, James,” Sirius groaned. “You can’t tell me that you’re not going to be worried that I’m checking you out when we change into our Quidditch kit together.”

James settled back down next to him, their arms and legs pressed together. “I don’t care if you stare at me in the change room.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to.”

“Why not? I look great in my Quidditch robes.”

Notes:

Hope you enjoy the latest instalment! As usual we start with a flashback before returning to the main timeline.

Soundtrack: *"Sad Girl"* (<https://open.spotify.com/track/11MyiSGZSYSmhhqwGUTtAq?si=75f50357085d42ea>) by Lana Del Rey

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_5_endnotes\)](#).)

“The more you love someone, the harder it is to tell them. It surprised him that strangers didn’t stop each other on the street to say I love you.”

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

Hogwarts School, Scotland – 1975

James was sleeping quietly in his bed, bathed in moonlight. Sirius examined his jaw, his arms folded under his pillow, the darkness of his hair, his long eyelashes.

Remus was in a foul mood as the full moon approached. To lift his spirits, James had sneaked out to Honeydukes to buy him an eye-watering array of chocolate. That evening, Sirius had sprawled on the couch in the common room, his legs draped over James, listening as he patiently explained their Transfiguration homework to Peter, whose goblet continued to squeak.

A perfectly ordinary day in their lives at Hogwarts, yet Sirius felt unsettled as he watched James light up the room, carrying each of them through their days. All day Sirius felt as if his chest might burst under the pressure of containing all the feelings he had for his best friend. Whenever he tried to press them down or push them out of his mind, the overwhelming reality of James would occur to him again.^[1]

Although Sirius had been aware of his sexuality for some time, he guarded the secret fiercely. Initially, his interest in boys had seemed like an abstract notion – his crush on James was embarrassing but understandable, given how handsome he was and how close they were. Yet the feelings persisted. As he regarded James sleeping quietly, Sirius suspected they would always remain.

Morning dawned, but Sirius continued to stare. James was an early riser, always making a swift

transition from unconsciousness to alertness. Right on cue, he reached for his glasses and ran his hands through his hair the moment the weak morning light reached his bed. It was a familiar routine, yet that morning it left Sirius flustered. What would it take to make James stay in bed all day? A dangerous line of thought that he quickly extinguished.

James caught him staring and grinned. Unfazed by the scrutiny, he sauntered over to Sirius and threw himself on top of him on his bed.

“Fuck, James,” Sirius groaned. “Are you trying to crush me?”

James lifted himself up on his elbows. Despite his words, Sirius adored the weight of him, relishing the sensation of being covered completely by James. Sirius wrapped his arms around his friend’s waist, inhaling the intoxicating blend of laundered clothes, broom polish, and sweat.

James smiled down at him indulgently. “What have I told you about being sad and mopey on Quidditch days?”

“Quidditch,” he groaned. “I forgot.”

James looked genuinely concerned at that. “How can you forget about the most important day of the week?”

“How can any of us forget about bloody Quidditch,” Remus growled from his bed.

“Hark! I hear the gentle cry of Moony,” James declared buoyantly.

Remus peeked out from under his duvet. “Any chance you could take this somewhere far, far away?”

Sirius and James exchanged grins; they adored cranky pre-full moon Moony. Since they had become Animagi, Remus had grown less guarded around them. Perhaps their willingness to break the law to keep him company on full moons had convinced him of their earnest support.

“We absolutely can,” James said cheerfully. “Pads and I will head down to the pitch early!”

“Why do you hate me?” Sirius whined.

James climbed off the bed, dragging Sirius’ bedding with him. “Encouraging you to excellence is an act of love, not hate.”

“Why the hell did you give James all those ridiculous Muggle business psychology books, Pete?” Remus complained.

“I thought he’d find them funny,” Peter piped up from the other end of the room.

“There’s nothing funny about them,” James declared piously. “They’re the central tenet of my new Quidditch philosophy.”

James maintained an irritating stream of encouragement as Sirius showered, dressed, and trudged after him to the Quidditch Pitch. It was a testament to his unwavering devotion to James that Sirius only threatened to throw him off his broom once.

The game turned out to be unexpectedly glorious. James scored goal after goal – perfect form in a scarlet robe. Anyone on the opposing team who dared to look his way received a Bludger aimed squarely at their face, courtesy of Sirius Black. They made a fantastic team and utterly decimated the other side.

After the match, James tackled him into a bear hug. Sirius embraced him back just as fiercely, fear and excitement warring within him. He had to tell his friends the truth; they deserved to know who was sharing their dorm.

McGonagall was incandescent with joy at their victory. After delivering her usual lecture about the prohibition on unauthorised parties, she casually informed James that she felt tired and would probably skip her customary weekend Common Room inspection that evening. James did not even attempt to hide his wide grin at this implicit permission to celebrate.

The Marauders rose to the occasion, inspired by the promise of a teacher-free night. Peter took charge of the food situation with the passion and focus that James brought to his Quidditch captaincy. Remus assumed the role of DJ, obsessively poring over their collect record collections. Always eager for the more daring tasks, Sirius and James sneaked out to Hogsmeade to procure copious amounts of alcohol.

Gryffindor Tower buzzed with excitement as they celebrated their win. However, Sirius was not in the mood to dance and laugh with his friends. Instead, he lounged on the couch with Marlene. Every now

and then, James would shoot him a concerned look. Sirius responded with an unconvincing smile, and the pattern repeated itself.

Eventually, James joined Sirius and Marlene on the couch. He placed a pillow on his lap and gestured for Sirius to lie down on it – an offer he gratefully accepted. Sirius closed his eyes, relishing the sensation of James massaging his scalp.

It was a while before James spoke again. “Has Pads told you why he’s in a mood, Marls?”

The Marauders found it amusing that everyone accepted their new nicknames without question. They made a game of offering increasingly convoluted explanations for them.

“He has not,” Marlene said, nudging Sirius’ bent legs with her foot. “He’s just been sitting there being all broody and mysterious.”

“We should play truth or dare!” a new voice chimed in.

Sirius cracked open an eye, surprised to discover that a large circle had formed around them. Unusually, it was Mary who suggested the game, her eyes glassy as she sipped from a smoking glass.

“Not again,” James groaned. “How many times do I have to skinny dip in the lake before you people will be satisfied?”

Without warning, Sirius sat up. “I want to play.”

James blinked at him, taken aback by both his sudden movement and unexpected enthusiasm.

“Looks like someone’s keen to see you naked,” Marlene quipped with a wicked grin.

Sirius shot her a filthy look, wrestling the bottle of fire whiskey out of her hands and taking a deep sip in retribution.

“Think you might want to ease up a bit there, Pads?” James said, eyeing the bottle uneasily.

“Lighten up, Prongs. It’s Quidditch day, remember?”

As was their tradition, they spun an empty bottle to select whose turn it was. The dares were mild. Peter performed a surprisingly skilful striptease, and Lily and Remus swapped outfits. A pretty Fourth Year named Violet blushing confessed that she considered Sirius to be the most handsome boy in school.

“Shocker,” James said, grabbing the bottle of firewhiskey and taking a sip.

When it was Mary’s turn to spin the bottle, it landed on Sirius. Everyone perked up in anticipation.

“Truth,” he said.

Mary gaped at him. Sirius understood her surprise; he had never once chosen anything but dare. His reasoning was simple: there was little he would not do, but there was a great deal he did not want to confess. To his left, James stared at him like he was a stranger. All Sirius knew was that if he delayed any longer, he might never confess. The flaw in his half-baked plan was immediately apparent – he was at the mercy of his questioner.

Sirius crossed his arms defensively. “Ask me something before I change my mind.”

Mary blinked, looking around the circle for inspiration. Floundering, she bit her lip. “Okay, who do you think is the prettiest girl at Hogwarts?”

Sirius blinked, surprised that the opportunity had been presented to him so easily. His stomach twisted. “I don’t know.”

Everyone jeered.

“You have to answer,” Mary said, pleasantly surprised to discover her question had elicited such coyness from usually fearless Sirius Black.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed,” Violet said eagerly. “Even if she’s in the circle.”

Subtle, Sirius thought rather uncharitably. He took another long sip from the bottle of firewhisky.

“I don’t know because I don’t fancy girls,” he blurted out. “I, uh, I fancy blokes.”

A deafening silence met his artless pronouncement. James was completely frozen, staring straight ahead. Panic spread through Sirius’ chest like ink in water. He handed Marlene the bottle.

“I think I’m done,” he announced, before fleeing for the portrait hole. Someone shouted his name before the portrait hole closed behind him, but all he cared about was getting away.

He went to the Astronomy Tower because he could not think of anywhere else to go. It was mercifully empty. Dizzy with panic, Sirius pressed a hand against the cool stone wall, then turned his back to lean against it.

“Fuck,” he cursed, sliding down to the floor and burying his face on his knees. “Idiot. Idiot. *Idiot.*”

He sat on the cold stone, arms wrapped around his knees. He did not notice the footsteps until a soft voice called his name.

“Sirius?”

James. Of course, James had come to find him. No matter how uncomfortable he was, James would never leave anyone alone when he thought they were upset.

Sirius lifted his head to address James’ knees. “You shouldn’t have followed me up here. People will think we’re having some sort of secret tryst.”

“I don’t care what they think,” James replied after a brief pause.

“Why not?” he asked bitterly.

James sat down next to him, moving slowly and carefully as if concerned that Sirius might bolt. He left a little space between them and Sirius wanted to cry.

“No one who would start a rumour like that matters to me,” James responded simply. “But you do.”

Curse James Potter and his sentimental heart. Sirius wiped his eyes, turning his head to hide his tears from James. He did not trust himself to speak.

“I thought you might have told me,” James said softly. “Before telling everyone, I mean.”

It was hard to force words out of his tight throat. “Sorry.”

James looked troubled. “Did I...do something. To make you think I’d mind?”

“No,” Sirius said, leaning his head back against the wall behind them. “I just didn’t want things to change between us.”

James twisted to face him, no longer concerned about maintaining distance. He looked genuinely distressed.

“This doesn’t change anything,” James insisted.

“Of course, it does.”

“It doesn’t!”

“Come on, James,” Sirius groaned. “You can’t tell me that you’re not going to be worried that I’m checking you out when we change into our Quidditch kit together.”

James settled back down next to him, their arms and legs pressed together. “I don’t care if you stare at me in the change room.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to.”

“Why not? I look great in my Quidditch robes.”

Sirius elbowed him in the ribs. The truth was he was terrified to even look at James in the changerooms. He studiously stared at the ground whenever they changed together.

“So, you fancy blokes,” James said at last.

Sirius snorted at his transparent attempt at sounding casual. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“So, you can tell me where I sit in the rankings!”

“What rankings?”

“The fitness rankings – best looking wizards at Hogwarts,” James grinned, warming to his idea. “Actually, it’s better if you’re the one deciding because that means you can’t include yourself and throw off the curve.”

Sirius gaped at him. He was not sure which was more shocking: the casual implication that James considered him attractive or the fact that he was so comfortable with Sirius assessing his own appearance. Sirius had expected discomfort and rejection; he had not expected this.

Sirius willed his traitorous heart to stop thundering in his chest. “Please,” he scoffed. “Like you need me to pump up your ego with that fan club of yours following you around everywhere.”

Just hours earlier, a few of James’ more dedicated female fans had unfurled a banner announcing: *We love James Potter* at the Quidditch match. Sirius could not blame them, even though he felt they were a

bit too obvious in their enthusiasm.

“I’m not asking about them,” James replied, a surprising note of intensity in his voice. “I’m asking about you.”

When he fixed his warm eyes on him, Sirius had no hope of controlling the racing of his heart. “Why?” he asked.

James shrugged off the brief look of confusion that flitted across his face. Not one to analyse his thoughts, James always just went with the flow. This was one area where James and Sirius were completely different.

“I just want to know,” James said, before quickly adding. “You know, I want to get the male perspective.”

“Right,” Sirius said, an illogical disappointment like acid in his stomach. “Well, rest assured that you’re just as good-looking from the male perspective too.”

The words did nothing to dispel the intensity of James’ gaze. “So, you think I’m fit?”

Sirius felt a swoop of irritation at his probing. Why was James so incapable of letting things go? Irritation made Sirius feel reckless. He smirked at James, letting his eyes run down the full length of his strong body, from his feet to the unruly mop he called hair.

The blatant scrutiny made James widen his eyes. A flush spread on his cheeks and neck. Was that blush also travelling down his chest? How far down his body could it travel? Sirius would give anything to find out.

“Yeah,” Sirius replied, his voice low. “I think you’re fit.”

James nodded with a little too much force to seem entirely natural. Despite his bravado, James seemed utterly thrown by the revelation. He opened his mouth, before shutting it slightly. He caught Sirius’ eye and cut his gaze away. Finally, Sirius took pity on him.

“I’m not making a pass at you, James,” Sirius said, patting his knee reassuringly. “You can relax. I know we’re just friends.”

Sirius was both relieved and disappointed when James did relax at that. For a while, they sat leaning against the cold stone wall. Then, James wrapped an arm around him. It was nothing unusual; it was something he always did when they were close like this. But Sirius could not articulate how grateful he was that James still wanted to be close to him. He leaned into his touch, letting out a sigh of relief that prompted James to squeeze his shoulder.

His deepest secret was exposed. James was still here. There were no other reactions that mattered.

“So,” James asked casually, breaking the silence. “Is this turning you on?”

The Astronomy Tower echoed with the sound of Sirius’ laughter.

For a week, James had been obsessed with catching Sirius looking at him. It had become his singular focus, ever since Lily had mentioned it during their argument. She had said it as if James would be aware of what she was talking about. The way Sirius *looked* at him. As if it were something incriminating or indecent. The thought should not have been so fascinating to James, but he had not been able to push it from his mind even for a moment since.

“Then there’s the way he *looks* at you,” Lily had said, as if it were significant. A look that said it all. But she did not know Sirius the way James did; he needed to see it for himself to understand what she meant. As a result, James was now spending an inordinate amount of time staring at Sirius – hoping to catch him in the act so he could finally get to the bottom of that eternal question of what they were to each other.

Not that it was a hardship staring at Sirius. He was endlessly fascinating to look at. Presently, he sat opposite James at his desk, his hair held in place with a spare quill. Born procrastinators, both were delaying getting started on the teetering piles of paperwork in their inboxes.

“What?” Sirius asked, noticing his scrutiny.

“Nothing,” James replied, cutting away his gaze. “Who are you writing to?”

“Minnie. I’m updating her on the exploits of her favourite former students.”

James was aware of the letters that Sirius and Minerva McGonagall exchanged. The first letter she had signed as simply “Minerva” was still on their fridge. Sirius’ obsession had begun the moment McGonagall had transformed into a sleek cat. He had described it as the single coolest thing he had ever seen.

Back in First Year, James had almost been jealous to have Sirius’ attention channelled away from him and towards their teacher. Now it just amused him that Sirius remained so taken with her ten years later.

It’s because Sirius is someone who loves really deeply, his traitorous mind supplied, recalling Lily’s words.

“Say ‘hi’ from me,” James said, hoping his voice sounded normal.

Sirius smiled sweetly at him. “Absolutely not.”

James shook his head in amusement, distractedly scanning an owl from his mother. Yet another missive to inform him that his presence was expected at the Samhain Ball – as if he did not attend the stuffy Ministry event every year.

None of his friends would be coming. The guest list was restricted to only the most prominent Pureblood families. Although he never deigned to come, Sirius always received an invitation. James suspected that he resented the reminder that despite his estrangement from his family, he was still a Black by blood. That was all that mattered at events like these.

Lily also did not want to go. She despised the idea of an exclusive party for Purebloods to rub shoulders with Ministry officials. There was growing paranoia among Order members that forces of darkness were infiltrating the Ministry. Little did they know that some members of those dark forces received embossed invitations.

Nonetheless, they could all see that the situation was escalating. Lily had told him about the increasingly draconian restrictions on Muggle-wizard relations that were passing through the Wizengamot. She was positively fearful of the implications of the repressive legislation coming from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures for Moony. The involuntary internment of werewolves was being actively discussed in civilised circles – a discussion that did nothing to ingratiate mainstream wizarding society to the communities that Remus visited to encourage them towards the Order’s cause.

Sirius leaned back in his office chair, stretching his arms over his head. Given they would be trapped in the office all day, neither of them had bothered to put on their robes over their casual jeans.

“I’m bored,” Sirius whined, before focusing his attention on James. “Entertain me.”

“Do you want me to dance for you or something?”

“Godric, no. I’ve spent far too much of my life watching you attempt to dance already.”

“Oi - ” James protested.

Sirius spun around in his chair. “Maybe you should hex me.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, that’s it,” Sirius confirmed, climbing to his feet and holding out his arms. “Hex me.”

“Merlin, I’m locked in a room with an actual lunatic,” James said, addressing the ceiling.

Sirius stalked over to his side of the room, pulling out his wand. “Stop being a drama queen and hex me.”

“This is not a normal request,” James replied, straightening his legs slightly in anticipation.

In fact, it was a standard request for them. Sirius and James had always pushed each other when it came to mastering new spells. During basic training at the Auror Academy, they had relentlessly tested each other ahead of their exams. Their dorm had become a perennial danger zone; Sirius had once even hexed him while he showered – a win James still considered cheating.

Sirius just kept advancing slowly towards him, a manic glint in his eyes. “We need to stay sharp, Prongsie. Or we’ll be useless when they finally let us back in the field.”

“And you think a natural re-enactment of the field is demanding that someone hex you?” he responded sceptically. “I think criminals are slightly more familiar with the art of surprise than you give them credit for.”

Despite his protests, a thrum of excitement sounded low in his stomach as Sirius moved into his orbit. He stopped about a metre away from James’ chair, a look of challenge on his face. “Fine,” he said. “Surprise me.”

James was in motion before Sirius had even finished speaking, leaping to his feet and summoning a small but blinding light in his palm. When Sirius staggered back to shield his eyes, James shot an Expelliarmus at him. Sirius dropped to the ground, ducking the disarming spell and aiming a knee-weakening hex in response.

James hit the floor, before shooting a spell at the ground under Sirius’ feet, transforming the worn carpet into quicksand. At the same moment, Sirius aimed a confusion hex at him. James blinked stupidly, sitting on the ground with his useless legs stretched out, trying to remember where he was and what he was doing.

“James!”

He frowned. He recognised that voice, but where on earth was it coming from?

“Finite incantatem!”

The confusion lifted. James realised in horror that Sirius was already waist-deep in quicksand.

“A little help?”

James cursed, crawling towards him. It was a crafty little spell; casting a Finite incantatem would leave Sirius trapped halfway through the floor. There was nothing for it but to pull him free as the vicious sand attempted to drag him under with a great sucking noise.

Using all his strength, James hauled Sirius bodily out of the hole until they were sprawled in a heap on the ground. For a moment, they lay there, catching their breath. James murmured a counter-spell, and the treacherous patch of sand disappeared.

Sirius sat up, glancing back at James with a raised eyebrow. Another burst of anticipation flared in James’ stomach. A dangerous smile spread across Sirius’ face as he read the expression correctly.

Sirius catapulted himself forward towards his usual side of the office. As he moved, he aimed his wand at a hideous paperweight on James’ desk.

“Bombarda!”

James rolled away as the glass ball exploded, shielding himself from the shards. He was glad that Auror offices were well soundproofed for security. Crawling forward, he peered through the gaps in the table to gauge Sirius’ location.

A thick fog crept towards him, obscuring his view. He squinted, attempting to wave away the impacts of the spell that Sirius had cast to camouflage himself.

“Obscuro!” Sirius exclaimed.

James found himself blindfolded on his hands and knees. But Sirius had given away his location when he uttered the spell. Not underneath the desks but on top of them. James leapt to his feet and blindly aimed his wand in the direction of Sirius’ voice.

“Brachiabindo!”

The sound of fluent and creative cursing confirmed that James had hit his mark. Pulling off the blindfold, he grinned when he saw Sirius lying flat on the desk with his arms bound to its wooden surface, beside his head. Papers flew everywhere—all their neglected work suddenly airborne.

A surge of triumph filled James until he realised that Sirius was spinning his wand one-handed to aim it at the bindings around his right wrist.

James leapt onto the desk, planting his knees on either side of Sirius’ hips before reaching up to grab his wand from his immobilised hand. He held it out of reach over his head.

“Do you yield?” James asked, peering down at Sirius, who still lay flat on the table between his knees.

Sirius ran his tongue over his teeth, considering his options. “Grudgingly,” he said at last.

James relaxed, casting an appraising eye over him. “Do I want to know why you’re so familiar with the process of getting out of bindings?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answer to,” Sirius replied, raising a suggestive eyebrow.

“There’s nothing about you I wouldn’t want to know.”

James had no idea what possessed him to say it, but it was true. He had always wanted to know everything about Sirius. Even the parts he kept hidden. Especially those parts. Every inch of him. James felt his smile fade from his face.

Sirius stared up at him, sprawled out on the table with an inscrutable expression on his face. James quickly murmured a Finite to release him from the invisible bindings, but Sirius made no attempt to lower his arms from alongside his head. His only movement was to rotate his wrists slightly next to his ears, as if testing their freedom from restraints.

James pressed his fingers to one of those exposed wrists, discovering to his surprise that Sirius’ pulse was racing. “Did the spell hurt you?” he asked worriedly.

Sirius swallowed tightly. “No. Not at all.”

“Good.”

James could not tear his eyes away from Sirius, all that strength and wildness lying pliant underneath him. His hair was a tousled mess, and the exertion had brought a flush to his cheeks. In that moment, James felt an overwhelming urge to discover whether the skin of Sirius’ inner arm was as soft as it looked.

James willed himself to stand up and make a joke. Instead, his fingers traced a line from wrist to forearm without his permission. He watched, oddly captivated, as his hand glided along the smooth skin, following the curve of Sirius’ bicep, partially hidden by his t-shirt sleeves. So many surprising angles and contours on that strong body.

Sirius closed his eyes. He did not resist; he did not even tense. He trusted James completely. The thought ignited an unexpected swell of emotion; there was not another living soul that Sirius would trust this way. Not a lover. Not a friend. Suddenly, James felt far more breathless than he had during their duel.

It was time to pull away. But first James needed to explore the contrasting texture of Sirius’ smooth cheek and the rasp of stubble on his jaw. Once he reached Sirius’ jawline, it seemed almost absurd not to trace his fingers down his throat. Sirius shivered at the touch.

James followed the curve of his neck to the little indent at the base of his throat, a spot he had often gazed at over breakfast in the Great Hall or during Quidditch training. He pressed his thumb lightly into it. A perfect fit. When Sirius swallowed, James could feel it. Fascinated, James stroked his thumb along the edge of that valley, down to his collarbone.

Sirius made a soft sound that James felt all the way down to his feet. Their gazes locked. The room seemed to heat around them. A strange expectation grew in James’ stomach. For a suspended moment everything was quiet and still.

A sudden panic washed over James. With a jolt, he realised how this would appear to someone entering their office: James straddling Sirius on the desk with their office in disarray. Embarrassment surged through him, and he quickly pulled his hand away, clearing his throat as he climbed down from the desk, his blood still fizzing in his veins.

“Merlin, look at this place,” James said with forced nonchalance.

He cast a quick Reparo and the room shifted back into order around them as Sirius slid smoothly from the desk to his chair. James had always imagined Sirius’ Animagus form would be something elegant and feline. Seeing him as Padfoot made everything click. His physical grace was a superficial quality; it was his loyalty and willingness to protect his pack that truly defined him.

“At least I’m not bored anymore,” Sirius said cheerfully, his easy tone dissipating the lingering tension in the air.

“For now,” James replied, relieved that things had returned to normal. “But we both know that will last for about ten minutes.”

Sirius shrugged nonchalantly. “Then you’ll just have to hex me again in ten minutes.”

James felt a guilty thrill at the thought of pinning Sirius to the desk again. But Sirius seemed completely unfazed, picking up his quill to continue working on his letter to McGonagall.

James Potter was going to be the death of him, Sirius mused as he hurried to the Ministry owlery.

He had used his letter to Minnie as an excuse to flee. Although she never came close to admitting it, Sirius knew that his former teacher appreciated his letters. She had always had a soft spot for the Marauders – particularly James, who had led Gryffindor to victory in the Quidditch Cup every year of his captaincy.

In his letters, Sirius told her about their lives as adults and she would respond with complex spells they could try. But mostly, he told her all about James. Sirius wrote reams of parchment on that topic alone. He could only imagine what McGonagall made of it; he doubted he had ever fooled her since he was eleven years old.

Sirius was under no illusions about the possibility that his feelings for his best friend could be reciprocated. He knew where he stood. He tried to be the friend that James deserved – tried and tried not to feel the way he felt. But his stupid, hopeful heart always gathered evidence.

It pointed out those moments when James would hold him as if he never wanted to let go, when the world would fade away, leaving just the two of them. Those lingering gazes and the electric feeling of fingertips brushing against each other. James was so generous with his affection that sometimes Sirius almost fooled himself into thinking it meant more than it did – that maybe James longed for him too.

Hope was a treacherous thing. It made Sirius feel as though everything he had ever wanted was within grasp. It made him believe that all those small gestures – the tattoos, speaking up for him at Order meetings, touching him gently after their impromptu duel – were imbued with deeper meaning.

But Sirius knew from experience that hope would make the inevitable disappointment more painful. The day was fast approaching when James would move on with Lily – all she had to do was gather the courage to ask him to step forward into their future together.

Sirius needed a distraction, something he could hold onto when James inevitably left him behind.

He was so lost in thought that he was not paying attention to where he was going. He collided with someone walking in the opposite direction, dropping his parchments on the ground. Sirius bent down to collect them, apologising profusely to the wizard he had run into.

“You don’t need to apologise, Sirius,” said a confident voice from above. “No harm done.”

Sirius glanced up, surprised to see Nicholas Gaunt smirking down at him. A tangle of confused emotions stirred in his chest. He understood why James hated Nicholas on principle. James had always believed in simple categories: good and bad, right and wrong. But he did not understand how it felt to live in the houses where Sirius and Nicholas had grown up. Upbringings like theirs created a skewed perception of what affection was supposed to look like. Nicholas was intense, but who was Sirius to judge?

“Not even a little?” Sirius joked. “I must be losing my touch.”

“Were you trying to do me some harm?” Nicholas asked playfully. His mismatched eyes had always appealed to Sirius. “Am I a person of interest to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?”

Sirius offered him his most charming smile, flirting out of habit. “A very specific part of the Department might be interested.”

“Well,” Nicholas replied, his gaze raking over Sirius with unabashed interest, “I would never fail to cooperate with an Auror’s investigation. Maybe we should get a drink, and you can interrogate me.”

For a moment, Sirius wavered. He knew from bitter experience that pursuing someone else would do nothing to quell his feelings for James. But perhaps a bit of space would do them both good. If the boundaries were blurring, it was probably time to reassert them. Sirius had to move on. To *really* move on. Their odd moment in the office was nothing in the grand scheme of things – not worth gambling a

friendship on. Not when he had so much to lose.

“The Department thanks you for your cooperation,” Sirius said, forcing a lightness into his tone. Even as they made their plans, his throat still tingled where James had touched it.

Notes:

Thank you **so much** to everyone who has read, commented and left kudos. I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Tune in next time for drama at the Samhain Ball.

Notes:

[1] A reference to Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* – “Each time you happen to me all over again.”

Chapter 6 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152210737>): **Certain Dark Things – Part I**

Summary:

“I thought you were dead,” James confessed. “At the door. When you fell, I thought you were going to die right in front of me.”

“I’m sorry,” Sirius rasped.

James shook his head, burrowing more closely into the space between Sirius’ neck and his shoulder. Sirius wished that it did not hurt to move. He would have loved to press his fingers into the wild mess of hair that was tickling his nose.

“You’re not allowed to die, Padfoot,” James whispered tearfully, his breath hot on the skin of Sirius’ neck. “Promise me you won’t die.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

For a moment, it almost seemed like a promise he could keep. With James this close, many impossible things seemed possible.

Notes:

TW: Physical and emotional child abuse in the flashback right at the beginning.

Soundtrack: *"Dancing on my own"* (<https://open.spotify.com/track/2BOqDYLOJBiMOXShCV1neZ?si=78930649bd594e15>) by Calum Scott

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_6_endnotes\)](#).)

*“I do not love you as if you were a salt rose, or topaz
or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.
I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

*I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;
thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,*

risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body...

- Pablo Neruda, "Love Sonnet XVII"

Grimmauld Place, London – 1975

When his father called him into the study after dinner, Sirius was not particularly concerned. Whenever he came home from Hogwarts, he was subjected to regular lectures about what a disappointment he was. He had chosen to view these comments as compliments. If his parents disapproved, Sirius must be doing something right.

That night, Orion sat behind his ornate desk with Walburga behind him. Sirius found himself oddly struck by his mother's beauty – the sharp lines of her face, the generous curve of her mouth. Every piece of her exactly where it belonged. A perfect beauty hiding a deep well of darkness.

Orion spoke at length about family and duty. Blood and purity. Fathers and sons. As he spoke, he rolled up his sleeves – an uncharacteristically casual gesture. That was the first warning Sirius had that something was wrong.

"It's time to choose a side, Sirius," Orion said grimly.

For a moment, everything was still. Sirius had known this day was coming and that, when it came, he was going to die. He would never take the Dark Mark. They all knew it. This entire interaction was merely performance, a justification for what came next.

His mind went straight to James like a compass seeking North. James would take the news of his death hard. Sirius hated the thought of hurting that big, stubborn heart of his. But Effie and Monty would keep him afloat. James would persevere because he was brave and strong. It would take time, but he would be alright without Sirius.

Sirius lifted his chin. He refused to beg his parents for mercy. Instead, he mustered all the swagger he had learned from Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd. He met his father's eye. "You and your Dark Lord can go fuck yourselves."

The pain was worse than he remembered. It lasted for hours. Orion was surgical about it. He generally preferred cuts to the Cruciatus. Pain for pain's sake was more Walburga's preference. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

Sirius was not aware that he had passed out until he woke up alone in the dusty office. He coughed, wincing at the pain that blossomed in his chest.

"Sirius."

He squinted into the darkness, trying to make out the face of the figure hunched over him. "Reg?"

Something heavy struck his chest and he gasped at the impact. It took Sirius a few minutes to understand the Regulus had handed him a knapsack – his overwhelmed nervous system interpreting any contact as pain.

"You have to go, Sirius," Regulus whispered urgently. "You have to get out of here right now."

Regulus hauled him to his feet with effort. He pressed Sirius' wand into his hand. Sirius stood blinking in confusion.

"They'll be back any minute," Regulus hissed. "It's time to go."

"What about you?" Sirius rasped, his throat aching from all the screaming.

"Like you care," Regulus replied dismissively.

Sirius coughed again. He was not entirely sure that he could walk. But it didn't matter; he would have to. "Of course, I care about you," he replied.

Regulus had never processed emotions well. His offered no response to Sirius, although his face hardened with determination. He pushed Sirius towards the door to the office. Sirius nearly swooned with pain. Regulus grabbed his arm to keep him upright, leading him to the hallway that would take him to the front door.

"I put some gold in your bag," Regulus instructed. "You can catch the Knight Bus to Potter."

James. Of course, Regulus knew where he would go. Perhaps Sirius would get to see James again after all. Just the thought made him feel stronger, which was probably his brother's intention. Nonetheless, Sirius wavered in the hallway. How could he leave Regulus behind to be swallowed by the darkness of their family? His conflict must have shown on his face. That determined stiffness in Regulus loosened slightly.

"You don't belong here, Sirius," Regulus said almost gently. "You never have. But I do."

Then, as if he knew that Sirius could not be the one to walk away, he strode back down the hallway and towards the stairs to their bedrooms. Alone in the hallway, Sirius finally found the strength to open the front door and walk out of it.

Sirius had no idea how he had made it all the way to Potter Manor. Even the Knight Bus driver seemed alarmed when he boarded. Luckily, discretion was part of the service, particularly this late at night. Sirius lay on a bed as the bus bounced around the country. Every lurch made him feel as if his insides might spill out of him.

Would he die after all? Hopefully not until he saw James.

The driver himself had to wake him when they arrived at Potter Manor. Sirius staggered down the steps with his knapsack and felt the wards reaching out towards him. Welcoming him as a friend. Eager to bring him within their protection.

His vision narrowed as he walked to that beloved front door. The sound of his ragged breaths – in and out, in and out – was all he could hear. Sirius had to get to James. One step at a time. Just keep breathing.

Sirius slipped over on the gravel, hardly noticing the burn of his knees. Everything was painful. Somehow, he made it to the front door. He rang the bell, leaning heavily on the door frame.

Sirius could feel the last of his strength draining away as he swayed on the spot. He had made it. He would get to see James again.

Suddenly James was right there, blinking into the darkness from behind his glasses. The reality of him was momentarily shocking. "Pads?" he asked, a grin already forming on his face at the sight of his friend despite the late hour. "What are you doing here?"

When Sirius stepped into the light that spilled out from the house, his smile vanished. Sirius stood for a moment swaying with dark spots in his vision.

"Hey Jamie," Sirius said, and then he collapsed.

James darted forward and caught him before he hit the ground. Thank Godric for those Chaser reflexes. The last thing he heard was James calling for his parents.

The dreamless sleep was a gift. But eventually, reality returned to him in pieces. Sirius was lying on the couch in the living room of Potter Manor. The lights were out. James was sitting on the floor next to him, clutching his hand tightly.

James was looking towards the door to the entranceway, which was open a crack. Sirius realised suddenly that James was listening to the raised voices of his parents.

"What exactly is your plan, Fleamont? You're going to go over there and challenge Orion to a duel?"

"Someone has to hold them accountable," Monty shouted.

Sirius felt a flash of guilt. He had never heard Monty shout before. It was all his fault. Darkness clung to him like a second skin; he brought it wherever he went.

"This is not about justice. If you go over there it is about vengeance. What kind of example would you be setting for the boys then?"

"They *tortured* him, Euphemia. For hours. Their own son. Doesn't that make you angry?"

"Of course, I'm angry," Effie spat. "But we both know what will happen if you go there. No good will come from you being thrown into Azkaban. We need you here."

Sirius tried to sit up, but his nerves shrieked in protest. James whipped around to look at him, his concern apparent even in the dim room. Before Sirius could pull himself upright, James lifted himself onto his knees and gently pressed him back down onto the comfort of the sofa.

Sirius was painfully aware of the heat of his hand on his chest. A reminder that good feelings still

existed, despite the pain. It was quiet in the hallway. Sirius could tell that something had shifted. He heard the creak of a floorboard. A shaky breath.

“How can a parent do that to their own child?” Monty asked, his voice almost inaudible. “To Sirius. It’s unthinkable.”

“I know,” Effie said, her voice sweet and soothing once more.

Monty had murmured so softly that Sirius could hardly hear him. “We should have gotten him out of that house years ago.”

Effie paused. “I know,” she said again.

The low voices in the hallway retreated as James’ parents moved deeper into the house. Sirius stared at James, trying to figure out if he was angry at Sirius for causing that uncharacteristically ugly fight in this warm, welcoming house.

“Sorry,” Sirius rasped. He pressed his hand limply to James’ where it still lay on his chest.

James immediately threaded their fingers together again. “You have nothing to be sorry for,” he said firmly.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” Sirius said, although it was not exactly true. This was the only place he had considered; it had not even occurred to him to think of somewhere else.

To his surprise, James pressed his face into his shoulder. “I’m glad you came here,” he said, his voice wet.

“You can’t let your dad go to Grimmauld Place,” Sirius murmured, his voice still sore. “He’ll get hurt.”

James let out a noise that sounded like a sob, one of his hands twisting the fabric of Sirius’ t-shirt. “I thought you were dead,” James confessed. “At the door. When you fell, I thought you were going to die right in front of me.”

“I’m sorry,” Sirius rasped.

James shook his head, burrowing more closely into the space between Sirius’ neck and his shoulder. Sirius wished that it did not hurt to move. He would have loved to press his fingers into the wild mess of hair that was tickling his nose.

“You’re not allowed to die, Padfoot,” James whispered tearfully, his breath hot on the skin of Sirius’ neck. “Promise me you won’t die.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

For a moment, it almost seemed like a promise he could keep. With James this close, many impossible things seemed possible.

“How do I look?” Lily asked, holding out her arms and spinning on the spot.

“Beautiful,” James said from his spot on the couch.

She was wearing a dress that Euphemia had chosen to perfectly complement the scarlet and gold Potter family dress robes. Only official family members could wear the robes; Effie herself had received her beautiful, enchanted dress only after she married Monty. A gift from her mother-in-law. Lily would not receive hers unless she and James married.

James secretly loved wearing the family colours, even at stuffy events like the Samhain Ball. These sorts of boasts were common among Purebloods, but Monty swore that their family line could be traced back to Godric Gryffindor himself.

Although he was not interested in clothes, James liked the way he felt wearing the scarlet robes. In particular, he liked the enchanted embroidery on the golden sash that stretched proudly over his chest. Each year, it incorporated new symbols to mark important milestones in his life. There was even a tribute to Sirius on them: the constellation of Canis Major. Prongs also made an appearance, much to his parents’ confusion.

James could tell that Lily thought these family traditions were ridiculous and quaint. Nonetheless she

was very pleased with her red dress; he suspected that it was the decisive factor compelling her to agree to attend despite finding the entire event wildly elitist.

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Lily commented, rolling her eyes and returning into the bathroom to continue applying her make-up. “I still can’t believe you convinced me to go. You realise I’m going to drag you to a public lecture at the British Library in retribution.”

“I look forward to my education,” James replied dryly. Lily stuck out her tongue at him, making him chuckle.

Sirius had not come home last night. Given his many admirers, this was not unusual. It never failed to irk James when it happened. He was not prudish - he just doubted that a one-night stand could understand how lucky he was to spend a night with Sirius.

Last night it had bothered James more than usual. There was no reason to be resentful. They had not had plans together. In fact, Lily had stayed over, although she probably regretted it given that James had been distracted all night. He wanted to know where Sirius was. He wanted to know who he was with and whether they were worthy of his time.

Before Sirius left for the evening, James attempted to come up with futile reasons for him to stay home. Chores they needed to complete as soon as possible. Sirius reassured him that everything could wait until he got home. James stayed awake long into the night listening out for the door.

He was not in the mood to attend a formal event after his sleepless night. But seeing Lily had not wanted to attend in the first place, he knew he would have to shake off the feeling. Rise to the occasion to be a perfect date. Lily deserved his focus and attention.

James heard the key turn in the front door and his heart leapt. He clambered to his feet, feeling foolish when he realised that he was doing it for effect; Sirius had always liked him in his family robes.

Sirius strolled in, wearing the same clothes he had worn the night before. If he was surprised to see James standing near the door like an idiot, he gave no indication. His eyes widened at the sight of James in his finery. A faint blush appeared on Sirius’ cheeks. As always, his eyes flicked down to the bottom of the sash to where his star appeared. The first time James had shown him the little constellation, he had touched it reverently.

“Wow,” Sirius breathed. “You look great.”

James did not realise he was waiting for the reaction until it came. He knew he was being ridiculous, but the wild flash of pride he felt at Sirius’ approving gaze was dizzying.

James seized the opportunity to look Sirius up and down. After all, fair was fair. James was burning with curiosity about where Sirius had been and with who. Suddenly, James noticed a red mark on his throat. An irrational wave of anger passed over him; some nameless stranger had no right to leave a mark on Sirius’ skin.

“Did you have fun last night?” James asked tightly.

Sirius looked tired more than anything. “I always have fun, Prongs.”

James swallowed his disproportionate anger. “Good.”

Sirius frowned, picking up on his clipped tone. Aware he could not even begin to explain himself, James stepped closer and pressed a finger lightly to the mark on Sirius’ neck.

“You want me to heal that for you?” James asked in that same strained voice.

Although Sirius had probably not known the mark was there, he quickly guessed what James was referring to. James wondered what his own expression looked like to inspire Sirius’ gaze to darken.

“Leave it,” Sirius shrugged, a note of challenge in his voice. “I’m sure he left it there on purpose. He’ll be annoyed if it’s gone by the time we next see each other.”

James felt a wave of intense dislike for this mysterious figure. With effort, James forced himself to pull his finger away from Sirius’ neck. “So, you’re seeing him again, then?”

Before Sirius could respond, Lily wandered out of the bathroom, pressing her wrists together to spread her perfume.

“Looking good Evans,” Sirius said cheerfully, pointedly turning away from James.

Lily offered him a smile. Ever since their recent conversation about Sirius, Lily had tried extra hard

to be friendly. James was grateful. Really, he was. He just found the false note in both their voices when they tried to chat in that over-familiar way slightly grating.

“Tell me honestly, Sirius,” she said. “Will there be a ritualistic Muggle sacrifice at the ball tonight?”

“Lower your expectations,” Sirius said as he strode purposefully towards his bedroom. “More likely some crusty old relic on a Ministry sub-committee will bore you to death with his life story.”

“Looking forward to it,” she said, before glancing at James. “We missed you last night.”

James registered the slight rebuke in her words. Clearly, he had not been successful at hiding his frustration. The back of his neck heated with embarrassment.

“I’m touched, Lily,” Sirius replied, as he swept into his bedroom.

Lily rolled her eyes, sounding much more like her usual self. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Well, rest assured you will get your fill of me tonight,” Sirius called.

“Wait – are you coming to the ball?” Lily asked, glancing at James in surprise.

“I couldn’t miss the Muggle sacrifice, could I?” he quipped, appearing once more at the door of his bedroom as he changed his earrings.

James felt as if he had stepped onto the set of a play. Lily and Sirius chatted lightly around him, as if unaware that the world had turned upside down. Sirius never attended the Samhain Ball. He loathed anything associated with his family name and purest of Pureblood status.

James could not contain himself. “Since when do you go to the Samhain Ball?”

Sirius looked taken aback at his sudden interjection. “I’m invited,” he said defensively. “I’ve always been invited.”

“And you’ve never gone,” James retorted, crossing his arms. “So why are you going tonight?”

“I didn’t realise I had to clear my attendance with you, Prongs.”

James could not say exactly why he was so annoyed by this development; usually he loved it when Sirius attended a social event. “Are you going with someone?”

Sirius raised an eyebrow archly. “How could I break the hearts of every eligible bachelor there by going with a date?”

Relief was probably not the appropriate response to that. James searched about for another problem to point to. He sensed that Lily was frowning at him, but James was entirely focused on Sirius.

“What are you going to wear? It’s family dress.”

“Well, obviously I can’t wear Black colours,” Sirius replied tersely, his gaze turning flinty. “So, I’m just going to wear dress robes.”

“You should have told me you wanted to go,” James retorted stubbornly. “I would have sorted out robes for you with dad.”

Sirius blinked at James, as if not comprehending his words. “What are you talking about?”

James gestured impatiently to his own robes. “You could have worn ours.”

Sirius gaped at him. “I can’t wear Potter family robes.”

James lifted his chin defiantly. “Why not?”

“Because we’re not related, James,” Sirius replied, as if explaining something very straightforward to someone incredibly stupid.

“It’s family dress,” James said. “You’re family.”

Sirius’ expression rippled; it reminded James of skipping stones on the surface of the Great Lake at Hogwarts. James had the strange sense that his words were hurting Sirius, but he could not understand why. Sirius quickly mastered his expression, but a muscle in his jaw ticked with irritation.

“I’m not, though, am I?” Sirius said matter-of-factly. “Not really.”

James knew he had started it. But hearing Sirius say that he was not really a part of the family was unexpectedly painful. Some of his anger ebbed, replaced by a deep sadness that Sirius still did not understand what he meant to James and his parents.

“It doesn’t matter what it says on the invitation,” James reasoned, his voice gentler as he stepped closer. “My dad gets to decide who wears them.”

Sirius retreated back into his room, his expression shuttered. “You shouldn’t put him in the position

of saying no.”

James opened and closed his mouth, at a loss. He could not figure out exactly what exactly he wanted from Sirius in this moment. He knew he had bungled the interaction, but he was not exactly certain why.

Lily shot him another warning look when he opened his mouth. “Did you want us to wait for you, Sirius?” she asked evenly.

Sirius shook his head, avoiding both their eyes. “That’s okay. I’ll just meet you there.”

With that, Sirius closed his bedroom door in their faces.

Sirius stood on the edge of the dancefloor, swilling his drink in his hand. The ball was exactly what he expected it to be: pretentious, uptight, and self-satisfied. It was everything Sirius hated about wizarding society. His horrible mood did not help. He would have skipped the event entirely if he had not been determined to talk to his brother.

Sirius was not worried about attending the event alone. Even James sometimes struggled to match his enthusiasm for late nights and loud music, so he was used to forging his own way. But when he arrived at the long marble staircase into the magnificent ballroom, Sirius had felt strangely vulnerable. His arrival caused a stir; no one expected to see the prodigal son of Orion and Walburga Black here. Not even wearing his family dress robes.

Sirius knew his regal purple robes suited him. But after his confusing altercation with James, he felt self-conscious. James had no business making the ridiculous suggestion that he wear Potter family robes. Even if Monty had agreed out of charity, Sirius would have felt like a fraud. Better to wear dress robes than pretend to be something he was not.

Sirius compensated for his failure in dress code etiquette by taking extra care with his appearance, threading complicated gold threads through his curls and carefully selecting his best gold rings. As he walked down the stairs, he had attempted to remind himself that he did not need to impress anyone at this stupid party.

James was standing with his father and another older man when Sirius had entered. When he noticed Sirius, a strange expression had appeared on his face. Their eyes locked and Sirius had shivered at the intensity of his gaze. James tracked his progress down the stairs. Sirius could not tell whether James was wearing a good or bad expression.

Monty had followed the line of his son’s eyes and seemed amused when he saw Sirius. Monty summoned Sirius towards their little group with a wave. James had ruffled his hair when Sirius approached – the gesture so familiar that Sirius could not contain a rush of unbridled affection for him. Based on the indulgent look on Monty’s face, he had not been quite successful in hiding his reaction.

When Sirius was introduced to the older gentleman in their group, the man had peered curiously at his robes. Sirius could tell the moment he was placed in the almanac of society gossip: the disowned Black heir.

“You’re the spitting image of your mother,” the man had said. “She’s still a striking beauty, even at her age.”

James’ knuckles turned white around his glass at the mention of Walburga Black. Monty put a reassuring hand on Sirius’ shoulder.

“Well,” Sirius had responded blandly. “What my family lacks in basic human compassion we make up for in high cheekbones.”

James had coughed to hide his laugh. Despite himself, Sirius caught his eye and grinned. It felt good to be co-conspirators again. Monty bravely progressed the conversation away from this uncomfortable moment, seizing the opportunity to lobby the older man on some of the changes he wanted to see at the Ministry. He led the man towards the well-stocked bar, appreciating the importance of alcohol to the government relations process.

Now alone, James and Sirius stared at each other, unusually lost for words. James downed his drink and gestured for another from a waiter. Sirius considered suggesting he slow down his drinking, but he realised that would make him a hypocrite seeing he had every intention of relying on firewhiskey to get him through this night.

“We could have gone together,” James had said abruptly. “Lily didn’t even want to come.”

Sirius could not articulate how little wanted to be a stand-in for Lily Evans. “Come on – formalwear, dancing, political intrigue. Girls love that sort of thing.”

James had appeared to be struggling with something. “Listen, Siri – about the robes - ”

Sirius had felt the unusual urge to throttle him. “Fuck, James,” he snapped. “I get it. You hate my robes. Could you please just drop it?”

He had left James standing there blinking and bewildered by his sudden anger. More than an hour later, Sirius was gripped with both remorse and anger. Nothing was ever straightforward when it came to James Potter. He brooded over their sharp words to each other as he watched the happy couples rotating on the dancefloor.

“You’re way too pretty to just stand here and watch people dance.”

Sirius forced a smile as Nicholas appeared by his elbow. Just hours earlier they had been in bed together. It had been a necessary distraction, but Sirius was still uncertain about rekindling their short-lived relationship. Nicholas had been so focused and intent in pursuing him. Sirius had never come close to matching his intensity for obvious reasons. The asymmetry of their levels of investment made him feel guilty.

“I like to watch sometimes,” he quipped.

“Noted,” Nicholas said lasciviously. “Though just say the word and I’ll take you for a spin on the dance floor.”

Sirius felt his smile turn into a grimace as James and Lily came into view once more. “Maybe later.”

Nicholas pressed his lips together, as if swallowing a complaint. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Sirius was not in the mood to reassure him. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on the dancing. To his credit, Nicholas got the message and disappeared into the crowd to network. The Gaunt family – although as ancient as any present at the ball – had fallen into hard times. The family fortune was long since spent. Nicholas needed to make use of the opportunity to rub elbows with the rich and influential. Sirius admired his determination; he understood what it was to be an outsider.

Sirius had not even seen Regulus. He feared that the whole unpleasant evening would be a total waste. No more than a front seat to watch Lily and James dancing together.

Before Sirius could truly settle into the depths of self-pity, a warm hand wrapped around his bicep. He recognised her perfume before he even looked in her direction.

“Are you having a good night, my darling?” Effie asked.

“Laughing hysterically,” he replied glumly.

“I was surprised that you decided to come tonight.”

“Everyone is very surprised,” Sirius replied. “I thought James was going to have a stroke.”

Effie patted his arm. She knew exactly how difficult James could be when the world did not bend to his will.

“I always thought you avoided these events because you were worried about seeing your parents,” Effie said, pausing for a moment before adding: “Your mother isn’t here. Just so you know.”

Sirius offered her a tight smile. “The one thing that Walburga and I would agree on is that she’s not my mother anymore.”

“Her loss,” Effie said firmly. “Our gain.”

Sirius simply squeezed the hand that still rested on his arm. Lily and James appeared in their line of sight. It was not one of the traditional dances that they learnt when they were young, which would have left Lily feeling out of place. It was generic classical wizarding music – the exact antithesis of the music that Sirius liked. It always struck him as a fitting irony that it would be Muggles who could create musical masterpieces without the benefit of magic.

“They look good together,” Effie commented, regarding her son fondly. “A lovely couple.”

“Very lovely,” Sirius said flatly, taking a long sip of the strong drink in his hand. She was right; Lily and James made for a perfect picture. It was just the beginning of their happy lives together. Sirius felt ill at the sight. He could not look away.

“All I want is for you boys to be happy,” Effie mused, leaning her head against Sirius’ shoulder as they watched the dancefloor together.

“We’re happy,” Sirius reassured her. “We can hardly close the door of our flat it’s so brimming with joy.”

“Well, that sounds very inconvenient.”

Despite his determination to brood, Sirius could not help but grin. “It’s a complete nightmare.”

Effie had always sensed the yawning gap within him - the one left behind by his mother and father and their neglect. She had lavished him with affection since he was a child. But because Sirius was who he was, he could not trust affection that was freely given. Growing up, it took effort not to flinch whenever she hugged him.

Effie turned around to face him so that her back was to the dance floor. She smiled, pressing her warm hands to his cheeks. Sirius felt unusually shy under her scrutiny, dipping his head.

“My beautiful boy,” she said fondly. “Every day, I feel so grateful that James has you.”

For a mortifying moment, his eyes felt hot. Usually Sirius would make a joke, but he knew that he owed Effie better than his usual flippancy.

“Meeting James is the best thing that has ever happened to me,” he said in a low voice.

She hugged him and he returned her embrace without hesitation. Sirius noticed suddenly that James was staring at them over Lily’s shoulder. For a moment, they watched each other – held in separate embraces on opposite sides of the room. Then, James offered him a tentative little smile, nothing like his usual sunny grin.

Sirius felt suddenly self-conscious, as if he was taking something from James by accepting such blatant affection from his mother. Effie released him before he could pull away.

Returning to her place by his side, she turned back to watch her son spin Lily into a dip. It was just the sort of extravagant display that James loved, but Lily despised. James glanced shyly at Sirius again. Sirius gave him a thumbs up as a peace offering.

“Don’t encourage him,” Effie scolded half-heartedly.

“Like he needs my encouragement.”

“Please. Your attention is the only thing he’s ever wanted.”

A lance of bitter amusement passed through him. Sirius knew better than anyone the single-mindedness with which James had pursued Lily. James must have asked her out a hundred times at Hogwarts, never put off by her stubborn refusal to even consider it. James had been so delighted – and shocked – when she had finally given in.

“I think it’s pretty clear that’s not true,” Sirius said, unable to keep his voice entirely disinterested.

Effie studied his profile. Sirius quickly masked his features, taking another deep sip of his drink. He stared stubbornly at the dancefloor, desperate to keep up the pretence that she could not see right through him.

“Promise me something, Siri,” Effie said at last.

“Anything,” he said quickly. There was nothing he would be unwilling to do for Euphemia Potter. He owed the Potters everything. He would give Effie whatever she asked for, gladly.

“Don’t let James run off and marry her without telling him how you feel.”

Sirius froze, shock rendering him momentarily speechless. Effie just stared at him, eyes brimming with soft understanding.

“I – I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sirius stammered.

She raised an eyebrow. “I think you do.”

Sirius had never felt so exposed. His heart thundered in his chest. Surely, she did not intend to imply that he was anywhere near good enough for her son. Sirius could not allow himself even to hope,

although the Potters had always thought far too much of him.

“James should be with someone who can give him everything that he deserves,” he reasoned softly. “A real future.”

“And I think he deserves to make a decision about his future with all the relevant information,” Effie replied.

Sirius cut his eyes away once more, stubbornly staring at some point in the middle distance. “James would never choose me,” he said. “Even if he...I wouldn’t be the one he chose.”

“He’s chosen you every day since he first laid eyes on you.”

Members of the Potter family clearly had a vendetta against him tonight. Sirius felt his eyes blur and was immediately worried that his rock-and-roll eyeliner would run if he started crying.

“Not in the way you mean,” he said, shaking his head.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that Siri,” she said knowingly.

Sirius said nothing. But he knew that he would replay her words endlessly in his mind.

“Alright,” Effie said patiently when he did not respond. “I’ll back off for now. Just promise me that you’ll think about it.”

Sirius shook his head. “There’s nothing to think about.”

“If you say so,” she said, before clapping her hands together. “Now, I should probably find Monty before he challenges the Minister for Magic to a duel.”

It was exactly this possibility that made Fleamont Potter his hero. Effie tutted disapprovingly at the look on Sirius’ face. She glanced once more at Lily and James on the dancefloor before leaning into Sirius to squeeze his arm again.

“Just so you know,” Effie said in an undertone. “James always looks happiest when he’s with you.”

With that, she swept away – leaving Sirius wide-eyed and confused in her wake.

Notes:

I hope you enjoyed the new chapter! Thank you for the comments and kudos. Looking forward to sharing Part 2 - probably next week.

Chapter 7 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152632525>): **Certain Dark Things – Part II**

Summary:

“You really shouldn’t say things like that to me,” Sirius murmured.

“Why not?” James asked innocently.

“You’ll give me ideas.”

James licked his lips in a way that seemed unintentionally suggestive. “You have great ideas.”

“Not these ones,” Sirius replied, shaking his head. “These ideas are really, really stupid.”

Notes:

I hope you enjoy Part 2 of the Samhain Ball.

TW: Toxic relationship dynamics and some unwanted physical contact.

Soundtrack: "Corner of your heart" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/0x14EC3DVUApEgFN554nsQ?si=64b42e416834490e>) by Ingrid Michaelson

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_7_endnotes\)](#).)

*“...I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;
So I love you because I know no other way*

*than this: where I does not exist, nor you,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.”*

- Pablo Neruda, “Love Sonnet XVII”

Hogwarts School, Scotland – 1977

James knew he was sick. For days, he had felt bleary-eyed and congested, his nose as red as his Gryffindor tie. His ears kept popping and he was unsteady on his feet. A deep cough rattled his lungs.

Of course, none of that was going to keep him from playing Quidditch – particularly not against the Slytherin team.

“I’m going to say it one more time,” Remus said sternly, eyeing James from across the table in the Great Hall. “Are you sure you should be playing Quidditch today?”

“I’m playing,” James said firmly. At least he attempted to make it sound firm. With his blocked nose, he was finding it hard to distinguish his *p*’s and *b*’s.

“Of course, you are,” Sirius said sarcastically. James would have kicked him, but he was using Sirius’ shoulder as a pillow. “Because you’re a complete and utter masochist.”

“I’m the captain, Moony,” James reasoned, ignoring Sirius. “I have to set an example for the troops.”

“We’re all inspired by your dedication, Prongsie,” Sirius said, patting his head absently while sliding a goblet of orange juice towards him. Sirius had already tried to force-feed James buttered toast, but the mere thought of eating turned his stomach.

Peter arrived at the table, wearing a lion headdress and a tail.

Remus shook his head at them. “You’re all stark raving mad.”

Lily walked by, clutching a thick textbook against her chest. She smiled at Remus and complimented Peter on his house pride, not sparing a glance for James or Sirius. Undeterred, James raised a hand to wave weakly without lifting his head from Sirius’ shoulder.

“Alright Evans?” James called. “I’ll score a goal for you today.”

“Please don’t,” Lily responded, before asking Remus a detailed - and exceedingly dull - question about their Arithmancy homework.

“You realise you said ‘Ebans’ right?” Sirius murmured, nudging the juice closer until James finally took the hint and picked up the glass for a long sip.

James shrugged, closing his eyes. “Close enough.”

Sirius adjusted his posture slightly to let James nuzzle closer. “Are you sure you won’t have some Pepper-Up potion, at least?”

“You sound like Moony.”

“Moony is the only one of us with a brain.”

“No arguments here,” James smiled, his eyes still closed.

After breakfast, they made their way to the Quidditch Pitch. The combination of juice and the excitement of the impending match perked James up. He gave the team a rousing speech—relieved he could still pronounce “Slytherin” despite his cold. Sirius stood by his side like an overprotective shadow.

Soon enough, the whole team was soaring into the wide, open sky. The conditions were perfect for Quidditch. Sirius hovered close by, slicing through the air with his Beater bat.

James wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "You know you're supposed to defend the whole team."

"The rest of the team is fine," Sirius replied, narrowing his eyes mistrustfully at the Slytherin Beaters. "We all agreed I should keep an extra close eye on you."

"Traitors," James commented fondly.

Sirius shrugged shamelessly. "Just looking out for our captain."

When the whistle blew, James focused all his attention on the match. At first, he was fine – even if he was flying in an unnecessarily showy way to prove a point. He scored a couple of goals and even completed a full mid-air rotation to dodge a stray bludger. Sirius shot passed him, smashing the bludger back at Maisie Bletham – the Slytherin Beater – with far more force than necessary.

"They're targeting you because they know you're sick," Sirius fumed from his broom. "It's basically cheating."

"I'm shocked that Slytherin would stoop so low," James shot back.

Sirius said something back to him, but at that moment the world seemed to waver – contracting and expanding in a way that made him dizzy. James was not certain for a moment where the ground was. Or how it was possible for him to be so far away from it. He gripped his broom tightly. After a moment of confusion, the world righted itself and James let out a long, calming breath. He yawned and his ears popped. He realised suddenly that his broom was jostling against Sirius'.

"What the hell was that?" Sirius asked urgently, hovering alongside him with a hand on his shoulder.

James swallowed, his stomach churning. "Nothing – I'm fine."

Sirius shook his head. "Moony was right; you're too sick to play."

Before James could respond, another Bludger whipped past James – missing his nose by mere centimetres. In an instant, Sirius sprang into action, shooting after it and smashing it back toward the Slytherins. Sirius zoomed close to Eldric Etherdown, the captain of the Slytherin team, jabbing a finger threateningly into his face. The umpire blew his whistle to break up the fray.

James watched the scene unfold as if through fogged glass. The strangest feeling washed over him. His grip loosened, even as he willed his fingers to keep holding onto the broom. His joints ached. Another discombobulating wave of vertigo hit him. He realised dimly that he was about to pass out. He was already plummeting towards the ground when he heard Sirius shout.

"*JAMES!*"

Strangely, he did not lose consciousness. He watched the ground spin closer, unable to do anything but tumble toward it. He scrunched his eyes shut and braced for impact.

He must have blacked out for a moment. The next thing James knew, he was lying on his back, and Sirius was hurling himself off his broom. Dust rose from the pitch at the impact. Sirius stumbled, dropping to his knees on the pitch and hunching over James. James blinked at him in confusion; Sirius must have been flying awfully fast to land so soon after him. Everything was muddled.

"No, no, *no*," Sirius said frantically, his hands hovering over James as if afraid to touch him. The sun behind his head created a dazzling halo around his face. "Jamie, can you hear me?"

He sounded so worried. James grimaced, trying to lift his gloved hand. Sirius grabbed it, pressing it tightly to his chest. James could feel his heart hammering wildly beneath his fingers.

"Are you alright?" Sirius said urgently. "Please be alright. You have to be alright."

"I'm fine, Siri," James said, closing his eyes. "I'm just going to have a quick kip."

"James, *James*."

As the world slipped away, he could make out a voice that sounded like McGonagall.

"Mr. Black, please step back."

"Don't let him die. He can't die. *James*."

"Sirius – he's going to be alright. Please let go so we can help him."

He heard what sounded like a sob, before he finally passed out.

James came to in a hospital bed. He blinked back into consciousness. Glancing blearily around the room, James recognised Sirius slumped in a chair next to the bed, his face buried in his hands, still wearing his Quidditch uniform. James shifted, wanting to reach out to comfort him, but the movement made him cough.

Sirius' head shot up. In one fluid motion, he moved from the chair to sit on the edge of the bed. He grabbed a glass of water from the bedside table, pressing it carefully to James' lips. James swallowed gratefully; his limbs still felt weak.

"Sorry," James croaked as Sirius placed the glass on the table again.

Sirius shook his head wordlessly; his lips were pressed together into a thin line. It looked like he had been crying.

"What happened?" he asked.

Sirius' face crumpled. Alarm shot through James as his friend pressed his face into his hands again. James could not stand seeing Sirius cry; it made his skin feel too tight.

"Siri," he breathed watching his shoulders shake. "Come on – it's okay."

"No, it's *not*," Sirius spat, lifting his tear-stained face from his hands. "You would have died without the cushioning charm."

"Oh," James said, not quite sure how he felt about his brush with death. He had always believed, in an abstract sort of way, that he was invincible. Clearly, he had been wrong.

"McGonagall cast it," Sirius said, wiping his eyes roughly as his tears continued to stream down his cheeks. "I wasn't even fast enough to get to you."

James felt a squeeze in his chest at the image of Sirius trying to reach him, desperately attempting to catch him as he tumbled towards the ground. Surely Sirius understood that no one could have caught up with him from that distance. James was just lucky that Minerva McGonagall had been so quick-thinking.

"Remus should be your best friend from now on," Sirius said abruptly.

"What?" James asked, confused by the sudden pronouncement.

"I didn't even try to stop you from playing," Sirius replied, his voice thick with self-loathing.

"Siri, you know you couldn't have stopped me."

"I should have tried! I could have tied you up or something."

James huffed a laugh, which turned into a groan. With effort, he propped himself up on the pillows and spread his arms invitingly.

"Come here," James said impatiently when Sirius just gaped at him.

Sirius let out an incredulous sob. "I don't deserve a hug."

James rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm sick, so I do."

Sirius could not argue with that. Uncertainly, Sirius climbed onto the hospital bed. James wrapped his arms around him, letting out a satisfied hum when Sirius settled against his chest.

"It's not your fault," James murmured.

Sirius pressed his face into his neck. Neither of them mentioned the tears that wet the fabric of James' hospital gown.

"It goes both ways, you know," Sirius said at last.

"What?" James asked, distracted by the tickle of his warm breath on his skin.

"You're not allowed to die on me either."

James remembered the promise he had extracted from Sirius when their positions were reversed on the night he had run away from home. The reminder made him tighten his grip on his friend.

"Then I promise, too," James said.

They lay together on the bed, not looking up until McGonagall swept in. She did not comment on their closeness; at this point, she was used to it.

"I hear you saved my life, Professor McGonagall," James said warmly. "I knew I was your favourite."

McGonagall ignored him, instead settling her disapproving gaze onto Sirius. James felt a flash of trepidation, fearing she might attempt to send him away.

“I assume it would be pointless to tell you to go back to the dorm by curfew tonight, Mr. Black?”

“You can try,” Sirius shrugged. “But we both know that I’ll just end up coming back here.”

“Very well,” McGonagall said, as if deeply exhausted by the conversation.

With a flick of her wand, a mouth-watering array of food from the kitchens filled the little table next to James’ bed. A cosy trundle bed, draped in Gryffindor red and gold, appeared alongside the hospital bed. James noticed she had even conjured pyjamas for Sirius.

“You’re the best, Minnie,” Sirius grinned.

“That’s Professor McGonagall to you, Black.”

“Yes ma’am,” he replied with an indecent grin.

James chuckled at his blatant insubordination. McGonagall sniffed at Sirius, although her eyes twinkled behind her glasses as she walked to the other side of James’ hospital bed. She pressed a surprisingly motherly hand to his shoulder.

“Rest up, Potter. We need you fighting fit before the Ravenclaw match next week.”

“I will,” James promised. “Thank you for saving me. And for letting Sirius stay with me.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You say that as if it would be possible to stop him.”

James could not hide his grin as he peered down at Sirius fondly. “I guess I’m his favourite too.”

Sirius did not deny it. Nor did he use the opulent trundle bed that night.

Regulus Black looked every inch the heir of Orion as he held court in a small room off the Grand Ballroom. A tall bookshelf lined one wall, and three surprisingly comfortable antique couches surrounded the flickering fire. Various dignitaries attending the Samhain Ball entered to speak with the heir of one of the oldest unbroken wizarding lines in the world. *Toujours Pur*.

Sirius waited until the room was empty before stepping inside. Regulus stood before the fireplace, his straight back turned to the door. Sirius paused, taking a moment to examine his younger brother, now eighteen and standing in the role Sirius himself should have occupied. In their traditional family, the firstborn son was expected to shoulder the responsibility of managing the estate of a dying patriarch. Here was Regulus, freshly out of school, bearing that burden alone.

Regulus was wearing the family robes, of course. When Sirius had started at Hogwarts, his friends had innocently assumed that Black family robes would be green and silver. In their parochial eleven-year-old minds, they had assumed that an ancient family with a monomaniacal obsession with blood purity would be connected to Salazar Slytherin.

The Black family actually had very little to do with Hogwarts. His father was the first generation of his progenitors to grow up in the United Kingdom. Their lineage was French, and their family house at Beauxbatons – when the family had finally stopped their practice of home schooling – had been Ombrelune.

Their robes were a deep navy blue, far more ornate and elegant than had been the fashion in the UK at the time when these things were established. They never suited Sirius the way the Potter robes suited James, who easily embodied generations of gallantry in his golden sash.

“I know you’re standing there, Sirius,” Regulus said without turning around.

“Creepy,” Sirius replied, stepping into the room. “Am I interrupting an intimate moment between you and the fireplace?”

Regulus had once thought he was funny. There was no hint of it when he turned around and cast a disapproving look at his purple robes. “You look like an aubergine,” he sneered

“Yes, no one likes my robes,” Sirius said, rolling his eyes. “I am aware of the consensus.”

Regulus looked thin; his cheeks were sunken, and his hair had grown out, curls spilling over his forehead. He was taller than Sirius remembered. Still growing. The fact made him seem even younger.

“You’re irritable,” Regulus commented. “Are you and Potter having a lover’s tiff?”

“We’re not together,” Sirius said quickly. “You know, I’m thinking of just printing that on a sign.”

Regulus wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Please don't mistake my question for an indication I want to hear anything about your romantic tribulations."

"Really?" Sirius quipped. "I thought you were doing couple's counselling in here."

A complicated expression briefly crossed Regulus' features. He turned his gaze back to the bookcase. Sirius remembered how much he had always loved reading. Regulus had been a gentle, quiet kid. Sirius had no idea what kind of man he was becoming.

"I'm sure you've heard about Father," Regulus said, still scrutinising the spines of the Ministry books rather than his brother. Would he have preferred to curl up on the velvet chaise with one of them? Or did he actually enjoy the political posturing that came with leading their family?

"I heard he's sick," Sirius replied.

Regulus inclined his head. "The Ministry is paying unwanted attention to the contents of his estate."

Sirius snorted. "You mean they want to seize all the dark objects Dear Old Dad hordes around Grimmauld Place."

"Family heirlooms," Regulus corrected in that chilly voice of his. "Safeguarded by our family line for generations."

"You mean used recreationally to torture Muggles for generations."

"So, you know what *I'm* doing in here," Regulus replied, ignoring the jab. "Perhaps you'd like to tell me what you're doing here?"

Sirius bit his lip. "I'm still your brother. I'm worried about you."

Regulus turned his pale eyes back to his brother. "I'm sure you can hardly sleep with your worry," he retorted sarcastically.

Sirius stepped closer, gripped by a sudden surge of brotherly protectiveness. "It's not too late to get out, Reg. If you want to. I can help."

An amused smile flickered across Regulus' face before he sobered. "You can tell your friends in the Order that I have no interest in becoming a spy. Frankly, I find this clumsy attempt at manipulation quite insulting."

Sirius recoiled as if struck. "I'm not manipulating you."

"I never said you were," Regulus responded evenly, turning his attention to the empty doorway. "Perhaps you'd like to join us, Potter."

James stepped into view in the doorway without an ounce of shame. "It's creepy that you knew I was there even through the wall."

Sirius could tell immediately that he was drunk. He surreptitiously moved between James and his brother. He caught the glimmer of amusement in Regulus' eyes at the protective gesture. Sirius recognised that signposting his mistrust was probably not the best way to entice his brother to share any useful information with him, but he could not help himself.

"Seriously," James continued, tapping the wall with his fist. "It's solid stone."

"James, please shut up," Sirius hissed.

"Yes, Potter, please do shut up," Regulus added mockingly.

Sirius shot Regulus a warning look. "Don't talk to him like that."

Regulus responded with a petulant expression that took Sirius back about ten years. Regulus had once been his little brother, trailing after him at Grimmauld Place. He almost felt nostalgic until Regulus turned back to the fire, the moment disappearing like smoke.

"I can see we both have our hands full with family matters tonight, Sirius," Regulus said, a clear note of dismissal in his stilted formality. "Perhaps we should leave each other to it."

"I think he's telling us to leave," James said in a stage whisper, sidling up to Sirius.

"Yes, I picked up on that, thank you James," Sirius replied sarcastically, before grabbing his arm to tug him out of the room.

As they stepped back into the Great Ballroom, Sirius felt a rush of relief at the growing distance between James and his unpredictable brother. Sirius never wanted James anywhere near a member of the Black family, afraid they would tarnish his inherent goodness. Sometimes even Sirius worried he was

leaving a stain.

"I'm sorry he doesn't want our help," James said sincerely.

"Found that out while you were eavesdropping, did you?" Sirius said, planting his feet and regarding James sternly.

"I only heard the last bit," James said, rubbing the back of his neck apologetically. "It didn't sound like it went that well."

"No, I don't think it did," Sirius sighed. "I was probably an idiot for thinking my brother would want anything to do with me."

James frowned, a line appearing on his forehead. "You're not an idiot."

Sirius lifted a resigned shoulder. "I do a lot of stupid things for someone who isn't an idiot."

"Stop saying that," James exclaimed, far too loudly. A few people in their immediate vicinity glanced at them curiously.

"Okay, Prongsie," Sirius said, throwing an arm around his shoulder to lead him to a more discreet corner. "I think it's time to stop drinking."

James shook off his arm, turning to face him with his eyes burning with sincerity. "You're not stupid, Siri. You're brilliant."

Sirius snorted. "You're drunk."

"And you're wrong," James retorted.

"Fine, I'm a genius," Sirius said, exasperated by the conversation.

"No about the other thing," James said, stumbling slightly in his enthusiasm.

Sirius placed his hands on his shoulders. "I'm going to need some of this subtext to become text."

"Earlier tonight you said I hated your robes," James explained. "But I don't hate them."

It was hardly even a compliment, but Sirius' traitorous heart leapt regardless. "Okay. So, what's your problem with them?"

Without warning, James placed his hands low on his hips. Even through his robes, Sirius could feel his skin tingling at the contact.

James ducked his head, staring intently at the way his fingers creased the sleek fabric of Sirius' robe. Slowly, James stroked his thumb along Sirius' hip bone. Even in the loud room, Sirius could hear the whisper of fabric. Sparks erupted in his stomach. They were so close together that James' hair tickled his cheek when he turned his head to whisper.

"You look amazing," James said in a low voice that Sirius suspected he would be fantasising about for weeks. "It's just that these robes make it seem like you don't belong to anyone. But you do."

"Do I?" Sirius said breathlessly, trying to tamp down on the heat that spread through his stomach.

James nodded, lifting his head until their eyes met. Something crackled in the air between them. Sirius tried to remember that James had been drinking. It would not be right to bury his hands in that messy hair. He hoped James could not tell how much he wanted to.

James squeezed his hip, his gaze unwavering. "You know you do."

Sirius knew he did not mean it like that; he meant that Sirius was an honorary part of the Potter clan. But it was hard to remember this when James was looking at him like that - and when Sirius was so full of affection for him that it was a constant pressure on his chest.

Sirius lifted his hands to frame James' face. James closed his eyes for a moment and Sirius dared to imagine that perhaps James was affected by his proximity too. He let his hands drop down slightly, until only his fingertips were touching James' jaw. Anyone glancing at them might think they were about to kiss. A shocking and exciting thought.

"You really shouldn't say things like that to me," Sirius murmured.

"Why not?" James asked innocently.

"You'll give me ideas."

James licked his lips in a way that seemed unintentionally suggestive. "You have great ideas."

"Not these ones," Sirius replied, shaking his head. "These ideas are really, really stupid."

Before James could reply, a strong hand grabbed Sirius by the wrist. He was already being pulled

away from James when he realised that it was Nicholas who had a firm grip on his arm. His usually handsome face was cold and annoyed. The grip on his arm was almost painful.

“You owe me a dance,” Nicholas said almost accusingly.

Sirius stole a glance at James who still looked stunned by the interruption and to find his hands suddenly empty of Sirius.

“Now is not really a good time,” Sirius said.

“Sure, it is,” Nicholas retorted, his mouth curling as he shot a glance at James.

“It’s really not. It’ll have to be a raincheck this time.”

Sirius tried to pull away, but the grip on his arm was too strong. He attempted to wrench his arm free, but somehow Nicholas gripped him harder. Sirius could see James moving towards them from the corner of his eye.

“Let go of him,” James commanded, eyes narrowed and fists clenched.

Fearing a confrontation, Sirius attempted to smile reassuringly at James, even though his trapped wrist was starting to hurt. It was embarrassing to be constrained this way; he was an Auror after all.

“I’ve got this handled, James,” Sirius said lightly. “Why don’t you go find Lily?”

James ignored him, stepping closer to Nicholas. Although they were the same height, James seemed to tower over him.

“I said: let him go,” James said.

Nicholas smirked. “I was just asking Sirius to dance.”

James’ eyes seemed to burn with fury. “Well, he clearly doesn’t want to dance with you.”

“It’s fine, James,” Sirius interjected.

“It’s not fine,” James replied, turning his determined face back towards Nicholas. Sirius was surprised Nicholas had not wilted under the look James gave him.

“Sirius is a big boy,” Nicholas said. “He can fight his own battles.”

Sirius winced in pain when Nicholas jostled his arm. Outraged, James grabbed Nicholas and twisted his arm until his hand opened against his will. A trick they had learned at the Auror Academy. Sirius stepped away, rotating his wrist while James released Nicholas.

James stared down Nicholas, no more than a handspan between them. “You need to apologise to Sirius,” he said firmly.

“Just leave it, Jamie,” Sirius urged, placing a soothing hand on his shoulder.

“Apologise,” James repeated, not breaking his eye contact with Nicholas. “Right now.”

Nicholas glared at him. “Sod off, Potter.”

The raised voices were starting to attract unwanted attention.

“Maybe everyone could just take a deep breath,” Sirius suggested, monitoring the crowd anxiously. “Before we make a scene.”

James shook his head grimly. “I don’t care about making a scene,” he ground out. “Gaunt needs to learn that ‘no’ is a full sentence.”

“As if Sirius Black has ever said ‘no’ to anyone,” Nicholas scoffed. “We both know he would get on his knees right here if - ”

James shoved Nicholas hard before Sirius could even process the insult - so hard that he slipped on the smooth marble, falling flat on his arse. A gasp went up around the room.

When James started unsheathing his wand, Sirius stepped between them. He pushed down his wand arm, hoping no one had noticed James reach for it. Sirius attempted to manoeuvre him away from the fray, but James kept glaring at Nicholas, sprawled in a heap on the ground. Then, his eyes seemed to catch on the red mark that Nicholas had left on Sirius’ wrist. James let out a pained sort of noise, reaching out to touch him.

Sirius stepped back before James could touch his skin, covering the mark with his sleeve. Lily was elbowing her way through the crowd – a flash of red hair making their way towards him. Suddenly, James seemed to notice that he was in a crowded room at a fancy party. His eyes swept the room uncertainly before settling on Sirius.

“Pads?”

Sirius could not answer him, suddenly desperate to get away from the messy scene. It was a mistake to come to the party; he had spoiled the evening. He straightened his shoulders, settling a firm look on James.

“You should talk to Lily,” he instructed. “I need to get out of here.”

James stepped towards him. “I can go with you - ”

Sirius grimaced, still backing away. “I don’t think that’s a good idea right now, James.”

Sirius turned on his heel and hurried to the exit. As he fled, Sirius could sense James staring at his back. So much for Gryffindor courage.

James leaned against a majestic column in the entrance of the Ministry with his head resting against cool marble.

Lily had dragged him away from the prying eyes in the ballroom, mortified with his behaviour and demanding an explanation. James did not leave anything out; he admitted he had been drinking, explained that Nicholas had grabbed Sirius, and told her he had shoved the man to the ground.

This explanation did not touch on the confusing feelings that churned within him. Lily knew – with that sixth sense of hers – that he was not being entirely forthcoming.

“I really want to believe you when you say you’re just friends,” Lily had said, running her hands through her long red hair. “And I get that you think Nicholas Gaunt is a prick, but all night you’ve been acting like a jealous boyfriend.”

Cold panic filled his chest. “I don’t get jealous,” he said quickly, before realising that was probably not the part he should have denied.

Lily paused, considering his words. “Not usually,” she said coolly. “But Sirius is always the exception, isn’t he?”

Lily did not seem to expect a response, simply shaking her head and informing him that she was leaving. She told him not to follow her.

Presently, James sighed deeply as he leaned against the column, rapidly sobering up. Monty approached him, a contrite expression on his face. Clearly, James was not the only member of the Potter family in trouble that night.

“Your mother is on the warpath,” Monty said, leaning on the column next to his son. “I know what I did – what did you do?”

James grimaced. “I got in a fight with Nicholas Gaunt.”

“Why?” Monty asked curiously. It was out of character for James to get into altercations.

“He didn’t back off when Sirius said he didn’t want to dance.”

It was clear that Monty at least considered this a valid reason to fight with someone. “Did you hex him?”

“Sirius stopped me.”

“Pity.”

James and Monty stood in comfortable silence for a moment. There was no one that James trusted more with his confidences, other than Sirius. He searched about for the words he wanted to articulate while his father waited patiently.

“Lily thinks I’m jealous,” James said at last. “Because Gaunt and Sirius used to date.”

“I see,” Monty responded in a neutral voice. “And what do you think?”

“I don’t know,” James replied. The last of the alcohol in his system made it possible for him to ask an impossible question. “Do you think Sirius and I are too close?”

James chanced a glance at his father, whose expression was soft. James did not deserve Monty’s understanding after his behaviour that night. Generations of their illustrious ancestors were rolling in their graves. Ashamed of himself, James was aware that he had no business wearing the family robes he

had put on so proudly earlier that night.

“I think you have a beautiful friendship,” Monty said sincerely. “You’re very lucky to have found each other.”^[1]

“Yeah,” James said, dissatisfied with his response even though the sentiment was true.

Monty appraised him for a moment. “Only you and Sirius can decide whether it's more than a friendship,” he added. “It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks about it. Not even me.”

No one had put it to him quite so directly. James had never allowed himself to consider the possibility that his relationship with Sirius might be more than friendship. Secure in his knowledge that he was attracted to girls, he had never turned his mind to the possibility. Not even when Sirius came out.

How then to explain his behaviour? That was a question that should wait until James sobered up. But there was a question he needed to ask his father before the borrowed bravery of alcohol dissipated.

“And you wouldn’t mind?” he asked uncertainly. “If it was...more than that?”

“I can tell you with absolute confidence that I will be a proud father until the day that I die,” Monty replied kindly.

Feeling his eyes burning, James tried to remember the last time cried in front of his father. Not since he was a little boy. James stared fixedly at the ground, attempting to suppress his emotions. It had been a mistake to drink so much. Alcohol made him far too honest.

“I just don’t want to make any more mistakes like I did tonight,” James explained.

Monty laughed, throwing a comforting arm around James. “Well, you’re out of luck there. Life is all about making mistakes. All you can hope for is that you make new ones every time.”

“Very comforting, thanks Dad,” James replied.

Monty nodded absently as he gathered his thoughts. “Now, I don’t want to undermine the well-deserved lecture your mother is about to give you,” he said. “But even if you didn’t handle it well today, don’t ever apologise for standing up for the people you love.”

Not trusting himself to speak, James just nodded as Monty squeezed his shoulder. Then, his father clapped his hands together with gusto.

“Well, I think drunken brawl trumps calling the Minister for Magic a washed-up hack,” Monty said cheerfully. “Hopefully your mother will be too busy yelling at you to start on me.”

When James heard the tell-tale clacking of his mother’s high heels ricocheting across ancient marble, he bit back his sarcastic response. James and his father straightened as if Effie was a drill sergeant.

Effie halted, sweeping her gaze between them before focusing on Monty. “I’ll deal with you later, Fleamont.”

“Looking forward to it, my love,” Monty drawled, before gesturing back towards the Grand Ballroom. “I should go say our goodbyes – best of luck, son.”

James could not blame his father for making a quick getaway. For his part, James avoided Effie’s accusing eyes.

“Do you want to explain to me what happened tonight?” his mother asked, her voice dangerously quiet.

James knew that Effie expected more from him; she would not be satisfied by the explanation that Gaunt grabbed Sirius. There was nothing to do except apologise for his poor behaviour.

“I’m sorry.”

“Here’s what is going to happen,” Effie sniffed imperiously. “After you sober up, you will apologise Lily, Sirius, and that boy you knocked over. Then you will apologise to everyone else you can think of.”

“I will, I promise,” James responded earnestly.

Effie shook her head. “Next time I see you, I expect you to resemble the son that I raised instead of some loutish Quidditch World Cup hooligan.”

Before she could turn to leave, James grabbed her hand. “I’m really sorry I embarrassed you tonight, Mum.”

His mother narrowed her eyes appraisingly as she gauged his sincerity. James knew how much

events like this meant to his mother.

“Thank you for apologising,” she said, relaxing slightly at his contrite expression.

James let out a breath through his teeth, shaking his head with confusion. “I don’t know what came over me tonight.”

“Oh James,” Effie scoffed. “We both know that there is one person on earth who can make you act that stupidly – and he has very pretty hair.”

Was the world conspiring against him tonight? James ducked his head, unable to think of a retort. His mother offered him an enigmatic smile as he stood there dumbly.

“Maybe you should give some thought as to why that is,” she said serenely. “In between preparing all your apologies.”

Notes:

Thank you so much for reading, reviewing and leaving kudos. You're keeping me very motivated to write as fast as possible. I hope you enjoyed this latest instalment. Tune in next time to witness James losing his mind over Sirius in leather trousers.

Notes:

[1] Inspired by a beautiful passage from André Aciman’s *Call me by your name*.

Chapter 8 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152726683>): **Unsaid inside**

Summary:

“You’re making it hard for me to leave,” Sirius complained, hovering uncertainly in the hallway.

“It’s okay,” James said, resting his head on the door. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

Sirius nodded, but instead of stepping away, he took a step closer. James barely had time to process the spicy scent of his cologne before Sirius pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. It was sweet and quick, but it made a streak of heat pass through James, from his cheek down to the bottom of his stomach.

Sirius peered at him worriedly as he pulled away. “Was that okay?” he asked, his voice uncharacteristically soft and uncertain.

James was painfully aware he was blushing. Strange how something so small could make him feel this way – nervous, excited, terrified.

“Yeah,” James breathed. “Of course, it was.”

Notes:

This chapter is quite dark; it delves into some of the experiences that Sirius had growing up. I have tried to strike a balance with some more fluffy and enjoyable moments - I hope you enjoy the update despite the darker moments.

TW: This chapter contains a graphic depiction of physical and emotional child abuse at Grimmauld Place, along with cruelty to animals. Although not as graphic, there are also some toxic dynamics at play between Nicholas and Sirius.

Soundtrack: "Flying High" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/5y3AUIP7aMQwu12WH5wn4s?si=ce62feaac30e4c1c>) by Jem

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_8_endnotes\)](#).)

“And the air was full of Thoughts and Things to Say. But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. Big Things lurk unsaid inside.”

- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

Grimmauld Place, London – 1974

It was a terrible summer – even worse than usual. Sirius could not do anything to please his parents. Not that he ever tried particularly hard to please them. His mother seemed furious about his very existence. Even Golden Child Regulus was taken aback by the force of Walburga’s ire towards him.

It had started the moment he stepped off the train. Train rides to Kings Cross at the end of the school year were always quiet in their compartment. Remus dreaded the summer holidays when he would have to face full moons without the distraction of school. His parents did their best with limited means, but the break inevitably meant spending long and violent nights alone in a dank cellar.

Every time Sirius watched the countryside speed by the Hogwarts Express, he went through a range of emotions. At first, he tended to be even louder and larger than life than usual, savouring his final moments of freedom. But as they approached Kings Cross Station, his mood plummeted. He felt it deep in his gut – a familiar twist of anticipation, the sting of the first inevitable insult, and the crushing realisation that he might face weeks without his friends, if he could even escape at all.

Sirius’ mood was toxic; it poisoned the compartment. James would start bouncing his leg or tapping his fingers in agitation. He hated feeling powerless to protect the people he cared about. During these journeys, James even snapped at Peter who he was usually unflinchingly kind to.

Perhaps Sirius should have shielded James more carefully from the grim reality of his home life. But it was impossible to remain completely silent. How else to explain why he could never simply accept those endless invitations to Potter Manor, why he avoided home, why he instinctively protected his back whenever he chose a seat? Everyone knew the Black family was a nightmare; only James had a sense that “nightmare” barely scratched the surface.

At the station, Sirius greeted Effie and Monty, basking in their warm hugs and enthusiastic greetings. He caught sight of Walburga and Regulus standing in a grim tableau that could have been lifted from a depressing Baroque painting.

James enveloped him in a fierce embrace before they parted, his parents watching with sympathetic eyes. Although Sirius knew he would pay for it later, he clung to James just as tightly. James pulled back slightly, reluctant to release him entirely. Not wanting to hand him over to his family. Sirius studied his friend’s face, committing every detail to memory.

“Write every day,” James said, sounding exactly like his mother. “Even if nothing happens.”

“I will – but it’ll be fine, Jamie,” Sirius reassured him, even though his words rang hollow.

James nodded, though he looked unconvinced. “Maybe you’ll be able to come visit after all,” he said hopefully.

“Totally,” Sirius replied, though he knew better. After his actions the previous summer, Walburga would monitor him more closely than usual. Sirius did not regret it; a stolen week with the Potters was worth it. “Maybe they’ll even visit the French relatives.”

Sirius was never included on those family trips to visit his mad cousin Bellatrix and the extended family. His parents rightly assumed he would embarrass the family name by showing insufficient enthusiasm for persecuting Muggles.

“I’ll miss you,” James said, reluctantly releasing his grip. He never hesitated to share his feelings in front of his parents; they never thought less of him for expressing emotion. But with Walburga so close,

Sirius found it impossible to respond. James understood, of course.

“Come by whenever you have the chance,” Effie added. “No need to tell us when.”

Sirius nodded, squared his shoulders, and walked over to his family. His mother did not even greet him.

For weeks, Sirius wrote to James every day as promised. He focused on the lighter stories. He told James about how the sticking charms on his motorcycle posters were holding up nicely. He recounted how Regulus was still annoyed about the time the Marauders made it rain crimson and gold in the Slytherin Dungeon - apparently, some of his favourite books had been damaged. In contrast, Regulus had been grudgingly impressed on the hottest day of the year when they transfigured all the furniture in the dungeon into ice sculptures. For Regulus, advanced skill in transfiguration negated the inconvenience of having his armchair melt into a puddle.

Sirius did not mention the three days he spent locked in his room. Or the long dinner conversations about the many ways he was an embarrassment. He did not describe the fear he had felt when his mother threatened to obliviate him – erasing any memory of his friends and life at Hogwarts. The thought that his hard-won happiness could be so easily stripped away terrified Sirius. James did not need to hear about any of that.

Presently, a familiar creak of the floorboards made Sirius look up from his daily letter to James. His mother – severe and pristine as ever – regarded him with an unsettling interest. Often, she ignored his presence around the house during the summer break, saving the worst of her ire for mealtimes. But occasionally, a particular glint in her eyes meant she wanted to toy with him. Sirius suspected that it was the same expression a cruel child wore when they burned bugs under a magnifying glass.

Walburga’s gaze swept over him, sitting in the library. When she looked at Bowie, the owl flapped his wings in his cage as if sensing danger. Bowie had always been an affront to her sensibilities. With his ragged feathers, oversized feet, and eyes that seemed slightly too far apart, he was a thoroughly absurd-looking bird, a stark contrast to the powerful snowy owls favoured by the rest of the Black family.

Sirius had bought Bowie himself with his friends at Diagon Alley at the end of Second Year. He had challenged the Marauders to find the ugliest owl they could just to annoy his mother. Peter had discovered Bowie, and Sirius had been utterly charmed by the ridiculous creature.

Despite his silly appearance, Bowie never once failed to deliver a letter. He was always particularly eager to complete his daily flight to Potter Manor. Sirius could relate; he missed having affection showered on him by the Potters.

“You’re writing to the Potter boy again,” his mother said, not phrasing it as a question.

Sirius fixed his gaze on his parchment. “You know his name is James.”

“I know that you will stop this ridiculous correspondence immediately.”

He did not look up. “It’s just a letter. Surely you have better things to worry about than me writing to a friend.”

“A friend,” she scoffed. “Blacks don’t have friends.”

Sirius nodded. “I can see why that would be the case for most members of our family.”

“We pursue greatness,” Walburga exclaimed, slamming her hand on the desk and rattling Bowie’s cage. “We do not fraternise with people who are beneath us.”

“I think we might be homing in on the reason why none of you have any friends,” Sirius replied sarcastically.

“This is not a joke. This is about your family legacy and the astonishing extent to which you fail to live up to it.”

The more she raved, the more Sirius concentrated on the letter in front of him. Her tirade was nothing new; it was not even her best work.

Soon enough, his indifference agitated her, as he knew it would. “Put down the quill, Sirius,” she commanded.

He ignored her.

“I said stop writing,” she said.

“Actually,” Sirius said absently, dipping the quill in ink. “You technically said ‘put down the quill, Sirius.’”

Without warning, Walburga lifted her wand. A sharp snap echoed through the air as the bone in his pinkie finger broke. Sirius gasped, shock washing over him before the pain registered. Bowie fluttered his wings in protest. There was something profoundly *wrong* about the pain of broken bone – a body’s warning that its solid frame had become unstable.

Sirius could see his mother watching for his reaction, so he kept his eyes trained on the letter. Gritting his teeth, Sirius resumed writing. He was not surprised when she flicked her wand and the bone of his ring finger snapped. She could break every bone in his hand. He would not stop; he had promised James. Even if he had not made a promise, Sirius would never surrender to his mother.

With his broken fingers curled awkwardly around the quill, Sirius managed to write another sentence. The effort became increasingly difficult when she broke his fourth finger. He bit down hard, fighting through the pain, tears beginning to leak from the corners of his eyes. He was dimly aware of his father entering the room, casting only a cursory glance at the scene before turning to the bookshelves.

Finally, Sirius signed the end of the letter with a shaky hand: *S.B.* He dropped the quill on the table offering his mother a benign smile.

“You’re so stubborn,” Walburga said, shaking her head. “When will you understand that I am trying to help you to grasp your place in the world?”

Sirius offered her a serene smile, tasting blood on his lip where he had bitten it. “I suppose I’m just slow on the uptake.”

“Begging for scraps of attention from that family of disgraceful blood traitors,” his mother tutted.

Sirius glanced down at his mangled hand, wiggling unbroken thumb. “You missed one, you know. You’re getting sloppy in your old age.”

Before Walburga could break that final bone in his right hand, Orion turned on his heel and stood beside his wife. Under his arm he held an innocuous leather-bound book. Sirius had learned the hard way that the most vicious tomes often appeared unremarkable.

Orion glanced at Sirius’s fingers, bent at odd angles, and at his wife’s raised wand.

“Honestly, Walburga,” Orion said, exasperated. “You and your theatrics.”

“I’m trying to teach the boy.”

“You have no appreciation for efficiency,” Orion grouched.

With that, his father aimed his wand at Bowie. “Diffindo,” he murmured – his favourite cutting spell. Sirius watched in horror as Bowie squawked, two vivid red lines appearing across the little owl’s chest.

“No!” Sirius reached out towards the cage, but he knew that it was too late. Blood had soaked his feathers and the movements of his wings were no more than twitches.

Orion turned to Walburga, offering her a thin smile. “Problem solved.”

She nodded, conceding his point. Then, they moved onto other things as if nothing had happened.

For a long time, Sirius sat beside the cage, unable to bring himself to touch the owl’s ragged feathers. A wave of guilt washed over him. Sirius should not have baited his mother. He should not have written the letter in plain view. He should never have bought Bowie in the first place. Weak and gentle things had no place in this house. It seemed suddenly cruel that his only friend in Grimmauld Place had been chosen as a joke.

Sirius was so focused on his many mistakes that he did not notice at first that Regulus was standing before the desk. Regulus was a sombre, quiet presence around the house, far better than Sirius at keeping a low profile. A perfect son for Orion and Walburga to make up for a disappointing first attempt.

“You can use Archimedes to send your letter to Potter,” Regulus offered, his expression inscrutable.

Sirius nodded. “Thanks, Reg.”

Regulus’ gaze shifted to his broken fingers. “Sirius?”

“Yeah?”

“Can’t you just...pretend to do what they say?”

It was the very essence of the difference between them – something they never spoke about and

never needed to. Pretending to agree with his parents would have been intolerable for Sirius. In contrast, nothing ever touched the hermetically sealed space behind Regulus' eyes.

"I think the problem with pretending is that if you do it for too long, you just become what you were pretending to be," Sirius explained. "If I do everything bad people tell me to do, then how am I any different to them?"

Regulus considered his words carefully, always so serious. "Do you think it could work in reverse?" he asked. "If you keep pretending to be a good person, do you become one?"

Sirius sighed at the question, one he had often grappled with since becoming friends with James Potter. "Fake it until you make it, right?"

The moment he said it, Sirius realised Regulus would have no idea that it was a Muggle saying. Regulus never seemed interested in learning anything about the world outside the library. Sirius found himself curious to know something about how Regulus saw the world. "What do you think, Reg?" he asked.

"Most people aren't good or bad," Regulus replied with all the authority of a thirteen-year-old. "Most are both. Everything else is just choice and circumstance."

"You might be right," Sirius conceded. "But I do think some people are just fundamentally good."

Regulus frowned. "You're talking about Potter," he said with a note of disapproval.

Sirius shrugged, comfortable in his assessment of his friend. "James would never hurt anyone intentionally."

Regulus considered this. Sirius suddenly remembered how sweetly entranced Regulus had been with Bowie when Sirius brought him home. More than once, he had caught his brother gently stroking the little owl. But the moment Sirius had given him permission to touch Bowie, Regulus had stopped doing it. Even at that young age, Regulus had already learned that wanting something and letting that desire be known was risky; a lesson for survival in the Great and Noble House of Black.

"I've seen you together around school," Regulus said at last.

"That's because you lurk in the shadows," Sirius teased. "You're a lurker."

Regulus ignored Sirius' interjection, instead looking pointedly at his mangled fingers. "I think that if Potter was there when our parents did that to your hand, he would have wanted to hurt them for hurting you."

Sirius paused, unable to deny it. "That's different."

"How?"

A prickle of irritation coursed through Sirius; comparing James to Walburga was absurd. "It would be about defending me, not hurting them for the sake of it," he said impatiently.

Regulus cocked his head to the side. "Does wanting revenge make someone good or bad?"

Sirius' hand was far too sore for these questions. "I don't know, Reg."

Regulus contemplated this. He was precocious, the kind of student teachers probably adored. Sirius could not say the same for himself, despite his excellent grades and natural abilities with magic. "I think intentions matter," Regulus said after a long pause. "People can do the wrong thing for the right reasons."

Sirius did not quite know how to respond. Talking to Regulus often felt like navigating two conversations at once, with Sirius only aware of one.

As usual, Sirius retreated into humour. "You really need to stop reading and start listening to music."

Regulus wrinkled his nose. "I hardly think you can call that Muggle caterwauling you listen to constitutes 'music.'"

Sirius was far more offended by that than their debate on moral relativism. He launched into a diatribe about the genius of the rock scene that was sweeping across the Muggle world. Regulus stood patiently, listening to his rant. Only later did Sirius only realise that his brother was being kind, giving him an excuse to talk about his favourite topic after a trying day. Regulus was far too good at hiding his intentions. Sirius was afraid of where that skill would lead him.

Later that night, Sirius buried Bowie in the community garden three blocks away from Grimmauld Place. He did not mention that in his letters to James either.

Remus arrived unannounced at their flat on a Tuesday night, a battered duffel bag at his feet. He looked so miserable that James had feared something terrible had happened.

“I’m so sorry to ask,” Remus said, his face pinched with worry. “But could I sleep on the couch for a few days?”

“Merlin, Moony,” James breathed, relief flooding him. “I thought you were dying. Of course, you can stay – as long as you want.”

Remus was still shaking his head when James pulled him across the threshold, taking his bag. “I’ll sort something out – it’s just that my last flat got shut down because there were too many of us, and - ”

“Moony!” Sirius interrupted, his eyes lighting up at the unexpected guest. He wore an oversized Puddlemere United sweatshirt that James had been searching for; it suited Sirius far better.

“Hi Padfoot,” Remus said, still looking deeply uncomfortable. “I just was just telling James that I just need somewhere to stay for a few - ”

“Thank Godric,” Sirius grinned. “James was threatening to cook! But we can’t let a guest get poisoned so let’s order in instead.”

“Excuse me,” James interjected, placing Remus’s duffel bag next to the couch and crossing his arms in mock-offence. “That’s no way to talk to someone who offered to make you dinner.”

“Prongs, you have many impressive skills,” Sirius said, his wide-eyed expression pure Padfoot. “Cooking is not one of them.”

James turned to Remus for support. “You like my cooking, right Moony?”

He was pleased to see Remus relaxing a bit. James knew how proud and private he was; he hated asking for favours. “Um,” Remus said uncertainly. “If I say yes, will you make me eat it?”

“Told you,” Sirius crowed, bouncing on his heels.

“I hate you both,” James grumbled.

Behind the couch, their robes were still locked in battle. James shot a quick look at Sirius, receiving a tacit nod in response. He ended the enchantment, watching the empty robes fall to the floor with a pang of regret. They would have to call it a draw.

They left Moony to get situated in the living room. James found himself following Sirius into the kitchen. He watched Sirius began rifling through various takeout menus. His hair was pulled into a messy top knot, still undeniably handsome in his most casual clothes. James felt self-conscious for noticing.

The fallout from the Samhain Ball had been milder than anticipated. Sirius had laughed off the incident the next morning, determined to restore their usual dynamic. He reminded James of all the times he had made a scene while drunk. The list of examples was so long and detailed that James had lost track of the conversation.

The discussion with Lily had been tense. James stuttered out a long apology at the front door, a bouquet of flowers in his arms.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she had said, her voice still strained. “But I’d really prefer that you were honest with me.”

“I am being honest,” James replied quickly, his stomach tightening in response to the implicit accusation.

She gave him a long look over the large bouquet. “I’m choosing to believe you, James,” she sighed, before standing aside to invite him in.

Later that night, after she had thawed towards him, Lily had wrapped her arms around his neck. “You realise that was our first proper fight,” she had said. “It’s almost refreshing to see that you can’t be the perfect boyfriend all the time.”

The comment bothered him. Any impression she had that he was perfect was woefully misguided. Probably stemming from the fact James had fallen into a habit of editing himself around her. Since the beginning, everything had been about proving that he was worth of her affection. His feelings were

always the fixed point in their relationship; everyone had known about his crush on Lily since Third Year. Even as adults, the dynamic continued in minor ways. He was never fully comfortable with showing his less desirable sides. These parts he revealed only Sirius.

Lily had not mentioned the possibility of James being jealous of Nicholas Gaunt again. Sirius had become a topic that they studiously avoided. Things that seemed possible at night after drinking seemed out of reach in daylight. James regretted his conversation with Monty about whether there might be something more than friendship between him and Sirius. It felt like a timer had started in the back of his mind.

James could grant himself leeway to be confused. But he owed it to Lily – and himself – to consider exactly what he wanted. His feelings for Sirius were intense and always had been. Was that just the nature of their friendship? Did it mean something more?

James was not used to looking this closely at his relationship with Sirius. But he had decided to follow the words that Sirius had given him that day in the tattoo parlour. James was going to let himself feel what he felt – to really pay attention. The fact the prospect felt dangerous seemed significant in ways he did not quite understand.

Sirius held up James's favourite Chinese takeaway menu, breaking James from his thoughts. James laughed at the peace offering as Sirius put the battered menu on the counter so they could both examine it. Sirius firmly believed that Muggle food – much like Muggle music – was far superior to anything prepared with magic.

Sirius peered down at the menu, leaning his elbows on the counter. His long, elegant neck was on display with his hair up. On autopilot, James took his usual place behind Sirius, resting his head on his shoulder and placing his hands on the bench on either side of him.

James froze when realised what he was doing. More shocking was the realisation that it was something he always did without thinking. Sirius seemed unfazed. In fact, when he looked over his shoulder to look at James, his eyes were shining.

“Moony came to us,” Sirius whispered excitedly. “We’re like your parents! Collecting strays.”

A surge of affection swelled in James. Sirius seemed genuinely thrilled by the prospect of providing sanctuary to their friend. Unable to resist, James wrapped his arms around Sirius, pulling his back against his chest. Sirius relaxed into his embrace, comfortably sandwiched between the counter and James.

“Which one am I?” James murmured into his ear, aware of Remus unpacking his meagre possessions in the living room.

“Monty, obviously,” Sirius replied, idly toying with the watch around James' wrist. “You better believe I'm going to go full Effie on this food.”

James grinned widely at that. He lowered his face until it was hidden behind Sirius' shoulder, embarrassed to show how much the comparison to his father pleased him. Not that Sirius could even see his smile from this angle.

Remus padded into the kitchen, pausing at the tall kitchen island where they sometimes ate their breakfast to regard them curiously. James released his grip on Sirius, suddenly self-conscious. Eager for a distraction, James turned to the cupboards and focused on preparing drinks.

“We’re thinking Chinese, Moons,” Sirius said cheerfully. “Any requests?”

The next few days with Remus passed pleasantly. Sirius glowed in his role as host. On the second night of Remus's stay, they invited Peter over, leading to a raucous game of Exploding Snap that left Peter missing an eyebrow. James woke the next morning with Sirius drooling on his shoulder on the couch and Peter demanding James help him regrow his eyebrow before his security protocol meeting with Minister for Magic.

James was embarrassed by the gaps in his knowledge about Moony's current living situation. Sirius – shameless snoop that he was – coaxed Remus into talking about the series of crowded flats where he had stayed since graduating. Often, they were closed down by the police as squats. James was also horrified to hear that he had been staying at Ministry-run facilities for full moons. He had heard from Lily that the institutions were inhumane. The thought of Remus chained up in silver turned his stomach.

Although James himself was focused on scrutinising his behaviour around Sirius, it was disconcerting to have Remus watching him too. Sometimes he thought that Remus might suspect something amiss – as if he could perceive the confusing muddle of feelings in James' chest.

More than once, James had caught Moony watching them, the gears of his analytical mind audibly whirring. By the weekend, James was increasingly jittery. With Sirius out on Saturday night, James felt it was probably safer to invite Lily over to avoid any potentially awkward conversations with Remus.

Determined to prove that he was perfectly capable of cooking when he wanted to, James had insisted on preparing a home cooked meal. Usually, James relied on simply preparing the ingredients and waiting for Sirius to step in with a huff of fond exasperation. Sirius rarely cooked, but every now and again he would suddenly be inspired to prepare a three-course meal. Although he always made a complete mess of the kitchen, the results were unfailingly delicious.

Unfortunately, Sirius was too busy preening ahead of his night out to intervene in the cooking process. James was desperate to interrogate him about his plans, but was striving to maintain some semblance of cool. He and Remus were sitting on the kitchen stools, staring down at the cookbook as if it were an Advanced Arithmancy textbook when Sirius emerged from the shower.

James made a point of avoiding looking in his direction while he strode through the living room wearing only a towel around his waist. James felt a small swell of victory at keeping his eyes on the book when he sensed Remus gauging his reaction.

“Come on Moony,” James said smugly, standing up and stretching in preparation for some vigorous chopping. “You can be my sous chef.”

“I'm honoured,” Remus said sarcastically. James was secretly pleased that Remus had become so comfortable around their flat. He no longer apologised and thanked them every time he used a teacup.

James carefully put all the ingredients they would need for their coq au vin neatly on the counter.

“Are you sure you want to do this the Muggle way?” Remus asked as James placed the onion on the chopping board. “I feel like you're going to stab yourself.”

James successfully chopped the onion in half. “You always think people are going to stab themselves.”

“I've never once said that,” Remus groused, reaching for the celery and carrot.

James was delighted to discover they had a large mixing bowl. This cooking lark really wasn't as bad as everyone described. Granted, James had not anticipated that chopping the onion would make his eyes stream. Nonetheless they successfully placed the chicken, carrots, celery, garlic, and onion into the bowl. James poured the red wine over everything before he remembered that he was supposed to let everything marinate overnight. When Remus was not looking, he murmured a quick spell to speed up the process.

Pleased with their progress, he allowed Remus to take on the heavy responsibility of browning the bacon while he chopped the mushrooms at the kitchen island. The kitchen smelt inviting when Sirius called out from his bedroom.

“Godric, Moony – do you have a death wish or something?”

James glanced towards his bedroom, ready to flip him off, when his entire nervous system seemed suddenly to stop functioning. All he could do was stare blankly and try to process the sight of Sirius Black wearing nothing but tight leather trousers and his usual assortment of rings.

“I tried to stop him, Pads,” Remus said, moving the bacon around the pan. “But he's my host. What could I do?”

Sirius shook his head, his loose curls brushing his shoulders. “Threaten to stab him? You always talk about people getting stabbed.”

James watched helplessly as Sirius prowled across the flat, every step accentuating different muscle groups. James eyed the long line that seemed to cut right down the centre of his chest. The angles of his hip bones drew James' eyes down to the top of those leather trousers.

“I have no idea where you and James have gotten this whole stabbing thing from,” Remus complained. “I have never once said that anyone is getting stabbed.”

It was absurd. James had grown up with Sirius – changed for Quidditch right next to him, shared a dorm room for Godric’s sake. But that thought unleashed a flood of images and observations over the years. Moments when his gaze would catch on Sirius’ long legs, his broad back, his arms. James was painfully aware of all the sharp lines of him – far sharper than the knife dangling uselessly in James’ hand.

“You must just have that energy,” Sirius shrugged.

Sirius was beautiful. That was no more than a statement of fact. Sirius was beautiful. The sky was blue. Humans breathe oxygen. Sirius was beautiful.

Although the thought that had come to James many times before, it seemed weightier than usual. James kept on noticing new details. His cheeks. His stubble. His jaw. Those lips. His hair – *Merlin*, his hair. James’ best friend. His *male* best friend. His male best friend who was playfully pressing him down onto the kitchen stool.

James let himself be manhandled into the seat, powerless to resist. Sirius stood in the V of James’ legs, slipping the knife from his loose grasp. James doubted that he would have reacted even if Sirius had plunged the knife directly into his heart.

“Watch and learn Prongsie,” Sirius said with a wink that made James’ mouth go dry.

Then Sirius turned and took over the chopping board, slicing mushrooms with a speed that would make a professional chef envious. It took superhuman effort for James to avoid looking down to see how those tight leather trousers hugged his arse. He felt fifteen again, stealing glances and hoping no one would notice.

James was close enough to reach out and touch Sirius. Every confident flick of the knife sent ripples across his back. But that was not what made James feel a rush surpassing even the sensation of soaring into the sky on a broom. There on his right shoulder were James’ antlers. His mark right there on that unblemished skin.

James could not help himself. Slowly, he pressed his fingers to the tattoo.

Sirius halted his chopping. He stopped doing anything, standing perfectly still. James knew he should pull away, but instead he let his fingers run over the surface of Sirius’ tattoo. Gooseflesh formed under his fingers. Fascinated, James traced a line along the ridge of his bare shoulder and watched the same reaction bloom. Cause and effect.

When James ghosted his fingertips over the tattoo again, Sirius shivered. It cascaded from his shoulders all the way down his back – to those two dimples right at the bottom of his spine. Could he feel James’ breath on his back? Would that raise gooseflesh too?

Sirius turned his head slightly. James looked up to examine his profile. His eyes were bewildered and sultry all at once.

“Staking your territory, Prongs?” he asked lowly.

Sirius was right. That was exactly what James was doing. It seemed wrong somehow that a stranger might touch that little piece of skin that belonged to James. The leather trousers had only confirmed what James had suspected: Sirius intended to take someone home tonight. Not that he ever brought anyone back to their flat – thank, Godric.

“They’re my antlers,” James shrugged, a challenge sparking in his gaze. “That’s my spot now.”

Sirius gave him a devilish smile. “Does that mean that your shoulder belongs to me too?”

Before James could answer, the smell of smoke filled the kitchen. As one, they turned to see Remus tearing his eyes away from them to focus on the smoking bacon, cursing as he lifted the pan off the flame.

“You’re as bad as James,” Sirius scolded, slipping out from between James’ legs to hurry to the window. “Can you at least try not to burn down the flat while I’m out tonight?”

Remus grimaced at the burnt meat while Sirius flapped a tea-towel over the burning pan. “Why?” Remus asked slyly. “Will it ruin your hot date?”

James broke out his trance, suddenly hyper-aware of their conversation. Sirius hesitated, shoulders tensing.

“It’s no big deal.”

“But it is a date?” Remus pressed.

A date. The word struck James like a jolt of cold water. Sirius did not date; it sounded like far too serious a description. Then again, James rarely asked for details on his mysterious nights out. Upon reflection that reticence was unusual for them. Communication failures like that explained how James had missed the entire Nicholas Gaunt fiasco.

“I guess,” Sirius said, avoiding looking at James as he hurried back to his room. “I should probably finish getting ready.”

James cleared his throat, stretching his tense neck. Remus watched him intently as he moved from the stool to the frying pan. He poked at the burned scraps with a melted spatula.

“Sorry about all of this,” Remus said. “I’m a terrible sous chef.”

“It’s fine,” James consoled, with a tight smile, still distracted by the thought of Sirius going on a date. “I’m a terrible main chef.”

After a moment of guilty eye contact, Remus murmured a quick spell and restored the bacon to its former glory. Back on track, they followed the cookbook until their chicken concoction simmered happily on the stove.

Remus and James were settled on the couch with celebratory glasses of red wine when Sirius emerged once more from his room wearing a shirt that was mostly unbuttoned under an overcoat. The chill of early October was settling in.

Sirius eyed their cosy set-up on the couch enviously. “Try not to have too much fun without me,” he pouted.

James stood up without thinking. Sirius looked puzzled as James came to a halt before him. James felt the irrepressible impulse to ruffle his own hair – something he had done all the time at school when he felt self-conscious around someone he liked – but he repressed it.

“You look really good, Pads,” James said shyly, feeling like an idiot.

Sirius smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” James confirmed, gesturing to the front door. “I’ll walk you out.”

He knew it was a ridiculous gesture in their flat. But he could not bring himself to regret it when Sirius looked so pleased. James opened the door for his friend, leaning against it as Sirius slipped passed him. An odd melancholy washed over him; James always enjoyed himself more when Sirius was around.

Sirius paused at the threshold, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. James offered him a tentative little smile. It felt like they were passing something delicate and breakable between them. Those fleeting smiles and lingering looks.

“Enjoy your date,” James said softly, surprised by how steady his tone was when he said the dreaded word.

“Enjoy dinner.”

“We will. But we’ll miss you.”

Sirius stepped into the hall, with James still watching him from the door. James could not decide where to focus his gaze. He wanted to pull Sirius back inside. He wanted impossible things.

“You’re making it hard for me to leave,” Sirius complained, hovering uncertainly in the hallway.

“It’s okay,” James said, resting his head on the door. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

Sirius nodded, but instead of stepping away, he took a step closer. James barely had time to process the spicy scent of his cologne before Sirius pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. It was sweet and quick, but it made a streak of heat pass through James, from his cheek down to the bottom of his stomach.

Sirius peered at him worriedly as he pulled away. “Was that okay?” he asked, his voice uncharacteristically soft and uncertain.

James was painfully aware he was blushing. Strange how something so small could make him feel this way – nervous, excited, terrified.

“Yeah,” James breathed. “Of course, it was.”

More than okay, really.

“Good,” Sirius said, a genuine smile growing on his face.

They stood there grinning stupidly at each other until Sirius shook his head and averted his gaze.

“Night, Prongs.”

“Night, Pads.”

James watched Sirius walk down the hallway. Sirius turned back once before descending the stairs to the street. James sighed, closed the door, and leant against it, trying to contain the excitement and confusion bubbling in his chest.

Suddenly, James remembered that he was not alone in the flat. Remus sat frozen on the couch with his eyebrows raised towards his hairline. Guilt and embarrassment surged through James as he rubbed the back of his neck, still hot from his blushing farewell to Sirius. His movement seemed to snap Remus out of his daze.

“So,” Remus said conversationally, bracing his hands under his chin. “Anything you want to talk about, Prongs?”

The elegant restaurant was filled with the buzz of conversation. Everything was understated and expensive; tiny serving sizes delivered by attentive waitstaff. Although Sirius did not mind paying for dinner, he would have preferred something more low-key. But Nicholas preferred fine dining when he ate Muggle food, as he snootily explained while considering the wine list.

Nicholas never asked Sirius what he preferred, even though the dinner was ostensibly an apology for the scene he had caused at the Samhain Ball. “You just make me crazy,” Nicholas confessed, shaking his head ruefully. “Consider it a compliment.”

Sirius smiled distractedly, his mind brimming with thoughts about James Potter. The cold air on the walk over to Mayfair had done nothing to clear his head. So focused on obsessively replaying the scene between him and James back at the flat, Sirius had walked past the restaurant twice without noticing.

Something was going on with James. During the week, Sirius had convinced himself it was simply wishful thinking, fuelled by Effie’s gentle encouragement at the ball. Then, Remus had planted a little seed of hope that perhaps it was not all in his head.

On the night of their Marauder reunion with Pete, Sirius and Remus had prepared drinks in the kitchen. “You’d tell me if I was intruding, right?” Remus had asked.

Sirius had blinked at him, confused. “Why would you think you were intruding?”

Remus let out a derisive snort. “Because James looks moments away throwing you over his shoulder and carrying you back to his cave.”

Sirius had glanced worriedly towards the living room, a blush creeping over his cheeks as he reassured himself that James was distracted with Pete. “I swear, Moony – if you even joke about that to James, I will kill you.”

“You can’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“There’s nothing to notice.”

“Come on, Padfoot,” Remus retorted incredulously. “Granted, James has always stared at you. But before you could tell he wasn’t even aware he was doing it. Now he’s *looking* at you. All the lights are on, you know?”

Even after that conversation, Sirius was sceptical. It was not until James had pressed his fingers to his shoulder, his pretty eyes burning with possessiveness behind his glasses, that Sirius had dared to hope that Remus was right. When James had escorted him to the front door, Sirius realised he recognised the expression on his face. Sirius had seen it in the common room back at Gryffindor Tower the afternoon Lily and James went on their first date.

Sirius sipped the expensive wine that Nicholas had selected, letting the flavours play across his tongue. Nicholas looked handsome, with his crisp white shirt and carefully coiffed hair. Sirius felt guilty for staring right through him, but he could not stop the gyre of his thoughts from returning to James.

Sirius rarely allowed himself to think this way about James. He could waste years contemplating his face, with its strong jaw, his surprisingly sensuous lips, those long eyelashes that any woman would kill for. Sirius often fixated upon his bulk, his commanding height, powerful arms, and broad shoulders. His strong hands and the nails he always bit when he concentrated. That tousled hair that looked like he had just rolled out of bed.

James was not someone Sirius could pick apart. It was not his eyes or his sportsman swagger that made him so captivating; it was his unbridled enthusiasm, the way he drew everyone in, that big heart that made him do anything for his friends. Sometimes James still looked like the misbehaving schoolboy that Sirius had known at Hogwarts. Then the light would shift and the shadows on his face would transform him into someone in command. Sirius adored every side of James.

But the side of James that Sirius loved most was the one he only ever saw in private. When James would pull him closer on the couch and Sirius would feel as if their edges were bleeding together. So close that James' hand on Sirius' hip felt like his own.^[1] The unguarded moments when the sheer improbability of it would leave him breathless – that James Potter could exist and care about Sirius so fiercely. That two people so well suited to caring for each other could have discovered each other so young.

“You're distracted.”

Sirius started, surprised to find Nicholas staring at him reproachfully over the table. “Sorry,” he said, genuinely meaning it. “It's been a weird night. Also, our friend Remus is staying, so everything has been a bit chaotic.”

“The werewolf?”

Sirius felt his gaze harden. “Who told you that?”

“Your brother,” Nicholas said, leaning back in his chair, satisfied now Sirius was giving him his full attention.

“You and Regulus have talked about Remus?” Sirius asked, surprised.

“I work Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

“Remus is not a magical creature,” he replied coolly.

Nicholas took a disinterested sip of wine. “Technically, he's a XXXXX beast.”

Sirius placed his wine glass carefully down on the table, attempting to contain his anger. “Well, this has been fun,” he drawled, reaching for his jacket. “I think I should call it a night.”

Before Sirius could stand, Nicholas grabbed his wrist – but it was different to the threatening way he had held onto him at the ball.

“I apologise,” Nicholas said formally. “That was insensitive.”

Not ready to forgive him, Sirius teetered between staying and going. “Remus has never hurt anyone and he never would.”

“You and your friends are very loyal to each other,” Nicholas said, releasing his wrist and instead reaching for his hand. “I admire that.”

“Thank you,” Sirius said carefully, his gaze falling on their hands on the white tablecloth.

“Potter came to see me this week,” he said.

Sirius was thrown off-balance by the unexpected reference to James. “What?”

“At work,” Nicholas explained. “He came to my office and apologised for his behaviour at the ball.”

Sirius could picture it: James standing there with squared shoulders, swallowing his dislike to do the right thing. Living up to every standard the Auror handbook - and Euphemia Potter - placed on him. Moral James, always willing to be the bigger person. Warmth filled Sirius at the thought.

“Of course, he did,” Sirius breathed fondly.

Nicholas retracted his hand, irritation flickering across his face. “I used to wonder whether something was going on between the two of you. I think that's why I...you know...put that spell on you.”

Sirius shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with the reminder. “Even if there was, that wouldn't justify what you did.”

Nicholas drew in a tight breath, reordering the silver cutlery spread out before him. "I know I've made mistakes with you, Sirius. But I am trying to be better. I think you understand how hard that can be."

Sirius did know what it was like to feel the darkness of the past choking you. This time, Sirius reached across the table to squeeze his arm reassuringly. "I accepted your apology. I know it was a mistake. I've made a ton of them."

Nicholas smiled at him gratefully. A flash of guilt struck Sirius. It was clear that Nicholas was trying to redeem himself. And yet all Sirius wanted to do was run back to his flat to try to catch James looking at him.

"You know," Nicholas said. "I'd be happy to meet with your friend - with Remus. To hear more about his experiences and what we could be doing better in the Department."

"Really?" Sirius asked, pleasantly surprised.

"Absolutely," Nicholas confirmed, turning his hand to lace their fingers together. "I like the idea of you owing me one."

Trepidation spread through his limbs at that. Not wanting to ruin an opportunity for Moony, Sirius forced himself not to pull away. Nicholas examined him hungrily with his mismatched eyes.

"Right," Sirius said doubtfully.

When the waiter came to take their order, Nicholas grilled him about the specials and the add-ons they should order. Sirius seized the opportunity to create some distance between them, pulling his hand away.

Nicholas regarded him across the table, a predatory glint in his eyes. "You look hot by the way."

Sirius could not help but compare it to the sweetness that James had shown when he complimented him. *You look really good, Pads.* James had blushed when Sirius kissed his cheek. Every time the thought appeared unbidden in his mind it shocked Sirius.

"Uh, thanks."

"I know it was stupid to be jealous," Nicholas added. "Someone like you would never be with someone like Potter."

Sirius stiffened, even though it was something that had occurred to him many times. "What makes you say that?"

Amusement painted his features. "Well, the girlfriend - what's her name - was probably the main giveaway."

"Lily Evans," Sirius responded, his heart sinking. "She was in our year in Gryffindor. James has been obsessed with her since school."

Sirius cast his mind back over the interactions that had made him float to the restaurant. It seemed suddenly paltry in the candlelight. What did a hand on the shoulder and a kiss on the cheek matter compared to the epic love story between Lily and James?

"Predictable," Nicholas said, waving a hand dismissively. "They'll be married with 2.5 children within five years."

Of course, they would. Lily already wanted them to move in together. Everything else would fall into place as if predestined. James would propose after a year of living with her. He would ask Sirius to be his best man, with Remus and Peter as groomsmen. Sirius would have to be funny in his speech, arrange a showy prank at the ceremony as an homage to the Marauders.

James would swear that nothing would change between them. But as the years passed, James would slip through his fingers like water. Focused on being a husband and father, he would contact Sirius only when he needed a break. James would make an incredible father, just like Monty.

The waiter placed their entrees before them, but the thought of eating made Sirius feel ill. Perhaps if Sirius kept staring at the seared scallops the burning in his eyes would recede.

"People like that could never be with people like us," Nicholas mused, as if pointing out something self-evident. "We can't be with normal people. The ones who had happy childhoods. All we can do is disappoint them. Twist around them like vines and suck the life out of them."

No one could have had a happier childhood than James. Even working as an Auror had done nothing to dim his optimism about the world. Sometimes Sirius did want to wrap himself around that strong frame of his, to soak in that warmth and goodness. James would let him, too. He had always given Sirius everything he asked for – friendship, affection, a family.

How could Sirius ask for anything more from him? How could he risk dimming the light in those beautiful eyes? Sirius was surprised the kiss he had given James had not left a mark on his smooth cheek.

“Thank you for that horrific image,” Sirius said, attempting to keep his voice light despite the crushing pain in his chest. “Even if it is unconventional content for a date.”

“So, this is a date,” Nicholas crowed in triumph.

Nicholas was imperfect; Sirius had no illusions about that. But what right did Sirius have to expect perfection? There was no risk of pulling Nicholas into the abyss with him. He already lived there.^[2]

“Of course, it’s a date,” Sirius responded, not matching his enthusiasm as he downed the rest of his wine. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Notes:

Thank you so much for reading and reviewing. Your lovely feedback is really keeping me motivated to post as soon as possible. Tune in next time for a motorbike ride and James discovering the identity of Sirius' mysterious suitor.

Notes

[1] Inspired by [this gorgeous poem](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49236/one-hundred-love-sonnets-xvii) (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49236/one-hundred-love-sonnets-xvii) by Pablo Neruda, “One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII”.

[2] Probably an unnecessary citation, but I was thinking about [this Nietzsche quote](https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00007886) (https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00007886): “He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.”

[Chapter 9](http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152818738) (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152818738>): **Symptoms of Love**

Summary:

Monty greeted them outside, clad in oil-stained overalls. “Not entirely necessary, considering I have you boys to do all the dirty work. I mainly wearing the outfit because Effie finds it irresistible.”

“Too much information, Dad,” James grimaced, nudging Sirius to stifle his laughter.

“What?” Monty said, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “It’s important to put in effort, even when you’ve been together for as long as we have.”

“Don’t be such a prude, Prongs,” Sirius teased, throwing an arm over his shoulder. “Married love is a beautiful thing.”

“Indeed, it is, Siri,” Monty replied, his sly smile lingering on James. “You should try it for yourself sometime.”

“I’m not sure I’m the marrying type,” Sirius said, his gaze drifting to the motorcycle at the room's centre.

“Ah, but it’s different with the right person,” Monty insisted. “With someone who truly understands you, commitment isn’t scary.”

James seriously considered transforming into Prongs just to change the subject

Notes:

I honestly have no idea how I am posting a third chapter this weekend. I blame Prongsfoot. Thank you for your kind comments and the kudos. I hope you enjoy the latest instalment.

TW: Unwanted sexual advances, abusive relationship dynamics, references to physical and emotional child abuse.

Soundtrack: "White Mustang" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/6eygbzyL6hY8jEQTARDuo9?si=c36a944e8b5f48f9>) by Lana Del Rey

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_9_endnotes\)](#).)

“His examination revealed that he had no fever, no pain anywhere, and that his only concrete feeling was an urgent desire to die. All that was needed was shrewd questioning...to conclude once again that the symptoms of love were the same as those of cholera.”

- Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Kensington, London – 1979

Sirius and James had not revisited the idea of living together since James started dating Lily in their Seventh Year at Hogwarts. Even before then, it had been an idle thought – a loose collection of plans for when they lived together and had absolute freedom.

After Hogwarts, they moved straight to the Auror Academy, trading one dorm room for another. Situated even further North than Hogwarts, the Academy was an ancient ruin perched on a craggy cliff, concealing several subterranean levels of advanced training facilities.

Two cadets shared each dorm at the Academy. Much to their chagrin, Sirius and James were not assigned as roommates. Nonetheless, they spent so much time in each other’s cramped dorms that their official roommates begged the administration to let them bunk together. Everyone was far happier after the administration gave in.

Now that the first year of their training program was complete, they would transition to working at the Ministry itself, right in the centre of London. Their living situation would be a matter for them to decide from now on.

In the short-term, Sirius and James were staying at Potter Manor, much to the delight of Effie and Monty. Although James loved his parents, he felt a growing impatience to start his life as a proper adult.

“So where do you want to live?” James asked Sirius one afternoon as they staggered over to the stone benches that lined the back lawn.

James had dragged Sirius out early to complete a gruelling series of running drills, determined not to let their conditioning slip now they were out of the daily training routine at the Academy. Sirius leaned back on the stone seat, his arms taut as he braced himself to stretch his back. When James made the comment, Sirius tensed, loosening his grip on the bench.

“Oh,” Sirius said, an unusual note in his voice. “Yeah, I guess I should figure something out.”

“You don’t have to figure it out on your own, Pads,” James replied patiently. “I just think it will be easier if we have a plan – like where we want to live, whether we prefer a Muggle or wizarding area, that sort of thing.”

Sirius stared at him, eyes wide with surprise. “You mean...live together?”

James shifted uncomfortably, suddenly very aware that they had not discussed the possibility for years. His stomach sank at the thought that Sirius had changed his mind. James cut his gaze away to focus on the towering hedges trimming themselves on the edges of the lawn.

“Well, yeah,” James confirmed stiffly. “I mean, unless you don’t want to - ”

“I want to,” Sirius interjected. “I absolutely want to.”

James stole a glance at Sirius, admiring the smile spreading across his face. Then James looked down at his feet. “Good, then we should start looking.”

“We should,” Sirius agreed, then let out a huff of laughter. “I thought you were subtly hinting that I should move out.”

James whipped around so quickly that his neck protested. “What?” he exclaimed, horrified. “Pads – I would never ask you to do that. Honestly, if Mum and Dad had their way, we’d never leave.”

Sirius chuckled, his entire demeanour relaxing as he closed his eyes and let a rare beam of sunlight warm him. “I love your Mum and Dad.”

The sun made Sirius’ skin glow. Sometimes it seemed like the universe conspired to emphasise his beauty. As James watched him, a feeling swelled in his chest – a growing conviction about the beauty of life right there in his backyard.^[1] Everything seemed interconnected by beautiful and invisible threads. How would James remember this feeling if he could not see Sirius every day?

They threw themselves into apartment hunting, both eager to advance their plan. Lily helped with the organisational side, circling advertisements from the Muggle newspapers and creating meticulous pro and con lists for each option. James appreciated her help, especially since she was not exactly thrilled about his decision to move in with his best friend.

It dawned on James only after he’d breezily mentioned their plan that she likely expected them to move in together after he finished at the Auror Academy. Truthfully, the thought had not even crossed his mind, particularly since Lily and Joyce had just renewed their lease. Luckily, Lily did not hold a grudge.

There was plenty of time to move in with his girlfriend later, James reasoned. This could be his only opportunity to live with his best friend as an adult. Never mind that they had lived together most of year since they turned eleven. This was different.

James knew they would recognise the right place when they saw it. For weeks, they wandered through empty apartments, debating whether they needed a fireplace for the Floo Network or if they were content to simply apparate to work. But nothing felt quite right – each apartment was either too small, too dark, or located in a neighbourhood that was too quiet or too loud.

One day, Sirius and James found themselves walking down a picturesque street in Kensington, the tree-lined avenues glowing golden in the morning light. They held takeaway coffees in their hands, growing increasingly confident with Muggle currency as they prepared for their move. Sirius was eager to immerse himself in Muggle culture, so they decided on a Muggle neighbourhood.

Sirius paused to admire a vintage car parked along the road. James glanced around, a warm feeling blossoming in his stomach – almost like the sense of homecoming he felt when stepping into the protection of the wards at Potter Manor. It was a comforting, welcoming sensation that only deepened as they located the pretty apartment block with a bright red door.

“Now, it’s on the pricier side,” Trevor, the building superintendent, warned, giving a pointed look to Sirius’ torn jeans. James bit back a laugh; it was refreshing to be around a Muggle who had no idea about the staggering wealth of their families.

“I’m sure we’ll manage,” Sirius said breezily, winking at Trevor in a way that made him sputter.

Trevor shot Sirius a disbelieving glance before leading them up the stairs. With every step, James felt a growing conviction that this was the place. He leaned against the wall while Trevor fumbled with the deadbolt, sharing a secretive smile with Sirius. James could tell Sirius felt it too.

When the door finally opened, James gestured for Sirius to enter first, following closely behind. The flat was beautiful – spacious and filled with light, offering a lovely view of the green across the street. It was perfect, just as James had hoped. He stood next to Trevor as Sirius curiously explored every corner of the space, even opening and closing the kitchen drawers with a look of awe on his face.

James watched Sirius closely, something unfolding in his chest. The feeling pressed against his ribs at the sight of Sirius in this empty, freshly painted flat. Suddenly, James did not care about the size of the bedrooms or whether they would be able to invite friends onto the rooftop in summer. All that mattered

to him was living here with Sirius – creating a home where he was not merely a guest. A place that belonged to both of them equally.

As if sensing his thoughts, Sirius looked up from his examination of the open-plan kitchen and met James' gaze. A strange feeling filled James that something was falling into place. No conversation was necessary.

“We’ll take it,” James said simply, not even turning to look at Trevor.

“Are you sure?” the superintendent asked doubtfully, clearly sceptical that two young men could possibly cover the rent.

“We’ll take it,” James said more firmly, his eyes still locked on Sirius.

Shrugging, Trevor hurried off to fetch an application from the building office. Without speaking, James and Sirius moved toward each other until they met in the centre of the empty living room. James draped an arm over his shoulder, turning so they could regard the empty space together.

“So, what do you think?” James asked.

Sirius leaned into the embrace. “I think Effie is going to love decorating it for us.”

“It’s probably good there’s no fireplace,” James joked. “At least she’ll have to knock if she wants to come over to visit.”

“We should have your parents over after we move in,” Sirius said suddenly, excitement building in his voice. “Cook dinner or something.”

“Definitely,” James agreed, before a slight complication occurred to him. “Do you know how to cook?”

Sirius shrugged dismissively. “How hard can it be?”

“Good point,” James conceded, chuckling. “Besides, they’ll mainly just want to snoop around our place.”

Though James let his arm drop, he kept his hand resting on Sirius’ shoulder blade. He could feel the excitement buzzing beneath his friend’s skin as he pictured the room filled with their belongings and the people they loved. That new feeling James could not identify grew in his chest.

“Our place,” Sirius said, trying the words out.

“Our place,” James agreed, squeezing his shoulder.

Sirius knew he had to tell James about Nicholas; it was just difficult to find the right moment. Bringing it up at work seemed ridiculous when they lived together, but with Remus staying with them, they were rarely alone for long.

James had been hurt by his secrecy last time. Although Sirius was determined to keep things casual with Nicholas, he knew that hiding that they were seeing each other again was as good as admitting that he knew it was a bad idea. Sirius could sense that James was dying to ask about his unexplained absences over the past week. It was an untenable situation for friends and roommates as close as they were.

Tonight, was the night. Moony would be gone, visiting his parents overnight. It was the perfect opportunity to talk to James.

They left work separately; Sirius had promised Peter that he would look over the plans he had drawn up to uplift the security processes around the Ministry. Although junior within the department, Peter’s role overseeing Portkeys and the Floo Network made him unexpectedly influential. He was scheduled to present to the head of department the next day – and even more significantly, the witch he fancied would also be present. In fact, she had finally agreed to go on a date with him.

Sirius was surprised that Peter had asked him to look over his work, rather than far more patient and affable James.

“He’s too nice,” Peter explained as they pored over a map of the Ministry Floo Network. “I need someone who will really tear everything apart.”

“So, you asked me to help because I’m an asshole,” Sirius commented.

“Pretty much,” Peter teased.

Sirius could not find it in him to be too resentful about that assessment. Not only did it give him an excuse to tear apart some of the shoddier work that Peter had produced, it also meant Sirius had received an approving smile from James. Sirius being kind to Peter always made James happy.

On his way home, Sirius dropped in to visit Nicholas, who had been away from the Ministry unwell. He picked up some groceries en route so Nicholas would have food while he recuperated.

Nicholas opened the door wordlessly, allowing Sirius to step inside. He led him into the living room, which always struck Sirius as unsettlingly empty. Nicholas eschewed tchotchkes and photographs; everything was in its place except for a stack of Ministry paperwork, which Nicholas pointedly covered with a folder.

Nicholas did not appear unwell, though Sirius noticed a slight tremor in his hand as he sipped water. He did not invite Sirius to sit.

“I wanted to check on you,” Sirius offered, lifting the paper bag of groceries. “I got you some supplies.”

Nicholas gave him a wan look, peering into the bag before turning up his nose. “I’m not much of a cook.”

“Right,” Sirius said, feeling foolish for thinking his impulsive visit would be welcome. “Are you feeling better?”

“I’m fine,” Nicholas replied, without emotion.

An awkward silence fell between them. Sometimes he doubted whether Nicholas actually enjoyed his company. At least when they were fully dressed.

“Well, I suppose I should leave you to it,” Sirius said uncertainly. “I hope you feel better.”

He forced a tight smile and turned toward the front door. Just as he was about to open it, Nicholas reached over and pushed it shut, then pressed Sirius against the door, his strong arm pinning him in place.

“I’m sorry,” Nicholas murmured, pressing a kiss to his shoulder through his shirt. “I just don’t like unexpected visitors – you really should owl first.”

“Sorry,” Sirius said, feeling awkward. Nicholas was changeable; one moment he would be eager to be as close as possible to him and the next he would turn cold and dismissive. Sirius never quite knew what to expect.

Nicholas removed his arm from where it pinned Sirius against the door, instead pressing his body against his back. Sirius squirmed, trying to create space without outright pushing Nicholas away. Unfortunately, Nicholas misinterpreted his movement as enthusiasm, pressing his hips against him. Sirius realised with a lurch that Nicholas was hard.

“I thought you were sick,” Sirius said uncertainly.

Nicholas breathed on the back of his neck, rubbing himself against the curve of Sirius’ arse. “How could I be sick enough to resist you?”

Sirius suddenly felt desperate to get away from him and this sterile apartment of his. The sensation of Nicholas grinding against him was turning his stomach.

“I should probably get going,” Sirius said suddenly, pushing away from the door but meeting resistance in the form of Nicholas’ strong body.

Nicholas ignored him, reaching around Sirius to undo the button of his jeans. Crowded against the door, Sirius found could not move. An unexpected panic bloomed in his chest – he loathed feeling trapped.

“Can you get off me?” he snapped, twisting to push Nicholas away.

After a brief hesitation, Nicholas released him. Sirius turned to find Nicholas glaring, his face flushed and the bulge in his trousers still evident.

Faced with Nicholas’ ire, Sirius felt suddenly embarrassed. “Sorry,” he said, unsure why he was apologising. “I guess I’m not in the mood.”

“Right,” Nicholas replied coldly. “You could have mentioned that.”

A wave of irritation passed through Sirius. “Should I have sent an owl about that as well?” he shot

back, raising an eyebrow.

They glared at each other for a moment before Nicholas let out a deep, regretful sigh. "I'm being a prick again, aren't I?"

"Yeah," Sirius confirmed. "You are."

It was disconcerting how quickly Nicholas' expression shifted; annoyance turned to gratitude in an instant. "See, this is why I need you around," he said earnestly.

"So, I can call you a prick?" Sirius asked, eager to keep the tone light so he could make his escape.

Nicholas laughed a little too loudly. "Exactly – especially when I'm not feeling well."

Sirius felt a twinge of guilt at the reminder of Nicholas' condition, despite his earlier behaviour.

"Look," Sirius said diplomatically. "Let's just forget about this whole interaction. You rest up and I'll see you when you feel better."

Nicholas nodded, allowing Sirius to open the door this time. Free from his oppressive hold, Sirius felt he had over-reacted. But the entire scene left a bad taste in his mouth.

"By the way," Nicholas said, as if they had been in a casual conversation rather than an oppressive silence. "I'm still happy to talk to your werewolf friend about his experiences. Unless you're hiding me from him."

Sirius was unsure how to respond but Nicholas did not seem to expect an answer. He pressed a dry kiss to Sirius' cheek and closed the door.

Off-balance, Sirius left the run-down apartment block and apparated to the alley behind their flat. As he trudged up the stairs, he remained lost in thought, puzzling over Nicholas and his erratic behaviour. His mood shifted so quickly, Sirius mused as he unlocked the door. In a way, it reminded him of his summers at Grimmauld Place. Always walking on eggshells, braced for the next change in mood. Perhaps Sirius' moods were changeable too and his friends had just learned to navigate around him. It was a sad thought.

As Sirius entered the flat, a delicious scent filled the air.

"Hey Pads!" James called cheerfully from the kitchen, a tea towel slung over his shoulder as he stirred a pot. "Before you ask, you don't have to worry – I didn't cook this. I visited my parents on the way home and Mum sent us food."

Sirius walked into the kitchen, drawn by James' warmth and the enticing smell of chicken cacciatore. James was barefoot in his tracksuit bottoms and an old t-shirt, jazz music from the record player filling the entire space. Sirius could scarcely swallow against the sharp affection he felt for him.

James glanced over, concern appearing on his face. "Are you okay?"

"This looks great, Prongs," Sirius choked out, embarrassed at the tremor in his voice.

James looked alarmed. He set aside the stew and hurried to Sirius, studying him closely. Sirius stood silent, unsure why he felt so upset. When James wrapped his arms around him, Sirius buried his face in his chest. "Sorry," he choked out.

"You never have to apologise for needing a hug," James reassured him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Sirius shook his head. He would tell James about Nicholas soon, just not tonight. He wanted to enjoy the warmth of their apartment with his favourite person. Pulling back, he offered a small smile.

"It's just us tonight," James reminded him softly, pressing a curl behind his ear. "Do you want to have a shower before we eat?"

Sirius nodded. "Try not to burn dinner while I'm gone."

James sniffed theatrically. "If you'd tried my coq au vin the other night, you'd know that I'm turning over a new leaf."

"Moony burned the bacon and you know it," Sirius retorted, rolling his eyes. "Using magic is cheating."

After a long shower, feeling much more relaxed, Sirius donned his softest pyjama bottoms and stole a Three Broomsticks sweatshirt from James. The familiar scent wrapped around him – even more appealing than the smell of dinner.

At the dining table, James poured them both glasses of red wine as they settled in for their unexpected feast. Sirius was not in the mood to talk, answering questions about his afternoon Peter briefly. James was delighted to hear that Peter had scored a date and that – if it went well – he would bring her to the party they were throwing for Sirius’ birthday in a couple of weeks. The moment his birthday came up, James seized on the topic with gusto, talking eagerly about his vision for the celebration.

Sirius sipped his wine, glancing over the rim at James as he chattered away excitedly. Soon, evenings like this would be a rare treat for Sirius. Once Lily found the courage to discuss moving in, she would be the only one to see James so relaxed. This past year had been an unexpected gift.

When they moved to the couch with the wine bottle, James slid closer, lifting Sirius’ legs onto his lap. Sirius relaxed against the soft pillow, enjoying the gentle squeeze of James massaging his calf as Miles Davis played the trumpet as if it were part of his body.

“I’m worried about Moony,” James said suddenly, his fingers working their magic.

“Yeah?” Sirius replied, resting his head on his hand as he watched James’ careful movements. James’ eyelashes cast long shadows on his cheeks under the low lights.

Sometimes it seemed impossible to contain so much longing. Sirius always waited for the space in his chest that belonged to James to fill, but it just grew larger. Perhaps one day he would be entirely hollow.

“He seems really lost,” James mused.

Sirius hummed thoughtfully. “He’s wasted in those dead-end jobs.”

“We should ask around the Ministry,” James suggested. “See if we can open some doors for him.”

Sirius almost mentioned Nicholas’ offer, the one positive note amidst his doubts. Just as he was about to speak, James smiled at him so warmly that his heart stumbled in his chest. Perhaps it was cowardly, but Sirius did not want to fight with James – not when they were sitting so comfortably and while the red wine was making his limbs loosen.

“I love having Moony to stay,” James confided, tracing Sirius’ shinbone. “But I also miss it being just us.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, relaxing even deeper into the couch. “Me too.”

James glanced back down at his hand tracing a line on Sirius’ leg. James let his hand slip down to Sirius’ ankle, tracing the bones in his foot. No longer massaging exactly, just tracing his fingers along the contours as if trying to memorise this part of his body that even Sirius rarely thought about. Suddenly he was achingly aware of the sensitive nerves coming alive under James’ gentle ministrations.

“Pads,” James said, his voice low and intimate. “Do you ever think about - ”

“About what?” Sirius prompted when James trailed off.

James lifted his uncertain gaze to Sirius, but the sight of his face made him freeze. Sirius tilted his head, trying to read his expression. James cut his gaze away before he could make sense of it.

“Nothing,” James replied quickly, returning his focus to massaging his leg.

Usually, Sirius would not have let such a blatant retreat go. But James was so focused on loosening his tight muscles that he found himself settling in against the pillows. Sirius closed his eyes, surrendering to the syncopated rhythm of the music and the steady movement of James’ hand.

Although he drifted off on the couch, Sirius woke to find himself carefully tucked into bed.

Fleamont Potter possessed many admirable qualities: he was a brilliant wizard, an excellent father, and a true role model for James. He taught James to fly, shave, and stand up for his beliefs. In every area of life, James strived to follow his example. James would have been happy to be considered half the man his father was.

Unfortunately, Monty also had the subtlety of a brick hurled through a window.

Sirius and James arrived early at Potter Manor, eager to work on the motorcycle. For the first time he

could remember, Sirius had been the one to wake up James, unable to contain his excitement. James went from dreaming about Sirius to seeing him perched on the edge of his bed. For a fleeting moment, the dream lingered – grasping hands and desperate sighs – before it evaporated. Sirius dragged James out of bed with the promise of coffee and breakfast.

Monty greeted them outside, clad in oil-stained overalls.

“Not entirely necessary, considering I have you boys to do all the dirty work,” Monty joked, before winking at them conspiratorially. “I’m mainly wearing the outfit because Effie finds it irresistible.”

“Too much information, Dad,” James grimaced, nudging Sirius to stifle his laughter.

“What?” Monty said, his eyes twinkling mischievously. “It’s important to put in effort, even when you’ve been together for as long as we have.”

“Don’t be such a prude, Prongs,” Sirius teased, throwing an arm over his shoulder. “Married love is a beautiful thing.”

“Indeed, it is, Siri,” Monty replied, his sly smile lingering on James. “You should try it for yourself sometime.”

“I’m not sure I’m the marrying type,” Sirius said, his gaze drifting to the motorcycle at the room's centre.

“Ah, but it’s different with the right person,” Monty insisted. “With someone who truly understands you, commitment isn’t scary.”

James seriously considered transforming into Prongs just to change the subject.

Luckily, Sirius seemed barely to notice Monty’s suggestive words as he circled the motorcycle with an adoring expression. “And how is my gorgeous girl?”

With Sirius distracted, James turned to his father. “Will you stop?” he hissed.

“Relax, Jamie,” his father responded cheerfully, striding over to confer with Sirius about the bike.

They were determined to get her up and running - at least on the ground - before the end of the day. They could figure out the best enchantment to get her airborne later. Once they did, they would need to take her to the Department of Muggle Artefacts for review and registration as part of the new process that the Ministry was rolling out.

Arthur had told Monty that it could take weeks for the department to test the enchantments and clear the paperwork. The increased bureaucracy was a painful necessity, given the potential risks. But Sirius was eager to take the motorbike out on the road, Muggle style, before he surrendered her to the Ministry.

True to his word, Monty let them do the heavy lifting, lounging against the workbench while reading instructions from a local Muggle mechanic. Sirius was in his element, a rag over his shoulder and a spanner in hand, his tongue poking out in concentration.

James kept dropping tools, distracted by the sight of that pink tongue and the smudge of grease on Sirius’ cheek. When Sirius wiped his face with his t-shirt, James’s gaze fell to his toned stomach, and the toolbox crashed to the ground.

“You’re a bit clumsy today, son,” Monty remarked knowingly, sipping a lemonade that Effie had delivered to ‘her boys’. “Something on your mind?”

“He’s just excited about taking a ride later,” Sirius said loyally.

“I can’t wait,” James said unenthusiastically, dreading the unique torture of sitting behind Sirius on the motorcycle.

“It’ll happen today,” Sirius assured him. “I can feel it.”

“When you know, you know,” Monty agreed. “You have to trust your gut.”

When Sirius finally ducked away to the bathroom, James rounded on his father. “Will you stop?”

“I’m acting completely normally,” Monty shot back. “You’re just self-conscious.”

“This isn’t a joke,” James scuffed the ground with his foot. “I have some things to figure out and your little comments aren’t helping.”

Monty looked crestfallen. “I was just trying to help.”

James let out a breath through his teeth. Tension had been building within him since the night they had spent alone at the apartment. After Sirius dozed off, James lost any sense of time just staring at him.

The aching in his chest only got worse the more he stared. There was just so much to notice about Sirius. There was not a sight that James preferred in the world and the realisation was confusing and elating in equal measure.

Eventually, James had gathered Sirius in his arms and carried him to his bedroom, placing him gently on the bed. Head foggy with wine, James had longed to slip in beside him, just like they did at Hogwarts.

He could not quite recall why they had stopped sharing a bed, but he knew that the tacit decision occurred after he and Lily started dating. If the two were connected, what did it say about their bed-sharing before then?

James had practically fled back to his own room to avoid temptation.

“I don’t want to mess everything up,” James admitted to his father.

Monty promised to keep quiet for the rest of the afternoon. Unfortunately, the dramatic change of demeanour was even more noticeable than the loaded comments. Sirius kept glancing at him in concern, growing increasingly nervous.

The afternoon stretched endlessly as they attempted to start the engine. By late afternoon, they had wheeled the motorcycle onto the driveway. Sirius sat atop it, biting his lip in concentration. Dressed in a denim jacket and a Blue Öyster Cult t-shirt, he looked every bit the badass motorcycle rider. Despite the tension, James felt a thrill of excitement.

Sirius pressed the kick-lever and turned on the ignition switch. The bike sputtered to life, and an excited glance passed between him, James, and Monty. Sirius twisted the throttle, and the engine roared, echoing off the ancient stones of Potter Manor.

James whooped, pumping his fists in the air, while Monty applauded wildly. Sirius sped down the driveway, completing a full circle. Gravel sprayed towards James and Monty as he stopped in front of them, a triumphant smirk on his face.

“Can I interest you in a ride, James?” he asked. His roguish grin would have looked ridiculous on anyone else, but with that face – and on that bike – it was irresistible. Ignoring the fact that his father was watching, James approached the motorcycle, eyeing the leather seat dubiously.

“Are you sure I’ll fit?”

Sirius was far too elated to consider such practicalities. “One way to find out,” he grinned.

James managed to squeeze behind Sirius, his chest plastered against his back. Their legs slotted together comfortably, probably assisted by the old engorgement charm. He wrapped his arms around Sirius’ waist.

Sirius glanced back, a familiar challenge glinting in his eyes. “You’ll need to hold on tighter than that.”

Instead of responding, James tightened his grip, resting his chin on Sirius’s shoulder. “Better?”

Sirius nodded, swallowing tightly. Monty stepped forward with his wand, casting safety spells as they sat on the bike, which shuddered beneath them, eager to unleash its power. Effie emerged from the house, a helmet in each hand. Her fierce expression making it clear that this was non-negotiable, even with Monty’s spells.

“Drive safely,” Monty ordered. “I expect both of you back in one piece.”

“Of course,” Sirius reassured him, as if offended that Monty felt he had to say it.

James was grateful his face was hidden by the helmet as he settled against Sirius, studiously avoiding the knowing look his father shot him. One moment they were stationary, and the next they were hurtling down the driveway and onto the road at breakneck speed. James let out another whoop, clutching Sirius for dear life.

While he still preferred the elegance and precision of flying, James had to admit the speed and roar of the motorcycle were exhilarating. This must have been how it felt for dragon riders to sling a harness on something wild and untameable.

Sirius took a winding path through the nearby villages. James could not tell whether he was following a route of simply relying on instinct. As the sun began to set, Sirius pulled into a quiet field

overlooking serene farmlands. He turned off the bike, flicked up his visor, and grinned at James, who mirrored his movements.

“That was awesome,” Sirius gushed.

James nodded fervently, pulling off his helmet. “I think that might be my second favourite way to travel.”

Sirius shook his head, pulling off his helmet and climbing off the bike. “Wait until we get her into the air.”

James followed suit, taking off his helmet and clambering down from his perch on the motorcycle. Sirius inclined his head towards a nearby field, eyebrows raised in invitation. James nodded, burying his hands in his pockets as they made their way to the pretty lookout over the farms.

As they sat on the grass, the setting sun turned the sky a vibrant orange and pink. They sat close together, their shoulders brushing and their legs pressed together. Sirius shivered in the growing chill.

“We need to get you a warmer jacket,” James commented, wrapping an arm around Sirius and rubbing his arm to warm it.

“Aren’t you cold?” Sirius asked, glancing at his light sweater.

“Nope,” James replied, with a shy grin. “I had you to keep me warm.”

Sirius turned his head, resting his cheek on his knees as he peered at James. James could tell that he wanted to say something, so he waited patiently, seizing the opportunity to admire the view while Sirius searched for the words.

James kept examining Sirius. When a curl blew over Sirius forehead, James lifted his hand to smooth it back. His gaze traced the line of Sirius' arm. James had been staring at him for almost a decade, but it still took him by surprise sometimes how lovely Sirius was, particularly when lit up by a setting sun.

When their eyes met again, James felt a swoop in his stomach – a burning urge not just to look but to touch. The same impulse that had compelled James to press his fingers on the antler tattoo, to trace a line on his throat, to drape his legs over his lap, to seize any excuse to touch him.

This is not just a friendship.

The thought was simultaneously obvious and completely dumbfounding. James never sat like this to watch the sunset with any of his other friends – male or female. He had never pressed this close to them. He had never worried that his heart was going to hammer a hole in his chest when he wrapped his arms around them. He had never stared at them when they wore leather trousers or torn jeans.

Theirs *was* a beautiful friendship – one that James treasured – but there was also an attraction here, at least on his side. James felt almost embarrassed he had never noticed before. Sirius sat there, pressed up against him, blissfully unaware of the crisis unfolding within James, lost in his own thoughts.

Sirius sighed deeply, breaking their eye contact to regard the sunset. James kept examining his profile, the implications of his thought process going off in his head like fireworks. He was attracted to Sirius. He had no idea what to do with this information.

“I need to tell you something,” Sirius said worriedly, still avoiding James’ gaze in favour of the setting sun.

“You can tell me anything,” James responded, although he felt a knot of anxiety in his stomach.

For a moment, James feared that Sirius had noticed something off in his behaviour. He knew he was not ready to have that conversation yet. Once it started, there would be no turning back for either of them. What if that this uncharacteristic hesitancy was Sirius’ way of warning James that he was about to change his friendship forever?^[2] No matter what happened, James could not lose Sirius.

“I’ve been seeing Nicholas,” Sirius said in a rush.

James froze, completely blindsided. “Are you joking?” he asked, staring fixedly at his friend’s profile.

“Nope, I’m Sirius,” he said, his voice far too hard to land the joke.

“That’s not funny,” James shot back. “How long has this been going on?”

“We’ve only gone out a few times,” Sirius responded tensely, a muscle tensing in his jaw as if he was fighting not to slam his mouth shut. “It’s casual.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“We went on a date the night you and Moony had Lily over.”

“Okay,” James said, anger tightening his stomach. “So, after he hurt your arm and insulted you right in front of me?”

Sirius moodily tugged at the blades of grass between them, studiously avoiding James’ gaze.

“I knew you’d react like this,” Sirius grumbled, still pulling at the grass.

“Because he’s an asshole!”

James was aware that his raised voice would provoke Sirius, but all he could think about was that tracking spell that Gaunt had hidden on Sirius’ back. Not to mention the mark he had left on his wrist at the ball. The disrespectful words Gaunt had hurled at Sirius still echoed in his ears.

Sirius leaned away, wrapping his arms around his knees. “He said you apologised to him. I thought you were getting over your grudge.”

“I apologised because I shouldn’t have shoved him,” James retorted bitterly. “Not because I’m excusing the way he treated you.”

Sirius lowered his head. “He’s trying to change.”

“Great!” James spat, his voice rising father. “Then let him change – far, far away from you.”

“Not everyone is like you James,” Sirius responded, his voice also rising. “Some people fuck up occasionally. I should know; I’ve made plenty of mistakes.”

James felt a strange buzzing in his ears as he stared at Sirius. His face was pinched with self-loathing. It reminded James of the way it had been after the incident on Snape – and the thought that Sirius could slip back into that level of despair terrified him.

“You’re not like him,” James insisted. “You’re nothing like him.”

Sirius shifted his gaze to a point somewhere behind James. “We have more in common than you think.”

“Why?” he pressed. “Because his father’s a prick? That doesn’t make you the same.”

Suddenly, Sirius clambered to his feet, planting himself firmly on the ground with narrowed eyes. James also stood up, mirroring his angry posture.

“You don’t get it, alright?” Sirius spat.

“No,” James responded, glaring. “I don’t. I don’t get how you can let him anywhere near you after the way he treated you last time.”

“People change,” Sirius said stubbornly.

“It didn’t seem like he’d changed that much a couple weeks ago. You can’t be this naïve, Sirius. What if he’s worse this time? What if he hurts you?”

“I’m a grown man, James,” Sirius said, his features twisting. “I can look after myself.”

For a moment, James held his ground, letting the anger and worry course through him. He did not trust Gaunt with Sirius – did not want him anywhere near him. But what frustrated him even more was the thought that Sirius could ever believe Gaunt deserved his time.

“Well, I’m surprised you even bothered telling me,” James said.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have,” Sirius retorted. “It’s none of your business anyway.”

“Of course, it’s my business,” James cried, his voice rising again. “I’m the one who is going to pick up the pieces when it all falls apart.”

Sirius even looked beautiful when he shouted at James, colour painting his cheeks. “Well, I’m sorry that being my friend is such a burden.”

“That’s not what I’m saying!” James exclaimed, realising suddenly that he had never shouted at Sirius before. “This is not like you and your family. You have a choice here.”

“My choice, James,” Sirius said, levelling a hard gaze on him. “Not yours.”

“Then make a *better* choice than this.”

“What?” Sirius demanded, moving closer to James, his eyes narrowed. “What should I choose?”

What exactly do you want from me?"

Without realising it, James stepped closer, his hands clutching Sirius' upper arms desperately. Sirius widened his eyes, taken aback by the sudden proximity. James was furious with him – and he could see the same anger reflected in Sirius' expression. Yet even through that anger, something deep inside him urged him to close the distance.

James lifted his hands to Sirius' cheeks, his chest heaving with emotion. The setting sun made Sirius' pale eyes burn brightly. The hostility melted away from his expression, replaced by a vulnerable sort of confusion. James shook his head, overwhelmed by a jumble of half-formed thoughts and angry protests.

Framing that striking face with his hands, James finally spoke, his voice low and desperate. "You deserve better, Sirius. You deserve to be with someone who knows how lucky they are to have you."

Sirius searched his gaze, then dropped his eyes. "You think way too highly of me."

James released grip on Sirius' face, too frustrated to even look at him. He took a few steps away, towards the fence they had jumped over, noticing suddenly that the light in the sky was dwindling away to nothing. By the time he turned back to face Sirius, there was no hint of emotion on his friend's face.

"You're making a mistake," James announced with finality. "I don't support this."

"Luckily, I wasn't putting it to a vote, James," Sirius retorted flatly, picking up the helmet that lay on the grass at their feet. "Come on. We should get back."

"You go," James replied. "I'll apparate back to London from here."

Sirius stared fixedly at the motorcycle. "What should I tell your parents?"

James could not resist getting in a parting shot. "Don't tell them anything," he said flatly. "You've gotten really good at that."

With that, James apparated, leaving Sirius standing alone in a wide, empty field, the motorcycle helmet dangling from his hand.

Notes:

Please don't hate me! Trust me when I say we are rapidly approaching some payoff for all this pining. I'm super excited to share the next few chapters with you - although fair warning that I probably can't quite maintain this level of multi-chapter sharing in one weekend.

Let me know what you think of the latest developments.

Notes

[1] Loosely inspired by this line from *Orbital* by Samantha Harvey: "It's a feeling he had almost perpetually when here, in both the biggest and smallest of moments – this belly-chest knowing of the deep beauty of things, and of some improbable grace that has shot him up here in the thick of the stars."

[2] Inspired by *Call me by your name* by André Aciman – an absolutely favourite of mine.

Chapter 10 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/152929066>): **Only ever yours**

Summary:

Sirius looked away. "James wants to be with Lily."

"James has no idea what he wants right now," Remus dismissed.

Despite their fight, Sirius felt a rash impulse to defend James. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know that you're both miserable," Remus retorted, running a frustrated hand through his sandy hair. "I know you've been in love with him for years. And I know that James looks at you like you're

miraculous. But you're just too - ”

Remus searched for the words.

“What?” Sirius demanded, crossing his arms tightly. “What am I? Go on, say it.”

“Damaged,” Remus said, as if the word was dragged out of him. “You're too *damaged* to let anything good happen to you. You'd rather say nothing and suffer, because that's all you know how to do.”

Notes:

Full disclosure: This one is going to hurt a bit with our boys so at odds. But some necessary conversations are happening to set up for the next couple chapters.

TW: Nicholas Gaunt.

Soundtrack: "Take me to Church" (<https://open.spotify.com/track/1CS7Sd1u5tWkstBhpssyjP?si=b89417b9c5314e96>) by Hozier

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_10_endnotes\)](#).)

“Break my heart. Break it a thousand times if you like. It was only ever yours to break anyway.”

- Kiera Cass, *The One*

Hogwarts School, Scotland – 1978

For weeks, the Leaving Ball had dominated the conversations of the Seventh Years. James and Peter were especially enthusiastic about the event. James was still elated by fact that Lily had agreed to be his girlfriend, while Peter sensed a golden opportunity to find a girlfriend of his own before graduation.

Sirius, on the other hand, thought the whole affair was absurd. He was only going because James had insisted, proclaiming the importance of the Marauders spending one last night together before they left Hogwarts. Nostalgia hung in the air like a thick fog; Remus waxed lyrical about how much he would miss the library, and Peter bemoaned the end of his free access to the kitchens.

True to form, James and Sirius responded to the upcoming milestone by retreating into their own little world. Together, they orchestrated daily pranks, sticking all the furniture in the Slytherin common room to the ceiling, filling the Great Lake with transfigured rubber ducks that squawked angrily when touched, and even growing a hedge maze that cut off the castle from the Herbology greenhouses.

Personally, Sirius proudest that they had successfully hexed the entirety of Slytherin House to sing the Gryffindor fight song every time they attempted to speak. It was particularly gratifying to see uptight Regulus singing about the fighting lion, his face a mask of horror.

“Honestly, Potter,” McGonagall chided at breakfast, attempting to hide her amusement at their house spirit. “You're Head Boy for another few weeks. A bit of decorum would be appreciated.”

“Come on, Minnie,” Sirius wheedled playfully. “Admit it – you're going to miss us.”

“Best students you've ever had,” James chimed in with a charming smile.

McGonagall sighed heavily. “The day you leave Hogwarts will be the first full night of sleep I have gotten in seven years.”

Sirius was bitterly disappointed to discover that James had promised Lily that they would do nothing to disrupt the Leaving Ball. James was determined to be a perfect date. He looked unreasonably handsome in his dress robes. With James preoccupied, the Ball was painfully dull for Sirius. For the first time in his school career, Sirius considered slipping away from a party early.

Not wanting to be accused of neglecting his Marauder duties, Sirius opted to focus on downing as

much spiked punch as possible. When he slipped outside for a cigarette, he found the evening pleasantly warm, although he could smell rain in the air. A smile crept onto his face at the sight of their maze, still standing despite the hole burned through it by a frantic Hufflepuff running late for a Herbology exam.

Sirius knew he would miss Hogwarts. His only consolation was that he and James would be returning to Potter Manor after graduation. They had committed to a summer of idleness and mischief while they awaited their Auror Entrance Exam results. Despite his adeptness at test taking, Sirius doubted he had passed, but he was too embarrassed to admit that to James who brimming with excitement about the possibility of them working together.

A faint scrape and a giggle caught his attention – clearly a couple seeking a bit more privacy away from the festivities. Curious, Sirius peered across the dimly lit courtyard.

His blood went cold when he recognised Lily and James. They were pressed together in a little alcove. They were kissing, James pressing Lily against the stone wall while her hands slipped lower and lower down his back.

“Is that wall uncomfortable?” James asked, his voice muffled against her lips.

Lily chuckled. “A little, but I don’t mind.”

Not satisfied with that response, James rotated them, until his back was pressed against the stone. He smiled down at Lily as if he could not believe his good luck to find himself there with her.

“I love you,” James said softly.

Sirius had often wondered what those words would sound like, spoken by James in a moment just like this. He knew he should leave; this was a private moment meant just for the two of them. Nonetheless, he was frozen on the spot.

Instead of responding, Lily buried her hand in his messy hair and pressed their lips together again. Sirius watched as James deepened the kiss. One of her hands was pressed to his chest and he slotted their fingers together. His other hand tugged gently at that vivid red hair. Lily did not seem to mind when one of the braids came loose under his ministrations.

Sirius would not have minded either, if he were in her place. But, of course, Sirius would never be in her place.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Lily asked, her green eyes gleaming in the low light.

James stared down at her fondly, a smile spreading across his face. “What did you have in mind?”

Lily slid her hand down his chest, and then even lower. “Maybe my room?”

James wrapped his arms around her, ducking his head to whisper in her ear. “Are you sure?”

“Definitely,” Lily grinned, twining her arms around his neck and kissing him again.

Stepping away, Lily straightened her green dress and held out her hand to James. He clasped their fingers together, and she eagerly tugged him toward the staircase. By the time they reached the entrance to the castle, they were laughing giddily, practically jogging in their eagerness to tumble into bed together.

Sirius took a long drag on his cigarette. As his best friend, Sirius was supposed to be happy for James. In the morning, the other Marauders would probably expect him to make sly comments over breakfast. But Sirius knew he would not be able to stomach going down to the Great Hall and seeing Lily and James sitting together – sharing private looks about the night they had spent together.

Sirius should have gotten used to the idea by now. After all, he had been the one to convince Lily to go out with James. It was not possible to lose something that had never belonged to him. But alone in the courtyard, his mind quickly supplied a list of everything he would miss out on. Sirius would never know what it felt like to kiss James, to avoid closing his eyes for fear of missing something. To feel that strong body moving over his. To trace his mouth down his stomach.

Sirius would never know how it felt to belong to James Potter, to be as close to him as two people could get. Sirius could not even bring himself to resent Lily. It was just like he had told her in the library months earlier; she would have been an idiot to turn down James.

As the cigarette burned down to nothing, Sirius realised he could not go back to Gryffindor Tower tonight. He could not bear to look at James’ empty bed.

Filled with a newfound determination, Sirius returned to the festivities in the Great Hall, attempting to push aside the memory of James' hand resting on Lily's lower back, the sound of their laughter, the way James had leaned down to kiss her.

Sirius needed a distraction. As if his thoughts had summoned him, Benjy Fenwick appeared at his elbow. His cheeks were red – whether from dancing or drinking Sirius could not tell. With his blonde hair and his quick Ravenclaw wit, Benjy was attractive – and knew it. On any other day, Sirius might have been pleased to have him step into his personal space.

“You're really fit,” Benjy gushed. “I've always wanted to tell you that.”

Sirius flashed a half-hearted smile, his heart brittle and unmoved in his chest. “Well, now you've told me.”

Benjy nodded, glancing around as if searching for someone. “You're not here with anyone are you?”

“No,” Sirius responded. “I'm alone.”

Do you want to get out of here?

What did you have in mind?

“That doesn't seem right,” Benjy protested, more confident after confirming that Sirius did not have a date. “Do you want to dance?”

Maybe my room.

Are you sure?

“No,” Sirius said, softening his harsh words by stepping closer to Benjy. Sirius had been to the Ravenclaw common room before for parties – all airy and midnight blue. Somewhere in the castle, James and Lily had probably reached the private room that she was awarded as Head Girl.

“Do you want another drink?” Benjy asked.

“No,” Sirius said again, stepping closer and pressing a hand to Benjy's waist.

Benjy widened his eyes, as if he could not believe his good luck. “Do...do you want to get out of here?”

Sirius licked his lips suggestively. He knew he was laying it on a bit thick, though judging by the way his gaze was roving hungrily over Sirius, Benjy was not exactly interested in a night of spirited academic debate.

“What did you have in mind?” Sirius asked, not realising he was quoting James until he finished asking the question.

Benjy kissed him enthusiastically. Sirius relaxed, understanding how the night would now progress. Sirius was not precious about sex; he believed it was something to be enjoyed. In contrast, James had once told him that he could not imagine sleeping with someone he was not in love with. Although Sirius had teased him for being old-fashioned, it had seemed fitting that James would feel that way.

Sirius focused on Benjy, attempting to lose himself in the feeling of his lips and later – back in the Ravenclaw dorm – his hands. Although Benjy clearly knew what he was doing, Sirius could not quite focus. Not that Benjy had any complaints.

When morning came, Sirius crept out of the Ravenclaw dorms, passed Benjy's sleeping dormmates, and back up to Gryffindor Tower. He climbed the stairs, starting when he noticed James standing at the door of their dorm room, his hand resting on the doorknob.

Sirius stood a few steps below him as they regarded each other silently in the quiet stairway, both still wearing the same robes they had worn the night before.

“Looks like someone had a good night,” Sirius said, trying to muster a teasing smile.

“You could say that,” James answered bashfully, a dreamy expression crossing his face as he contemplated the highlights of his evening.

Sirius was grateful when he did not elaborate. It was probably a gentlemanly gesture that James was sneaking away so early – avoiding the curious gazes of their classmates. He really was ridiculously quaint sometimes.

“Well, I'm knackered,” Sirius said with a tight smile. “I should probably go to bed.”

James nodded, but did not move to let him into the room. Instead, his eyes swept over Sirius again,

his expression clouding. “Where did you sleep last night?”

“Ravenclaw dorms,” he said, attempting to reclaim some of his usual swagger.

“Anyone I know?”

“Benjy Fenwick.”

James nodded stiffly, a muscle in his jaw tightening as he digested that information. “Nice,” he said.

“Yep,” Sirius replied.

They stood there staring at each other, neither moving. James opened his mouth to say something, before thinking better of it. He appeared to be gripping the doorknob with more force than necessary.

Breaking their eye contact, Sirius glanced pointedly at the closed door. “Are you going to let me in there or do I have to answer three riddles first?”

James huffed a laugh, shaking his head as if to clear it. “Right, sorry,” he said quickly.

James opened the door and gesturing for Sirius to enter. They stepped into their room silently, sharing an amused glance when they spotted Peter passed out on the floor.

Sirius found that he did not want to look too closely at James, afraid he might sense the change in him. Even Sirius had some sense of self-preservation. He changed into his pyjamas while James headed for the shower – incapable of going to bed during daylight hours, despite the fact he had likely not slept a wink.

In that moment, Sirius realised they would never talk about their respective evenings. Although they still chatted endlessly about anything and everything, he sensed that a shift had occurred. It reminded Sirius of how they stopped having their impromptu sleepovers once Lily and James got together. Neither of them mentioned it, but a strange silence had settled between them on the topic of their sex lives – a line drawn in the sand, indicating they could get this close, but no closer.

Sirius closed his bed curtains tight, casting a silencing charm. Just today, he promised himself. Sirius would indulge in his pathetic moping for one day. Then tomorrow, he would go back to being the friend that James deserved.

Things would be better tomorrow. But today Sirius buried his face in his pillow and wept.

For more than a week, James and Sirius had managed to avoid speaking a single word to each other – a remarkable feat, considering they shared a flat and worked in the same office. James could hardly look at Sirius, sitting at his desk, his hair pulled back and smudges under his eyes. James knew he looked just as miserable and exhausted, but every time he tried to speak, the words disappeared.

The silence between them had settled so heavily that James could hardly imagine speaking to him again. That thought was so painful he could scarcely endure it. He feared that if he began to speak, everything inside him would spill out - the entire tangled mess of emotions that had taken residence in his chest. It was as if his epiphany in the paddock after their motorcycle ride had drawn his attention to a locked door in his mind. He was terrified that opening it would unleash a flood that their friendship would not survive.

It was unbearable to imagine Nicholas Gaunt touching Sirius, and James fought to keep those thoughts at bay, moving through his days robotically. The only solution seemed to be not to think at all. A strange sort of distance grew between him and everything in his life. Nothing felt real without Sirius.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Remus had asked one night while Sirius was out – probably with Gaunt. They were at the dining table, engaged in a half-hearted game of wizarding chess. Remus had turned down the offer of a drink with a pointed look that made clear that he thought James should hold off as well. James ignored him, proceeding to drink most of a bottle of Gigglewater on his own.

As Remus effortlessly trounced him at chess, James erupted into sporadic fits of laughter, the sound jarring in the otherwise silent flat. Without Sirius, the warmth and light of the space vanished.

“There’s nothing to tell,” James replied, his tone flat.

Remus hummed in disbelief, contemplating his next move. “I feel like my parents are splitting up and no one wants to tell me.”

James had stared stonily ahead, and when Remus looked up the chess board, his expression softened. “That was a joke, Prongs.”

James pressed his lips together. “Good one.”

He knew Remus had sensed something was off – after all, he had witnessed the debacle with the leather pants. James had deflected his questions, and Remus had let him get away with it. He had not mentioned it since, probably because he could tell that James could not withstand another emotional shock after his fight with Sirius.

Nonetheless, James started hiding out at Lily’s place. In his current mood, even the passive aggressive comments from her roommate, Joyce, were not enough to scare him off. Although Lily had initially seemed pleased by his frequent visits, she was starting to frown whenever she glanced in his direction. James felt like he was dragging his misery around like an oversized suitcase on a crowded train, constantly knocking it into others.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?” Lily asked, peering into the small mirror perched on the top of her chest of drawers.

Her room was cramped – far too small for two people – but Lily never complained about his presence, simply moving space for his Auror uniform in the closet. He had presented her only with a loose sketch of their fight, breaking their unspoken rule of not talking about Sirius.

“There’s nothing to talk about really,” James replied, mechanically buttoning the shirt that she had picked out for him. “He’s dating a tosser and we had a fight about it.”

Their presence was expected at a double date with Peter and Margot Silvertongue – the witch from Department of Magical Transportation who had finally agreed to go out with him. James would have begged off the evening, if he had not known that it meant a great deal to Peter for Lily and James to meet his new girlfriend.

At least Lily seemed to be looking forward to it. James knew he had not been good company this week. Going out on double dates was probably exactly the sort of thing she would like to do more often. James added that to the growing list of ways he had let Lily down recently.

“You realise it’s my job as your girlfriend to listen,” Lily said, her tone laced with doubt as she pinned back her hair with a pretty barrette.

James nodded absently, sitting on the edge of her bed. The past week had driven home how much he relied on Sirius for advice. He was the only one James could really talk to without any fear of judgement. He toyed with one of the frills on her bedspread, its excessive pink and lace a far cry from her usual style. He remembered how he’d teased her about it in the early days of their relationship, when he had been eager to learn every detail about her.

Was it the same for Sirius with Gaunt? Was every conversation a discovery? James imagined them talking late into the night, and a wave of desolation washed over him. He pictured them curled up together in bed. He pictured Sirius smiling at him – that heart-stopping smile of his – naked except for a sheet. James felt sick. The unexamined door in his mind rattled ominously, and he turned his back on it.

“Seriously,” Lily said, kneeling beside the bed to catch his gaze, which was fixed on the worn carpet. “You can tell me anything.”

James had said the exact same thing to Sirius – and hadn’t he failed spectacularly to live up to the promise? Sirius had been afraid to confide in him about Gaunt and James had shouted in his face. A sharp pang of remorse pierced his abdomen.

“I’m not sure I come out well in the story,” James replied, forcing a brief flicker of a smile. “I was a bit of an arse. I wouldn’t want to remind you of all the things you didn’t like about me when we were younger.”

Surprise flashed in her expression, and James realised it was exactly the wrong thing to say. Lily sank back onto her heels, regarding him with concern.

“James,” she breathed. “Is that really how you feel?”

“No,” James said quickly, rubbing a weary hand over his burning eyes. “Sorry – I’m...I say stupid things when I haven’t been sleeping. Can we just...go to dinner?”

Lily looked like she wanted to press further, but a glance at the clock on her bedside table made her widen her eyes in alarm. Her obsessive punctuality compelled her to drop the topic for now.

At the restaurant – an upscale Italian place that did not list prices on the menu – James opened the door for Lily. The place felt far beyond Peter’s usual price range, clearly chosen to impress his date. Given his splitting headache, James doubted he would contribute much to the evening in terms of conversation. Quietly settling the cheque at the end of the night would be the least he could do to make up for it.

James was surprised to discover that Margot was very attractive, her gold dress gleaming under the restaurant’s romantic lighting. His surprise felt disloyal; clearly Wormtail had overcome his usual shyness around women. Peter looked exceedingly pleased with himself as he introduced Margot to them.

James began to plan how he would tell Sirius about Peter’s unexpectedly gorgeous date before the harsh reminder struck him – they were not speaking. His already low mood plunged further. Usually, James was good at meeting new people, but he found himself letting the conversation wash over him – the girls complimenting their respective outfits while Peter beamed at him across the table.

When Lily and Margot excused themselves to the restroom, Wormtail leaned across the table conspiratorially. “I had to pinch myself when she agreed to go out with me,” he confided.

“I’m happy for you, Pete,” James said, genuinely meaning it even as he pressed a finger against his throbbing temple.

The girls returned from the restroom as fast friends. It remained an abiding mystery to James what transpired in that secretive, mystical room that seemed to forge such deep bonds between women.

As James focused on ordering wine, Lily expertly steered the conversation. They learned that Margot had recently joined the Ministry, previously working for her father, a collector and distributor of enchanted artefacts among the most affluent families in the wizarding world. Stridently opposed to the increased regulations around such magical objects, her father was deeply disapproving of her job within the Ministry, despite the fact she worked in an entirely different department.

They quickly discovered that Margot had been a few years ahead of them at Hogwarts. (Sirius would have found it endlessly amusing that Peter had snagged an older woman – *Godric* how James missed him.)

However, it was not until Margot mentioned that she had been in Slytherin that James started focusing fully on the conversation.

“Were you in the same year as Nicholas Gaunt?” James asked, his sudden intensity causing Lily to look at him askance.

“Yes, I was, actually,” Margot replied, taken aback.

Peter shot him a pleading look across the table to moderate his tone, but James ignored it. “Were you friends?” he pressed.

“I wouldn’t call us friends,” Margot stated enigmatically.

James leaned forward, suddenly fascinated by the conversation. “What do you think of him?”

Margot glanced at Peter, who cleared his throat. Wormtail was unused to reigning in James. Since childhood, he had always been James’ greatest champion, cheering the loudest at Quidditch matches and laughing the hardest at his jokes in class.

“A friend of ours is dating him,” Lily interjected when it became clear that James would not be explaining the motivation behind his question. He was far too fixated on getting an answer to care about Margot’s impression of him.

Margot let out a surprisingly loud laugh at that. “That explains it. Well, I wouldn’t want one of my friends dating him, if that’s what you mean.”

“Why not?” Lily asked, shooting a surreptitious look in James’ direction, as if gauging his reaction to this titbit of information.

Margot smiled thinly. James sensed that this worldly version of her was far closer to reality than the

simpering woman who had spent so much time complimenting Lily's dress. There was something canny and calculating in her gaze, and she certainly did not seem intimidated by James's intensity.

"He can be a bit unstable," Margot replied simply. "One moment he's charming, the next he flies into a rage. You never know what you'll get with Nicholas. The only thing you can count on is that he's out for himself."

Something primal stirred within James, as if Prongs had stood to full height. Adrenaline pulsed through him, urging him to leap up, sprint out of the stuffy restaurant, and place himself between Sirius and anyone who meant him harm. It was only the feeling of Lily's warning squeeze on his knee that held him back from launching a full-scale interrogation.

Margot took a sip of her drink, bemused by tension she had stumbled upon. "Is your friend pretty or rich?"

James could not respond, too annoyed at the dismissive characterisation of Sirius. He was dimly aware of receiving another inscrutable look from Lily. He willed himself to calm down, aware that Margot was just being flippant to lighten the mood James kept throwing off balance.

"Both," Lily replied in a clipped tone when James failed to speak.

"Well," Margot said casually. "Maybe this one will actually last then."

James was afraid that the force of his grip on the wine glass might shatter it.

The last time Sirius and James had gone this long without talking was after the incident with Snape back at school. The thought made Sirius feel a fresh wave of guilt. During his brief appearances at the apartment, Sirius was awkward around Moony, as if their fight back in Sixth Year was still unfolding.

Most nights he spent with Nicholas. Sirius was getting better at navigating his more unpredictable moods. It was always better when he arrived with ample warning, but Nicholas remained secretive around him. Owls regularly delivered notes sealed with wax crests that Sirius recognised from his childhood.

Determined not to be a nuisance, Sirius held his tongue. He tried to be helpful; he understood that Nicholas was exploring business opportunities to recover at least some of the fortune that his father had squandered. He recalled hearing about Marfin Gaunt – painted as a pitiable character prone to barroom brawls and unhinged rants – at the dining table at Grimmauld Place. For Orion Black, being a descendant of Salazar Slytherin was a badge of honour; Marfin's behaviour was a disgrace to his family line.

Things seemed to be turning around for Nicholas, with a markedly positive impact on his mood. Sirius had loaned him a small sum – around twenty thousand galleons – to help facilitate one of his investments. It seemed like the least he could do seeing he was spending so much time around the apartment. Although it was pocket change for Sirius, Nicholas had been assiduous about repaying him. The only gripe that Sirius had was his insistence on using gold instead of simply arranging for the payments to be made directly via Gringotts.

Mostly, their arguments centred on Sirius failing to mind his own business. Sirius was far too used to his boundary-free living situation with James. He had not even hesitated before picking up a letter sealed with his own family crest on the wax. It was not as if he could read the contents; Nicholas was obsessively disciplined with his security enchantments.

Sirius examined the envelope, realising suddenly that he recognised the handwriting. "Are you writing to my brother?" he asked when Nicholas emerged from the bathroom.

Nicholas snatched the note from his hands. "We're friends."

"I didn't think Regulus had friends."

His eyes were cold as he gathered up his latest correspondence. "I'm not lying to you Sirius."

Sirius pulled back back. "Sorry," he murmured, wondering if he should start keeping a tally of how often he apologised to Nicholas. "I just didn't realise you were close enough to write letters to each other."

“Maybe if you stopped going through my things, you wouldn’t make so many shocking discoveries,” Nicholas shot back, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Sirius bit back a retort; there were only so many fronts he could fight on. The memory of his argument with James was still raw. He could not forget the look in his eyes when he told Sirius that he deserved better – his eyes blazing with sincerity in the dying light.

You deserve to be with someone who knows how lucky they are to have you.

But then there were the other uglier words, which also ricocheted around Sirius’ mind.

I’m the one who is going to pick up the pieces when it all falls apart.

It was true; he leaned too heavily on James. His best friend should focus on his relationship with Lily, not carry the weight of Sirius’ emotional turmoil. Reflecting on it, Sirius felt like a parasite – leeching James’ attention away from his own life. Now that James was treating Sirius as if he was invisible, he would have far more time to focus on the things that really mattered. For his part, Sirius tried to focus on making things work with Nicholas.

Nicholas seemed to be trying as well. Sirius arranged for them to have coffee with Remus – the first time he had ever formally introduced one of his friends to a boyfriend. Nicholas had been the one to insist on the label. He used it endlessly when they were in public. Sirius had noticed that he was always his most attentive when there was an audience – particularly when they received compliments for being such an attractive couple.

Nerves shot through Sirius as they waited for Remus. Remus was the most level-headed of his friends, and Sirius valued his opinion. He glanced around the small café, which Nicholas had chosen because it was near the Ministry and he wanted to go back to the office to finish up some work after the meeting.

Deep down, Sirius was unsure whether he cared about Remus and Nicholas getting along or if he just wanted to prove a point to James.

“I do know how to comport myself in company, Sirius,” Nicholas remarked, eyeing Sirius’ leg, which bounced nervously under the table. “I’m not going to embarrass you.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Sirius replied, scanning the menu anxiously. “Why doesn’t this bloody café doesn’t have a single chocolate item on its menu? What’s Remus going to order?”

Before he could continue fretting, the bell over the door announced the arrival of Remus. Nicholas immediately stood up, making a great show of settling him in the vacant seat and offering his hand, which Remus accepted after a brief – though to Sirius, endless – hesitation. While Nicholas made derisive comments about the various café patrons he knew from the Ministry, he was the embodiment of charm when they came over to greet him.

Although the point of the coffee was for Remus to share his perspective on the work of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Nicholas hardly let him get a word in. Instead, he launched into a monologue about the importance of preventing werewolves from teaching in schools or serving in Ministry positions.

“Well,” Remus said when Nicholas paused for breath. “It sounds like you have a fairly clear view about werewolf rights.”

Nicholas chuckled at the phrase, earning a flinty look from Sirius, which he ignored. “No offence, Remus, but I am more focused on public safety than ‘werewolf rights.’”

“I think public safety is better served when a werewolf has a reason to contribute to society,” Remus said, shrugging as he poured a fresh cup of tea.

“A fascinating perspective,” Nicholas said insincerely, making Sirius cringe.

The appointment dragged on in much the same vein for an hour. Sirius felt relief when Nicholas finally made his excuses, pressing a hard kiss to his mouth before leaving. Sirius insisted on settling the bill, unwilling to let Remus pay after the dismissive treatment – and without even a piece of chocolate cake to distract him.

Remus suggested they walk through Hyde Park before apparating back to the apartment. A goose honked absurdly at the ducks waddling next to the lake. Children called out to each other around them. A

man with an oversized parcel on his pushbike had a screaming match with a street vendor selling roasted nuts. But all Sirius noticed was the quietness of his friend walking beside him.

“I can basically hear you thinking,” Sirius said, unable to tolerate the silence any further.

Remus shrugged. “It was a thought-provoking discussion.”

Sirius sucked in his cheek, trying to moderate his temper. “I’m having a rough week, Moony,” he said shortly. “Just say what you want to say.”

Remus nodded, stepping off the tidy path and onto the grass, allowing the tide of pedestrians to pass. He looked around at the park, as if searching for a point of entry into the conversation that would not make Sirius angry. Then he shook his head.

“What are you doing, Sirius?” Remus asked.

Sirius was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“When are you going to talk to James?” Remus pressed.

His heart contracted, and Sirius felt the urge to shrink away. He pulled his denim jacket closer around him. “I have nothing to say to James right now.”

“Come off it, Padfoot,” Remus scoffed. “I know how you feel about him. So why are you wasting your time trying to educate some glorified one-night stand about the plight of werewolf kind?”

A breeze ruffled his hair, reminding Sirius of the way he had looked when they were young. Though Remus had gained some much-needed weight staying with James and Sirius, he was still too thin. The gaunt lines of his cheeks made his expression severe.

“So, this is about not liking Nicholas,” Sirius said, irritation creeping in.

“I don’t care about Nicholas Gaunt,” Remus replied, his usually calm voice hardening. “But while we’re on the topic, you could do a lot better than that patronising Pureblood wanker.”

Without James to keep him grounded, Sirius felt like he was being pulled by unseen currents. He had been on edge, especially after treading carefully around Nicholas’ cramped flat. Suddenly, he was spoiling for a fight.

“Nice,” Sirius said bitterly.

“I’m sorry, but I’m sick of it, Sirius. I’m sick of watching you and James pretend that you don’t realise that you’re meant to be together.”

Sirius looked away. “James wants to be with Lily.”

“James has no idea what he wants right now,” Remus dismissed.

Despite their fight, Sirius felt a rash impulse to defend James. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It had started to drizzle, but neither made a move to seek cover.

“I know that you’re both miserable,” Remus retorted, running a frustrated hand through his sandy hair. “I know you’ve been in love with him for years. And I know that James looks at you like you’re miraculous. But you’re just too - ”

Remus searched for the words.

“What?” Sirius demanded, crossing his arms tightly. “What am I? Go on, say it.”

“Damaged,” Remus said, as if the word was dragged out of him. “You’re too *damaged* to let anything good happen to you. You’d rather say nothing and suffer, because that’s all you know how to do.”

Sirius let out a shuddering breath. For a moment, he considered walking away – stepping back into the stream of people hurrying through the park to the Tube. But something inside Sirius hardened as he looked back at his old friend.

“What about you, Moony?” he spat, anger honing his words to a fine point. “You want to talk about settling for less? When are you going to stop accepting every shitty thing that the universe throws at you?”

Sometimes, when he was angry, Sirius could send the wolf lurking beneath Remus’ otherwise kindly demeanour. “I don’t have the choices you have,” he replied, his voice low. “Nothing in my life is my choice.”

“And you just accept it,” Sirius retorted. “You never stand up for yourself – not even with Nicholas. We all know you were dealt a bad hand, but you could at least try to make things better for yourself.”

Remus let out an incredulous scoff. “You think I like how things are for me, Sirius? You think I enjoy accepting charity from you and James?”

“Then fight! Let us help you – we’re your friends.”

“We’re not talking about me,” Remus exclaimed, his raised voice attracting concerned glances. Sirius felt a jolt of realisation; this was the second time he had fought with a friend in a public space in as many weeks – incontrovertible evidence that he should go back to conducting his affairs from the safety of bars.

“We’re talking about you and James,” Remus continued. “I don’t get a choice. But you do. Twenty seconds of courage and you might get everything you’ve ever wanted.^[1] Or at least have an answer that lets you move forward.”

It was unfair of Moony to make it sound so simple. Those twenty seconds could easily end in shattering the most important relationship in Sirius’ life.

Sirius felt his mouth twist into a grimace, one he recognised all too well from his mother’s face. Just like her, he knew exactly where to strike to make it hurt. “Because you just want the best for me and James,” he said icily. “That’s the only reason you’re so fixated on us getting together.”

Remus lifted his chin, his expression turning guarded. “What else would it be about?”

Sirius let out an ugly laugh. “I’ve seen the way you look at Lily.”

A beat of silence hung between them. Then Remus stepped back, raising his hands as if in surrender.

“You know what, Sirius?” Remus said. “Do whatever you want – like you always do. I don’t care anymore.”

With that, Remus turned and walked away, his long legs carrying him swiftly toward the street.

“Fuck,” Sirius cursed as he watched him closed the distance to the street.

He knew he should chase after Remus and apologise. But instead, Sirius just stood perfectly still, as another close friend fled from him.

Notes:

I am ducking for cover right now, team. Two chapters this weekend to compensate for the pain...I think you will be a lot happier with me after that. As always, I'm so grateful to you for reading and commenting. It makes my day to hear what you're thinking about the story.

Notes

[1] Some advice for life from Benjamin Mee, *We Bought a Zoo*: “You know, sometimes all you need is twenty seconds of insane courage. Just literally twenty seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it.”

Chapter 11 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/153035551>): **Okay sometimes**

Summary:

“I hated him,” Sirius said with a broken sob. “He was a shit father and a bad person.”

“I know,” James whispered, tightening his embrace.

“I’m glad he’s dead,” Sirius spat.

“I know. Me too.”

Sirius reached up blindly, pressing his hand to the back of James’ neck. James manoeuvred him

closer, until he was draped over his lap. James wondered whether Pandora was still watching them, what she meant when she said that they lit up around each other.

“Why does it feel like this?” Sirius asked, his voice thick with tears. “I don’t even know what this feeling is.”

“That’s okay,” James replied. “You don’t have to know. Sometimes you just have to let yourself feel it, remember?”

Notes:

Welcome back! I have been absolutely living for your kind comments so I thought I would post this one a little early. This chapter, Sirius needs some time to himself so Remus will be briefly stepping in to offer his perspective for one section. We won't hear from him directly again until around Chapter 20 so I hope you enjoy his take as a diehard Prongsfoot stan.

TW: Substance use (although potions-related); references to child abuse; small appearance by Nicholas Gaunt.

Soundtrack: *"Don't Blame Me"* (<https://open.spotify.com/track/1R0a2iXumgCiFb7HEZ7gUE?si=8faec0e5307b4b45>) by Taylor Swift

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_11_endnotes\)](#).)

“On those grey days where eight in the morning looks no different from noon and nothing has happened and nothing is going to happen and you are washing a glass in the sink and it breaks – accidentally – and punctures your skin. And then there is this shocking red, the brightest thing in the day, so vibrant it buzzes, this blood of yours. That is okay sometimes because at least you know you’re alive.”

- Augusten Burroughs, *Running With Scissors*

Hogwarts School, Scotland – 1976

James stood in the stone courtyard, wrapped in his Gryffindor scarf, staring expectantly at the castle’s side entrance. The low, grey clouds dulled everything around him. James had almost forgotten what blue skies looked like. Every breath formed steam and he all he could smell was damp cobblestones, damp grass, damp spirits.

Some of the students exiting the castle glanced at him curiously. James was not sure whether it was his intense concentration or the fact he was alone that provoked such interest. He rarely walked around the school unaccompanied; Sirius was always by his side.

James knew he was risking being late for Defence Against the Dark Arts – his favourite subject – but this could not wait.

Regulus Black walked down the stairs, exuding an imperious air that made him seem far older than his years. He had three thick books pressed to his chest – none of which James recognised from the Third Year syllabus.

But James was not interested in discussing his course load. “Regulus,” he called, already striding towards the younger boy. “Wait up.”

Back in Second Year, James had naïvely assumed that Regulus would be his friend by default. He had rushed to introduce himself after his Sorting, proudly announcing his status as Best Friend of Sirius Black, only to receive icy disdain in response to his extended hand.

“You’re wasting your time, James,” Sirius had informed him loudly, glaring at his brother. “Regulus

doesn't speak to blood traitors – do you Reg?"

Even then, the look that the brothers exchanged seemed to speak volumes. Although not close, Regulus and Sirius had their own understanding, a secret language that was far removed from the one that James and Sirius shared.

James sped up as Regulus hurried towards the greenhouses. He always felt on edge around Regulus; the green accents on his uniform always reminded him that Sirius could easily have been sorted into Slytherin, leaving James alone without his best friend.

James felt that familiar edge of frustration as the boy ignored him. "I need to talk to you."

Regulus huffed, steam billowing from his mouth. "We don't talk, Potter."

"I know," James replied, his voice strained. "It's just...it's about Sirius."

Regulus showed no emotion at the mention his brother, but he nodded toward a secluded spot in the courtyard. Relieved, James followed him to the cover of a tree, its bare branches stark against the cold January sky.

"Well?" Regulus prompted, as if doing James a great favour. "What is it?"

Suddenly confronted with the chance to get answers, James found himself at a loss for words. Ever since Sirius had arrived at his doorstep bleeding, an unbearable pressure had built in his chest. James knew that Sirius was happy to be rid of his parents, but he also sensed a profound sadness in him.^[1] James had no idea what to do about it.

Sirius had pulled away, and James felt the separation like a taut thread between them. If it snapped, James did not know what he would do. He needed Sirius to be alright. There was no other option.

"You have to tell me what happened," James said. "You have to tell me what your parents did to him."

Regulus' blank expression hardened. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he said sharply, before turning on his heel.

James could not help himself; he grabbed Regulus' shoulder, spinning him back around. "You have to tell me," James begged, desperation in his eyes. "I need to know everything. I need you to tell me how I can help him."

Regulus narrowed his gaze, his posture shifting uncomfortably – clearly unused to heart-to-hearts with Gryffindors. "I'm sure he told you what happened the night he left."

"I'm not talking about that night," James shot back, his voice echoing against stone walls. "I need to know how it was for him – all of it. Everything. Please just tell me."

James knew at least the outline of what had happened on the night Sirius had run away from home. Effie's diagnostic charms revealed the marks of Cruciatu Curse. He had watched her heal the deep cuts from the Diffindo Curse. During the summer break between Second and Third Year, Sirius had explained the scar on his ribs – a punishment received for his sorting into Gryffindor that had been so deep that even magic could not heal it completely.

None of this gave James the full picture. During their last break at Potter Manor, Monty had reached for his wand unexpectedly to mend a loose bannister on the stairs. Sirius and James were walking down the staircase when suddenly Sirius stopped dead at the sight of the drawn wand, his chest heaving with fear.

When James had searched his face to figure out what was wrong, it was as if Sirius was gone. It took several minutes of gentle coaxing from James to calm him down – reminding him how to breathe, sitting next to him on the stairs. Sirius had been embarrassed. Monty had remained stationary on the bottom step. The look on his face was something James would never forget: guilt, regret, and anger. But his voice had been gentle and reassuring when Sirius apologised.

Sirius had shared only glimpses of his life at Grimmauld Place. It was not enough. James needed to understand the scars that Walburga and Orion had left behind. Regulus was the key.

"I don't think you really want to know," Regulus said, turning to leave.

James reached for him again, before thinking better of touching him. "He's having nightmares,"

James said, his voice wavering with emotion. “Even when he sleeps with me.”

“Too much information, Potter,” he replied, wrinkling his nose in a way that made him look far younger.

“It’s not like that,” James said, his stomach dropping like he had stepped off a cliff.

“Really?” Regulus raised a sceptical eyebrow. “What’s it like then?”

James suddenly felt like Regulus had him at a disadvantage. “I just want to help him. I need him to be alright.”

Regulus considered his words. They were truly alone in the courtyard now, officially late for their classes. James wondered what he would tell Sirius about his whereabouts when he arrived at DADA, whether Sirius – so often lost in his own world now – would even notice his absence.

“If he wanted you to know, he would tell you himself,” Regulus replied at last.

James felt a sting in his eyes. “He thinks I can’t handle it. But I can.”

“Clearly,” Regulus retorted, amusement creeping into his voice.

“I can,” James insisted. “I can help him.”

“How? By showing up at our house again and getting yourself killed?”

James did not reply, embarrassed by the reminder of his reckless behaviour. Even though he was the one who had made the reference, the reminder seemed to soften Regulus slightly.

“Look, Potter,” Regulus said, cutting his gaze away in favour of staring at the stone wall behind him. “With my parents it’s always bend or break. Have you ever known my brother to bend?”

James shook his head. Even he was unsure whether he was responding to the question or denying the premise. “He’s not broken,” he insisted.

“No,” Regulus replied shortly. “Because he got away. I’m sure that he would agree that nightmares are a small price to pay for his freedom.”

It was clear that the conversation was over. Regulus hoisted his books further up his chest. But a question nagged at James, concern creeping in for this aloof boy. “What about you?” he asked. “Are your parents... like that... with you?”

“No,” Regulus sniffed. “I know what I have to do.”

James felt a wave of empathy for Regulus. “You don’t have to do anything. We could get you out, if you wanted.”

James was taken aback by the disdainful look he received in response. Nonetheless, the younger boy’s voice was even when he spoke.

“My family needs an heir, Potter,” Regulus stated. “Would you prefer that it was me or Sirius?”

James opened his mouth, but nothing came out. They both knew his answer; it was written all over his face. James would die before he allowed Sirius to fall back into the clutches of his parents.

Regulus seemed pleased to be proven correct. “That’s what I thought.”

With that, Regulus began walking towards the greenhouses, his feet rapping a steady rhythm on the uneven stone. James buried his hands in the pockets of his robes, watching his retreating back. The conversation had not elicited the answers he was hoping for. Perhaps there were no clear answers. James realised that he truly did not know the first thing about the Black family.

“So, what do I do, then?” James called after Regulus.

The boy let out a long-suffering sigh, as if talking to James was a terrible threat to his IQ.

“Care for him,” he replied, throwing the comment carelessly over his shoulder without turning around. “Like the idiotic Gryffindor you are.”

Remus had a secret – one he guarded jealously. It was not his lycanthropy; that was mostly public knowledge since he had signed the Werewolf Register at seventeen. Nor was it the fact that, in unguarded moments, catching a glimpse of his friend’s lovely girlfriend could stop him in his tracks. It was not even the details of his living conditions, which he tended to gloss over when discussing his life with his far

wealthier friends.

This secret was far worse: serious and scholarly Remus Lupin loved romance novels.

Back at school Remus had devoured the Muggle classics: *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Wuthering Heights*. But this was not enough to satisfy his voracious appetite. Remus would curl his long limbs onto a windowsill in the Astronomy Tower to blushing read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*.

One weekend, he had loaned Sirius a copy of *Giovanni's Room*. Even James had been unable to distract him from it during the frenzied weekend he had consumed every page. After Sirius returned the novel, Remus noticed James glare at it whenever it was in view – resenting even inanimate objects that stole the attention of his best friend.

As his tastes matured, Remus found himself drawn to stories of longing and desperate devotion – love bordering on obsession, love with its own designs, love that burned through the lives of the characters. Love that demanded nothing less than every thought, every breath, every moment. Irrational, inconvenient, undeniable love. Love that would sacrifice anything.

Sometimes Remus suspected he enjoyed these stories because he could never take the risk of loving someone like that. Not because Remus was incapable of feeling that bone-deep devotion, but because it threatened his carefully won equilibrium. Only a fool would love that recklessly.

For days, Remus had ruminated over his fight with Sirius while wandering through the spacious flat that both his friends had abandoned. The most frustrating part was that Sirius had not been wrong. Remus had settled into a life that was merely manageable.

Remus had trained himself to avoid disappointment by simply not wanting too much. In his shoes, Sirius would have fought. He would never have accepted the small, safe life that Remus had carved out for himself. He would never allow himself to become this quiet. Knocked down, he would pull himself back to his feet – if only to annoy his adversary. He could never abide being a supporting character in his own life.

Sirius Black loved James Potter with everything he had because that was the only way he knew how to do anything. Even when Sirius denied himself – convinced that he was undeserving – he did so with complete and utter abandon. It was profoundly irritating.

When Sirius had confessed his feelings for James to him back in Seventh Year, Remus had pitied him for the first time since meeting him. This was a story about unrequited love, its painful contours clear to the avid reader in Remus. In contrast, Lily and James seemed to have stepped out of an Austen novel – a strong heroine, a gradual shift from disdain to affection. It made sense, and the romantic in Remus supported his friends, recognising this was the way it was supposed to be.

This assessment had not factored in one crucial detail: James Potter and his endless devotion to Sirius Black.

Not wanting to build false hope for Sirius, it had taken a while for Remus to notice the signs. The extraordinary friendship between Sirius and James was itself worthy of a novel. From the moment they met, they were inseparable. More than once, Remus had raised an eyebrow at the sight of them clambering into each other's beds to continue conversations that had already taken up most of the day. No one batted an eyelid at the sight of them curled up on the couch in the common room together.

It was not until their last day at Hogwarts in Seventh Year that Remus truly considered whether James might reciprocate Sirius' unspoken feelings.

Sirius had dared the Marauders to attempt to stroke the Giant Squid. It was just the sort of ridiculous idea that made being friends with Sirius so entertaining. He was the only person who could convince even straightlaced Remus to dive into the chilly lake in his swim trunks and attempt to touch an animal that would sooner drown him.

No one was surprised when athletic James won the challenge – although Peter gave him an unexpected run for his money. All four of them collapsed on the sandy shores of the Great Lake, surrounded by freshwater seaweed, attempting to catch their breaths.

Remus shook his head at Sirius, who lay on his back laughing uproariously at their latest near-death

experience. He turned to half-heartedly chastise Sirius when he caught sight of James, propped up on his elbow, staring down at Sirius with an expression so soft and private that Remus had almost looked away.

Carefully, James reached out to remove a piece of seaweed from Sirius' hair. "You're ridiculous," James had said, unmasked affection painting his features.

"You love it," Sirius retorted, his laughter receding as he gazed up at James with a wide smile.

James merely pressed one of Sirius' sodden curls behind his ear without comment.

The look James had worn while staring at Sirius stuck with Remus over the years that followed, although he was unsure why. From that day, Remus began to observe James more closely. Once he started looking, the evidence was everywhere - in every lingering look, every gratuitous touch, every decision, every eager sacrifice.

Remus drew the obvious conclusion: James Potter was just as irrationally, inconveniently, and undeniably in love with his best friend as Sirius. All that was left was for James to realise it for himself.

It was late in the afternoon on Saturday and Remus was sitting on the couch with a Muggle newspaper opened to apartment ads. He had just made a cup of tea when James burst into the flat.

James scarcely acknowledged Remus when he entered, calling for Sirius from the moment he opened the front door. He jogged towards Sirius' empty bedroom.

"Where is he?" James demanded, re-entering the living room.

"Hi James," Remus said drily from his spot on the couch, pointedly taking a sip of his tea.

"Sorry, Moony," his friend grimaced. "I just really want to find Sirius before he hears the news from someone else."

"What news?" Remus said, bracing himself. Good news was increasingly rare – and it was unlikely James would suddenly reconcile with Sirius just to share a positive development.

James sat on the couch next to Remus, his posture still stiff and his expression worried. He kept spinning his wand around in his hand – a nervous habit Remus remembered from their O.W.L.s. His gaze was unsettled, as if he was worried that he had simply failed to notice Sirius standing in the corner of the room. As if James Potter had ever failed to notice Sirius Black.

"Orion Black died," James explained. "It was in the paper and on the Wizing Wireless. My parents owed me."

Remus nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I can't say I'm going to put on my mourning suit for that arsehole."

"Good riddance," James agreed fervently. "I just hope that Siri... Well you know what he's like."

Remus did know; no one was more self-destructive than Sirius when he was in pain. "Well, he has to come back eventually," Remus reasoned.

James nodded. "How long has he been out?"

A nervous feeling filled his stomach. Under James' scrutiny, Remus suddenly felt guilty for failing to keep track of Sirius – never mind that James himself had been equally absent. "A few days?"

James gaped at him, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah," Remus shrugged. "We had an argument and he's been avoiding me."

James stood up, visibly agitated. "Well, where the hell is he?"

Remus winced, not relishing the reaction to his next words. "I mean... I assume he's probably... with Gaunt."

How would a novel capture the change in James when that name was mentioned? There was no outward difference in his posture, but, somehow, James seemed to stand taller, his feet planted more firmly on the carpet.

"Then I suppose that's where I'm going," James declared, determination emphasising the line of his handsome features. He looked every inch the leading man in some Hollywood blockbuster.

"Well," Remus sighed, setting aside his tea. "I suppose I'm going with you."

As usual, any plan formulated by James was heavy on noble intentions and light on detail. Neither of them knew where Nicholas Gaunt actually lived. Remus passed several painful hours watching James pace around the living room while they waited for Margot Silvertongue to respond to their owl.

James calmed down once they had an address. Worrying about Sirius tended to sharpen his focus. They apparated about a block away; finding discreet apparition points in the centre of London was always a challenge. Accustomed to living among Muggles, Remus often noted how quickly his friends resorted to magic. It would never have occurred to James to catch the Tube.

Upon arriving at the apartment, James shot a dark glance at the crack in the security door's window. It was clear he deemed the place far below what he considered acceptable for Sirius. Remus had lived in far worse, but the real issue with Gaunt's building was the neglect. It would have taken barely a moment for Gaunt to fix that crack. Odd, given his proud Pureblood lineage, that he would let his home slip into disrepair.

By the time they knocked on the apartment door, James' mouth was set in a grim line. The door was surprisingly well-warded, revealing Gaunt's apparent regard for his neighbours. Not that Remus could judge.

"Try not to punch him," Remus advised, eyeing James' tight posture.

James rolled his eyes and knocked loudly again. No answer. Leaning forward, Remus allowed his werewolf senses to stretch out, probing the apartment's interior. James watched him, eager for news of Sirius.

"Someone's definitely home," he confirmed. "But - "

Before he could finish, James drew his wand and performed a complex unlocking spell, easily overpowering the wards. Without a glance back at Remus, he strode into the apartment, calling for Sirius as he moved down the hall.

"Or we can try breaking and entering," Remus commented wryly, crossing the threshold with far more caution.

He was surprised to find the space so empty. Every Pureblood wizard he knew boasted a trove of family heirlooms – everything from creepy moving portraits to the skulls of magical creatures. Even the down-to-earth Potters had an attic filled with silver weapons belonging to their ancestors. Remus recalled one summer running into that room during a spirited game of hide and seek; the burn mark on his elbow had taken days to heal, despite Effie's best efforts.

Remus noted that, while the apartment was generally tidy, extensive potion ingredients were cluttered the dining table, with a small portable cauldron still emitting wisps of smoke. Well trained by Fleamont Potter, James waved the smoke towards his nose, his expression darkening as he recognised the scent.

"Alihotsy, belladonna, and vervain," James murmured, his voice heavy with concern. It was a dangerous combination – addictive and hallucinogenic. During his visits to remote werewolf colonies in Europe for the Order, Remus had witnessed the devastating impact of potion abuse; the desperate quest for euphoria often led to ruin. The thought of Sirius being anywhere near such a reckless concoction clearly unsettled James.

An edition of the *Daily Prophet* lay spread out on the table, Orion's death dominating the front page. Remus suspected none of the articles would mention the darker facets of Orion's character, such as his cruel treatment of his eldest son. James cursed at the sight of the newspaper, then turned away from the table, calling out for Sirius once more.

Almost unconsciously, Remus began leafing through the neat stack of papers on the table. Though reluctant to fuel the paranoia he sensed in James, Remus shared his unease about Gaunt. Yet the stack of papers contained nothing out of the ordinary – mostly extensive correspondence from prominent families in the wizarding community, although the contents of the letters were enchanted to prevent anyone except the intended recipient from reading them.

Under these papers was a handsome leather document holder that had not quite been secured properly. Glancing guiltily around the room, Remus carefully opened the folder and pulled out the small stack of documents: records of several sizable bank transfers from Sirius to Nicholas, along with a full statement of Sirius' account holdings at Gringotts. The balance of his account was eye wateringly high. Embarrassed by his snooping, Remus hastily closed the folder until the security charm activated and

sealed the documents inside.

Remus bit his lip, debating whether to mention these documents to James. It was odd for Sirius to leave his bank statement lying around, particularly given that he and Gaunt did not seem sufficiently serious for him to receive mail at this apartment. Perhaps it was related to the sums that Sirius had given his boyfriend. Nonetheless, it was probably a bad idea to broach either issue with James. Given his current mood, it was difficult to anticipate how he would react.

“Remus!” James called, snapping him from his thoughts. Embarrassed, Remus hastily straightened the stack of documents and followed the sound of James’ voice into the bedroom. He was taken aback to find Gaunt face down on the bed, several empty vials scattered on the bedside table. It was clear he was high, but Remus was relieved to see that he was alone in the bed.

“He’s not here,” James said despondently. He was sitting on the edge of the bed – probably on the side where Sirius usually slept – with his head bowed. James picked up a ring from the shelf, presumably one left behind by Sirius. Remus felt a sympathetic squeeze in his chest at the sight of his friend’s slumped figure as he peered down at the ring.

Narrowing his eyes at Gaunt, Remus strode purposefully to the side of the bed and shoved him onto his side, lightly slapping his cheek. Gaunt groaned in protest as he stirred from his drug-induced stupor.

“Where’s Sirius?” Remus demanded.

“Don’t know,” Gaunt mumbled, shielding his eyes from the late afternoon light with his forearm.

Before he could drift back into unconsciousness again, Remus tapped his cheek again. “When did you last see him?”

“Don’t know,” Gaunt replied again, his voice muffled.

“Come on,” James said, rising from his spot on the bed, the ring still clutched tightly in his hand. “He’s useless. We just need to look for him ourselves.”

Although Remus agreed with James’ assessment, he bit his lip. “It’ll take a while to search all of London.”

James lifted his chin, his earlier despondency replaced by a steely determination. “Then we’d better get started.”

They set to work, summoning Peter to assist with the search – his small size and keen sense of smell in rat form was particularly useful in crowded London. The Marauders scoured every bar and record store they could think of, reaching out to all their friends to keep a lookout for Sirius.

To facilitate the search, James entrusted Remus a small handheld mirror. When James had its twin, they were able to talk to each other through the smooth glass. Monty had given the matching set to James and Sirius, back at school when they could not rely on living together to get in contact. They had used them constantly at school during the short periods when they were separated, but clearly Sirius no longer carried it around everywhere he went. A sign of how tightly their lives had intertwined.

When James returned to work on Monday, he found an empty desk in his office. Sirius failing to show up for work sparked a new intensity in James as he paced the living room late at night. He seemed to radiate anxiety, running his hand through his dishevelled hair, eyes darting periodically to the door as if expecting Sirius to stroll in. His fingers clenched and unclenched around his wand. Every now and then he would pick up the mirror before remembering that Sirius did not have its twin. He carried around the ring he had found at Gaunt's apartment like a talisman. Remus did not have the heart to tell him that the smell of silver was making his nose itch.

It was painful to watch. After four days of frantic searching, Remus had summoned Lily, genuinely concerned that James might collapse from exhaustion. The alarm on Lily’s pretty face when she took in James’ haggard appearance confirmed Remus’ worries. Yet she entered the flat with her trademark calm and assurance. Remarkable, as always.

Lily managed to draw James away from the living room and into the kitchen. He sat slumped on one of the stools at the counter – the same spot where, just weeks earlier, he had stared so longingly at the tattoo on Sirius’ shoulder.

Unable to resist, Remus eavesdropped on their quiet conversation.

“This isn’t healthy,” Lily said quietly as she brewed another mug of tea that he would ignore. “You need to rest.”

“I’m fine,” James replied stubbornly, a map of London was spread out before him.

He seemed oblivious to the futility of retracing the same routes around the city day after day. Remus suspected a naïve part of him had believed he would easily locate Sirius – that no matter where Sirius was, James would find him by instinct alone. His failure to do so was eating away at him.

Lily bit her lip, studying James as her composure began to fray under the force of her worry. “I know you’re worried about Sirius, but maybe he just needs some time.”

“He needs me,” James insisted, his tone leaving no room for arguments. “I can feel it. He just doesn’t think he can ask because we’re fighting.”

“James,” Lily said slowly, as if reasoning with a lunatic. “You’ve done everything that you can. It is not your responsibility to find him.”

James recoiled. “His father died – I have to at least try.”

“Sirius is an adult,” she retorted. “If he doesn’t want you to find him, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“You don’t know Sirius,” James retorted, his voice raising in a way that startled Remus. “You don’t know the first thing about how he’s feeling.”

Instinctively, Remus stood up and stepped towards the kitchen before hesitating. It was typical for him to dither this way. Remus often disappointed himself with his need to tread carefully, to ensure he was on solid ground before rushing in.^[2]

For an extended moment, Lily studied James, her expression inscrutable.

“Maybe not,” she said, her voice cool and even – a clear contrast to James with his wild hair and heaving chest. “But I do know that this is way beyond friendship. And I think you know it, too.”

James lifted his exhausted head to meet her clear green eyes. “I just really need to find him, Lily,” he said, his tone softer than before. “I don’t know what else to say right now. I just...I need to fix things with Sirius.”

A sad sort of resignation appeared on Lily’s face. She suddenly noticed Remus standing up in the living room. Remus rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed by both his instinct to intervene and his failure to do so.

Lily turned her focus back to James, her brows knitted. “I’m not going to watch you do this to yourself,” she said simply. “Let me know when you’re ready to talk about it.”

James nodded mutely. As Lily exited, he stared down at the ring in the palm of his hand. He rotated it around the tip of one of his fingers, examining it as if it contained the secret of where Sirius had gone. Remus regarded James solemnly from the living room, realising he had been correct in his assessment.

Only a fool would love that recklessly.

Six days after Sirius disappeared, James arrived at Potter Manor after work. Effie – her face pinched with worry – rushed out to meet him halfway up the driveway, wrapping him in a tight hug. He leaned into her embrace gratefully.

James was aware he had become impossible to be around. No one understood why he could not just wait for Sirius to return. He was ashamed of the way he had spoken to Lily. Remus was watching him far too closely, as if anticipating an approaching meltdown. Peter checked on him constantly at the Ministry during long days he spent covering for Sirius.

James needed to see his parents, to be around people who understood what it meant to care this deeply about Sirius Black.

His mother pulled back to study him. “You look terrible,” she remarked, then pulled him in for another hug.

“Thanks, Mum,” James replied, sarcasm lacing his tone. “Way to kick me when I’m down.”

“I’m not going to start lying to you now, Jamie,” she chuckled, leading him into the house where Monty waited, a sombre expression on his face.

“Any sign of him?” Monty asked.

James shook his head. “Nothing.”

“I tried the locator spell we discussed,” his father said, frustration etched on his features. “Wherever he is, the location is well cloaked.”

James had known it was a long shot. Locator spells were often useless when they were in their Animagus forms; Sirius would certainly have thought of that. Nonetheless, the fact that Monty had been unable to find Sirius shook James deeply. His father had always had the answers.

“Give him time,” Monty added, not quite managing to sell his confidence. “Sometimes he needs space, but he always comes back.”

“Yeah,” James said, equally unconvinced. “It’s just...really quiet at the flat without him.”

“Our Siri has always filled the room,” Effie added with a sigh. “It’s a pity I’m going to kill him the minute he gets back.”

James carried his bag to his childhood room. Remus still had the other mirror, so he would know right away if Sirius reappeared at their flat. James was increasingly convinced that Sirius was not in London; he was more likely to show up at Potter Manor, where he had always felt safe.

James buried his face in his hands, the emotional exhaustion making him nauseous. James missed Sirius far too sharply; he felt like was losing his mind. But it was all irrelevant when Sirius was out there suffering. Why did he always pull away? Surely, Sirius knew that their fight did not matter in a genuine crisis? Why did he make it so hard for James to just be there for him?

Dimly, James heard his mother calling from downstairs – alerting him to an urgent Floo call. The fireplace in his bedroom burst into life. A face he had not seen for more than year appeared in the logs.

“James?” asked Pandora Lovegood, her airy voice wafting out of the fireplace.

Pandora had been a Ravenclaw in their year at Hogwarts. She was an odd fit for the house, with her ethereal voice, interest in reading auras, and uncanny knack of knowing things she had no business knowing. But she was as clever as anyone in the house; just a few years out of school and she was already on a fellowship back at Hogwarts teaching charms for six months. Soon enough she would return to her experimental work at the Charms Institute.

“Hi Panda,” James said, surprised to hear her voice. “Is everything okay?”

“I think so,” Pandora replied lightly. “But is it possible that Sirius Black is currently a dog sleeping by the Great Lake?”

James was already on his feet before she finished speaking. “Don’t let him leave, Pandora! I’m on my way.”

James scarcely had time to explain to his parents where he was going before he dashed outside of the wards. It was impossible to apparate directly to Hogwarts, but he ran most of the distance from Hogsmeade, desperate to reach Sirius before he vanished again.

Pandora stood on the grass near the Lake, a striking figure in the fading light, almost as tall as James, with long blonde hair cascading down to her waist. Her eyes were such a pale shade of blue that in certain lights they looked white.

Even as he approached her, James scanned the shore of the Lake. When he caught sight of Padfoot curled up in the reeds, it took genuine effort not to sprint towards him.

“Thank you so much, Panda,” James breathed, standing beside her, heart racing as he devoured the sight of that familiar shaggy black coat on pale silt. “Did you try to talk to him?”

Pandora smiled at him, focused on something just out of sight as usual. “Sirius doesn’t like me much,” she said serenely.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” James protested. “Everyone likes you.”

“It’s not really about me,” she explained in her airy, lyrical voice. “He’s just always been afraid of what I’ll see.”

Melancholy washed over James at the thought. It was typical of Sirius to recoil from her all-seeing eye. He kept so much of himself hidden from view. Although James had a newfound understanding for the impulse to conceal. He wondered what Pandora made of his own swirling thoughts, assuming the rumours were true that she could, at least occasionally, catch glimpses inside a person's head.

James nodded, itching to rush to Padfoot, but pausing to examine Pandora. "You won't tell anyone you saw him like this, will you?"

"It's our secret," Pandora reassured him, squeezing his arm.

"Thanks," he responded, relieved. "I should go and talk to him."

"Do you mind if I stay here and watch?" she asked, turning her clear eyes towards him. "I love seeing how you light up around each other."

Bemused, James nodded his assent. Then, unable to wait for a moment longer, he jogged towards the Lake, now a deep purple in the twilight. As his feet thudded on the grass, Padfoot's ears perked up. He lifted his head, eyes widening.

"Don't run away, Siri," James called desperately, holding out his hand as Padfoot sprang to his feet. "Please just stay. I can't keep searching for you."

Padfoot whined before lowering himself in submission. James dropped to his knees, relief flooding through him. As Padfoot sat up, James buried his hands in his thick fur. The lake gently lapped at the sandy shore at their feet.

Later, there would be time for James to chastise himself for not thinking to check Hogwarts. He knew the Forbidden Forest like the back of his hand. As Prongs, James would have found Padfoot days ago.

"I was so worried about you," James breathed.

When Padfoot transformed back into Sirius, James nearly cried out with relief. He was torn between examining him for injuries and simply pulling him closer. Reluctantly, James pulled back, eyes scanning over Sirius. His face looked gaunt. His human body was stiff after days in his dog form. He was probably the best thing James had ever seen.

"Are you alright?" James asked gently, brushing a leaf from his shoulder.

Sirius sighed heavily, his eyes flickering shut. "I'm sorry, Prongs. We were fighting and I just – I needed to..."

His face crumpled, and James scooted closer, wrapping his arms around him. Sirius buried his face in James' neck, while James stroked a hand through his curls.

"I hated him," Sirius said with a broken sob. "He was a shit father and a bad person."

"I know," James whispered, tightening his embrace.

"I'm glad he's dead," Sirius spat.

"I know. Me too."

Sirius reached up blindly, pressing his hand to the back of James' neck. James manoeuvred Sirius closer, until he was draped over his lap. James wondered whether Pandora was still watching them, what she meant when she said that they lit up around each other.

"Why does it feel like this?" Sirius asked, his voice thick with tears. "I don't even know what this feeling is."

"That's okay," James replied. "You don't have to know. Sometimes you just have to let yourself feel it, remember?"

Sirius laughed wetly, lifting his head. "Are you quoting me?"

"You're the smartest person I know," James replied matter-of-factly. "You deserve to be quoted."

Sirius lifted his head slightly to peer at James, tears streaming down his face. James wished he could reanimate Orion Black and kill him again himself. Unable to articulate the thought, James simply tightened his grip.

"I thought we all agreed Moony was the smart one in the gang," Sirius joked, pain still apparent in his voice. "He's the only one who ever managed to avoid getting detention."

"What about the rest of us?" James asked, surprised at the wavering of his voice. It was like this

between them sometimes; James could feel Sirius' emotions as if they were his own.

"I'm the funny one," Sirius said, wiping his tears. "You're the muscle. Wormtail is guy who tripped over and accidentally turned on the sprinklers during the burglary in that film Moony made us watch."

James smiled at the memory, suddenly nostalgic to be sitting next to the Great Lake and talking nonsense with Sirius again. "Why can't I be the funny one?"

"It's the arms," Sirius shrugged. "They distract people from your punchlines."

James nodded, as if that made perfect sense. Despite the momentary levity, his mood was heavy. Sirius rested against him, watching the lake.

"I hate when you disappear on me," James admitted, stroking Sirius' arm.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess," Sirius murmured. "And that you always have to pick up the pieces."

"You don't have to apologise," James insisted. "Just be a mess with me. You don't have to push me away."

"You shouldn't have to deal with me when I'm like this."

"We've always looked after each other," James said firmly, before hoisting himself to his feet. "Now come on – my mum wants to throttle you for disappearing on us."

He grasped Sirius' hands to help him up. James glanced towards the castle, looking for Pandora, but she had already disappeared.

James kept Sirius pressed tightly to his side as they walked back to Hogsmeade. After days of tense waiting, relief made everything look surreal, as if he was dreaming. Although exhausted, James insisted on a side-along apparition back to Potter Manor, not wanting them to be separated again.

As they walked along the gravel driveway, James clasped their hands together. He felt Sirius examining his profile, but he was too emotionally wrought to articulate his need to keep Sirius close – even to himself.

Reluctantly, he released Sirius' hand when his parents rushed to meet them. Sirius was quiet, accepting their hugs while his grey eyes constantly sought out James for reassurance. After they cleaned up, Effie insisted on feeding them before bed – a plate of sandwiches hastily consumed at the kitchen table. Sirius wore the old Gryffindor jersey he had left behind when they moved out.

After dinner, Sirius and James climbed the stairs and turned down the hallway that led to their bedrooms, which faced each other across the hall. James did not even glance at the open door to Sirius' bedroom. Instead, he gently propelled Sirius into his own room, guiding him with a gentle hand on his lower back. Sirius offered no resistance.

Sirius climbed into the four-poster bed, settling in with a deep sigh as he turned onto his side. James watched him, oddly moved by the sight of his friend in his childhood bed. It should not have been such an arresting sight; they had shared this bed many times when Sirius had nightmares after running away from home. But something was different now.

James slipped off his glasses and climbed into the bed. He was acutely aware of the distance between them. After a brief pause, James slid across the mattress, closing the gap, curling around Sirius until his chest pressed against his back. James hesitated, offering Sirius a chance to object, but he simply let out a deep sigh that almost sounded relieved.

James wrapped an arm around him, pressing his nose to the back of Sirius' neck and inhaling deeply. Sirius exhaled shakily at the sensation, prompting James to pull him closer. Each movement flowed naturally on from the one before. The pull between them was like moon and tide, but James had no idea whether he was water or sky.

James listened to the steady rhythm of Sirius breathing, trying to remember the last time they had shared a bed. He must not have recognised it as the last time; he would have paid closer attention.

"You'll still be here when I wake up, right?" James whispered.

"If you want me to be," Sirius responded, just as quietly.

Aching with tenderness, James pressed a chaste kiss to his shoulder, covered in that familiar jersey. Sirius reached for James' arm, pulling it more tightly around his waist. Another perfect call and response, like everything else between them.

“Yeah,” James replied. “I want you to be.”

Notes:

As always, thank you so much for reading, leaving kudos and commenting. I'm so excited to share the next chapter with you. No spoilers but it's a big one.

Let me know what you think of this latest instalment!

Notes

[1] Inspired by a quote from Stephen Chbosky, *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*: "So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be."

[2] Based on a lovely quote from Samantha Harvey, *Orbital*: "...he'd never be where she is because he's a man who disappoints himself with his need of firm ground. He needs stability inside and out, and to simplify his life lest it overwhelm him."

Chapter 12 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/59290327/chapters/153169087>): **Deepest feelings**

Summary:

“You have feelings for him, don't you?”

James stared down at his hands resting on the table. Even the memory of Sirius smiling at him that morning was enough to make his heart clench. “Yeah,” he admitted, saying it out loud for the first time. “I do.”

Lily let out a humourless laugh. “How many times did I ask you if there was something there? Whenever I brought it up, you just brushed it off or shut down.”

It felt as if rocks were lodged in his throat. “I didn't understand what I was feeling – and I didn't want to lie to you. I just needed time to figure things out.”

“You've been lying to me about your feelings for weeks, James,” Lily retorted sharply. “The fact you've also been lying to yourself doesn't make me feel better about that.”

Notes:

I am very excited about sharing this chapter. It's a long one – I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Soundtrack: ["When the party's over"](https://open.spotify.com/track/43zdsphuZLzwA9k4DJhU0I?si=06aad3e7cdbc4caf) (<https://open.spotify.com/track/43zdsphuZLzwA9k4DJhU0I?si=06aad3e7cdbc4caf>) by Billie Eilish

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_12_endnotes\)](#).)

“I hid my deepest feelings so well I forgot where I placed them.”
- Amy Tan, *Saving Fish from Drowning*

Auror Academy, Scotland – 1978

In retrospect, Sirius should have expected it. After all, there was a war brewing and he had just joined the frontline of its defence. It was natural for people to be suspicious of someone with a surname like “Black.”

At Hogwarts, his allegiances had been clear to everyone. Glued to the side of one of the most well-liked boys in school, everyone in their year knew that Sirius Black despised his family and everything they stood for. His particularly merciless mockery of the Pureblood fanatics in Slytherin only reinforced the point. The Marauders had enough of a reputation around school that most students at Hogwarts knew the general gist of his biography – disowned by Orion and Walburga Black, taken in by Euphemia and Fleamont Potter. As if Sirius were a Chocolate Frog Trading Card, easily swapped between parents.

But that was Hogwarts. The Auror Academy cast a far wider net. It was unusual for witches and wizards to gain admission right out of school. Many of the cadets training alongside Sirius and James were several years their senior; some had even studied abroad and did not know the first thing about Hogwarts. Apart from a few familiar faces – like Alice Longbottom, one of their instructors in the Stealth and Tracking class – Sirius and James found themselves surrounded mostly by strangers.

As usual, James effortlessly established a warm camaraderie with their fellow cadets, greeting everyone in the twisting halls of the Academy as they navigated their crowded schedules. He was regularly invited to Friday night drinks, usually held at a drab pub in the nearest town that seemed stuck in a time warp, playing nothing but music from the 1950s.

It was James who always extended the invitation to Sirius, confidently assuming an invitation for him was also extended to his best friend. Sirius had noticed pointed looks exchanged when he showed up alongside James, although a round of shots was usually enough to ease any awkwardness. People liked James enough that they were willing to include Sirius as well.

Sirius did not care what they thought about him. For the first time in his life, he felt no need to crack jokes in class or throw raucous parties. He was far too preoccupied with the fear of failure to worry about his place in the social hierarchy. Once they began working at the Ministry, these people would be nothing more than colleagues. Twelve months as a social pariah felt trivial compared to the sixteen years of isolation he had endured at the hands of his family.

It took an endearingly long time for James to pick up on anything amiss. He seemed incapable of imagining anyone not liking Sirius. For his part, Sirius decided it was best not to mention the whispers and furtive glances from their classmates, especially when Orion published one of his unhinged opinion pieces in the *Prophet*.

A few months into their training, Sirius and James were practising duelling in a large training room. Their duels were famous for being fast-paced and ruthless; the thrill of competing against someone as skilled with offensive spells as James was always intoxicating. Their classmates often gathered at the side of the mat, dissecting every spell and strategy.

Sirius spotted Thaddeus Chase lurking at the edge, a look of distaste twisting his features. Thaddeus was so tall and imposing that he almost made James look pint-sized. After spending five years training Hungarian Horntails in Belarus, he bore an impressive burn on his upper arm, which he had incorporated into an impressive dragon tattoo. Sirius might have thought the tattoo was cool, if Thaddeus were not such a twat.

Their duel was winding down. James had just scraped a victory – a fact that made Sirius inordinately pleased with himself. James excitedly explained the clever trick he had used to create an anomaly in Sirius’s vision, making it seem as though he were standing in a completely different location. They grinned at each other, still riding the high of their spar.

Then Thaddeus stalked over, interrupting their conversation. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to share all your best moves, Potter?” he scowled.

James met him with an easy smile, unfazed by the hostility. “Sirius knows all my moves already. We’ve been practising together since we were at school.”

“Still, probably wise to keep a few things up your sleeve,” Thaddeus said, casting a pointed look at Sirius. “Just in case.”

James frowned, bewildered. “Just in case of what?”

Sirius twirled his wand in his hand, adopting a bored expression. Despite his daring profession before joining the Aurors, Thaddeus generally preferred indirect confrontations. Unfortunately, that was not Sirius Black’s style.

“Chase is just trying to warn you that we might need to duel for real one day,” Sirius said, a sarcastic smile playing on his lips. “If I ever decide to take an interest in the family business.”

For a moment, James stared at him, uncomprehending. Then, his entire posture shifted as he faced Thaddeus, his shoulders squared and his expression hardening. He positioned himself in front of Sirius, ready to defend him if necessary. It was a futile gesture; both knew that Sirius would leap into the fray alongside James the moment curses started flying.

“Is that what you’re saying, Chase?” James asked, something resolute and steely in his gaze – as if daring Thaddeus to repeat his words.

Thaddeus glanced down at the wand still drawn at James’ hip. He might have been bolder if he had not just witnessed James’ deft duelling. A few years spent living with dragons had clearly taught him to choose his battles wisely.

“Can’t be too careful these days,” Thaddeus muttered as he turned on his heel, hurrying back to his own mat.

James continued to glare at Thaddeus’ retreating figure, dislike twisting his features. “Can you believe him?” he asked, shaking his head.

Sirius sensed that James was still wrestling with the urge to hex him. “Just ignore him, Prongs. That’s what I do.”

James shot him a look of concern. “Has he said things like that before?”

Sirius shrugged, reaching for his water bottle. “Not usually that explicitly.”

“Has anyone else said something like that?”

Sirius waved a hand dismissively. “My surname isn’t exactly an asset here,” he replied. “But it really doesn’t bother me.”

James surveyed the room, as if reassessing all their fellow cadets still sparring on the training mats. Sirius felt a rush of warmth at the sight of James’ anger. He had James; that was all he needed.

For the following week, James seemed hyper-aware of his interactions with their classmates. Any perceived slight was enough to set him off. He stopped accepting invitations to the pub and ceased smiling at people in the hallways. Sirius worried that James would alienate even the cadets who had never looked askance at him.

Being James, he channelled his frustration into punishing workouts. This would have been fine if he had not insisted that Sirius follow his lead. Guilt gnawed at him for shattering the image James had of the other fledgling Aurors, so Sirius reluctantly agreed to join him on a long-distance run at an ungodly hour.

After an hour of running up the craggy mountains surrounding the Academy, Sirius felt certain he would keel over. Annoyingly, James appeared more invigorated as they climbed higher.

Eventually, Sirius caught James by the arm. “Either we stop,” he wheezed. “Or you carry my dead body back to the Academy.”

James slowed to a halt, concern etched on his face. “It’s the smoking, Pads. It’s bad for your lung capacity.”

Sirius doubted that the coughing fit he immediately launched into helped his case. Nonetheless, they stepped off the running path. Here, far away from civilisation, there were no benches or seats in sight. James settled onto the grass, stretching his limbs as Sirius attempted to regain his breath. James was truly relentless, always driven to push himself to the limit. Sirius shifted his gaze, aware that he had been staring too intently at his friend.

“I miss crowds,” he admitted, surveying the desolate landscape with his hands on his hips. “And proper bars with loud music.”

“Sounds like we need a weekend in London with Moony and Wormtail,” James chuckled, taking a long sip from the canteen he had shrunk and kept in his pocket during their run. “It’ll do us good to get

away from all those prats at the Academy.”

Sirius bit his lip. “Listen, Prongs,” he began. “I’ve been thinking.”

“That’s never a good start,” James said, peering up at him in concern.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sirius rushed to clarify. “I just think you should keep your distance from me for a bit.”

“What are you talking about?” James asked, confusion knitting his brow.

Sirius raised his hands to his head, letting the cool air evaporate the sweat trickling down his face. He stared out at the windswept terrain, where moody clouds hung low, almost touching the mountain tops. Sirius had always preferred warm places. It was strange how life could carry you so far from yourself. James continued to gape at him from his spot on the ground.

“You’re going to be an amazing Auror,” Sirius said, the words carrying a weight he hoped James would understand.

“So are you,” James interrupted.

Sirius shook his head; this unwavering loyalty from James was exactly the problem. “The things Chase was saying – it’ll always be like that,” he explained, willing James to see the truth in his words. “People will always think I’m just like my family.”

“Well, they’re wrong,” James retorted, his voice clipped. “They’ll realise that when they get to know you.”

“This isn’t school, James,” Sirius said firmly. “This is the real world and people will always make assumptions. They won’t take the time to get to know me.”

“Then they don’t deserve our attention anyway,” James replied stubbornly.

“Look,” Sirius reasoned. “I just don’t want you to be tainted by association.”

As he spoke, James wrapped his hands around his knees, his gaze focused on the peak of the next mountain. He was probably contemplating whether he could run up that one as well. His cheeks were pink in the cold air – a perfect picture of health and vitality. Sirius had struggled to keep up with him the entire run.

“Everyone knows we’re friends, Sirius,” James said flatly. “I’m not going to pretend I don’t know you.”

“I’m not suggesting that you pretend not to know me,” Sirius replied, irritation creeping into his voice. “I’m just saying that while we’re at the Academy it might be better for you if we didn’t spend every waking moment together.”

James dug his heels into the damp soil. It was strange having this conversation with James sitting while Sirius stood.

“You can’t actually think I’m going to agree to this,” James said stubbornly.

Sirius realised with a jolt that he sounded angry. Hesitantly, Sirius moved closer, dropping down to sit beside James on the ground. From this vantage point, he could see the tightness in James’s jaw, his shuttered expression. Sirius matched his posture, drawing his knees up and wrapping his arms around them. Then, with great care, he reached out and pressed his fingers to the crease of James’s elbow, a silent plea for understanding.

“I don’t want to hold you back,” Sirius said softly, with a gentle squeeze of his hand.

“You don’t hold me back,” James snapped, though he made no move to pull away from Sirius’ light grip. “You make me want to be better.”

“I’m a horrible influence and you know it,” Sirius scoffed. “I’m the reason you spent half your time at Hogwarts in detention.”

James turned his head to meet his gaze. Sirius was not prepared for the beauty of his warm eyes against the dramatic sky. The surprise of it must have been written all over his face. Sometimes he wondered how it was possible that James had not noticed the way Sirius felt about him. Perhaps he had noticed and was just too kind to say anything.

“And I was still Head Boy and Quidditch Captain,” James said. “And now I’m going to be an Auror. If this is you ruining my life, you’re not very good at it.”

Sirius knew he should argue – should point out all that James might be capable of without him. But he could not bring himself to; even the small space between them right now felt disastrous.

“Well,” he said weakly. “If you change your mind, I’ll understand.”

“I’m not changing my mind about you,” James replied firmly. “You’re stuck with me.”

They stared out at the sprawling landscape before them, a tapestry of greens and browns under the low-hanging clouds. Without meeting Sirius’s gaze, James reached over and gently placed his hand over the fingers still splayed on his forearm. The soft motion of his thumb gliding along the back of Sirius’s hand sent a rush of adrenaline coursing through him. Perhaps it was selfish, but Sirius felt a wave of relief wash over him that James had not taken him up on the offer of distance.

“Does that mean you’re going to make me keep running?” Sirius said, trying to lighten the mood.

“It absolutely does,” James said, patting his hand sympathetically. With that, he sprang his feet and effortlessly hauled Sirius up beside him.

“Sadist,” Sirius complained.

“We’re going to outwork all those prats,” James declared earnestly, already jogging on the spot. “Because it’s lonely on the extra mile.”

Sirius grimaced. “I don’t think Wormtail realised the monster he was creating when he gave you those stupid motivational books.”

“A philosophy for Quidditch is a philosophy for life,” James grinned, the light in his eyes infectious.

Before Sirius could muster a response to that absurd comment, James was already speeding away, a flash of determination in motion. Grudgingly, Sirius took off after him, a smile tugging at his lips despite himself.

James awoke from a deep, restful sleep in his bed at Potter Manor to find Sirius still nestled in his arms. Sleep-muddled, James leaned in closer, a contented sound escaping his lips as he let his arm, still draped over Sirius’ side, slide across his hip and down his stomach until he found a strip of bare skin. He stroked it with his thumb.

Sirius inhaled sharply, causing James to freeze in place. As consciousness settled over him, James quickly retracted his traitorous hand and rolled onto his back.

Sirius turned over to face him, propping himself up on one elbow, his hair tousled from sleep. Despite his embarrassment over his wandering hands, James felt powerless to move or look away. Even if he tried, James knew he would still feel the pull of those arresting grey eyes. Besides, James never needed to look to know Sirius was there; he could always feel his presence like sunlight.^[1]

“You went looking for me,” Sirius said quietly, although his voice sounded loud in the stillness of the early morning. He spoke as if they had just been talking. James knew immediately that he was referring to the words he had spoken down by the Great Lake.

“Of course, I did,” James replied just as softly. “I’d do anything for you.”

Their eyes locked and the expression on Sirius’ face seemed to falter. A new vulnerability appeared in his gaze. His brow furrowed with concentration as he reached across the small distance between them, pressing a hand to James’ cheek. The heat radiating from Sirius’ palm sent a jolt of electricity through James. No more than a stroke of fingers on his cheek and his heart was racing.

The charged moment stretched between them, the gentle caress of Sirius’ fingers igniting a longing that curled in James’ stomach. It dawned on James how effortless it would be to bridge the distance between them. Only inches to close before James could finally find out what Sirius’ tasted like. As James looked up at him helplessly, Sirius’ gaze darted down to his lips. He moved closer.

A rapping at the door shattered the moment. Sirius withdrew his hand as if burned. James turned his head, glaring at the closed wooden door in frustration.

“Sorry to interrupt boys,” came Monty’s voice from the other side of the door. “Effie is very

concerned you won't have time for breakfast before you head to work."

James let out a frustrated huff. "We're coming down – thanks Dad," he called, his voice betraying an embarrassing fluster.

They avoided each other's eyes as they climbed out of bed and filed to the door. Downstairs, a veritable feast was spread out on the dining table, excessive even by Effie Potter's standards. They took their usual spots, studiously focused on their plates.

"It's so lovely to have a full house," Effie enthused, pouring a steaming cup of coffee for Sirius. "Although if you ever vanish without a word like that again, Siri, I'm going to lock in you in the dungeon."

"Sorry, Effie," Sirius winced.

"You're forgiven, my darling," she said, giving his shoulder a reassuring pat.

She bustled around the table, pouring a coffee for Monty before wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Monty, absorbed in the headlines of the *Daily Prophet*, absently squeezed her forearm.

"How did you sleep, boys?" she asked pleasantly.

Monty glanced up, a grin creeping onto his face, sensing the perfect opportunity to torment his son. "I'm sure there were no complaints," he remarked with a knowing grin at James.

Sirius looked between them, frowning as if trying to decode a complex riddle.

"We both slept fine, thank you," James said through gritted teeth, willing his father to shut up.

"Not too crowded in there?" Monty asked innocently, his smirk widening.

James felt Sirius tense beside him. "Nope," James ground out. "There was plenty of room."

Monty raised his eyebrows in feigned innocence. "You know James, you're wound awfully tight for someone -"

"Sirius," Effie interjected, lightly tapping Monty on the shoulder as she took her seat. "You haven't told me what you want for your birthday dinner."

James could not think of a moment when he had loved his mother more. As usual, Sirius spent the next five minutes insisting that she should not go to any trouble. Their familiar back-and-forth almost let James relax for the first time since coming downstairs. Across the table, Monty picked up the newspaper, launching into his daily ritual of exaggerated groaning about Ministry incompetence.

They had agreed weeks ago to have their family dinner for Sirius the night after his birthday, leaving Friday night free for a celebration with friends. Monty and James had tickets to a Puddlemere United game in the afternoon on Saturday and Sirius had been insistent that it should remain a father-son expedition. Sirius would use the time to work on the flying enchantment for the motorcycle.

As James listened to the pleasant sound of Effie and Sirius discussing logistics, he realised that he had scarcely eaten in a week. He began shovelling food into his mouth. Across the table, Monty lowered one side of the newspaper so that only James could see his smirk.

"Worked up an appetite, have you?" Monty teased in an undertone.

"I hate you," James mouthed back.

All day at work, James tried to push from his mind the memory of waking up next to Sirius. But it was all he thought about. After so much time apart over the past week, James was captivated by the physical reality of Sirius. Every time Sirius entered the room, he would happen to James all over again.^[2] By the time the working day ended, James realised he could not remember a single detail about it except Sirius.

Over dinner with Remus back at their apartment, James found himself still staring at Sirius. He was quiet in a way that reminded James of his darkest times, and the memories scared him so much that he could scarcely taste the aromatic curry he had ordered in for them. All James was aware of was Sirius – the movement of his shoulders, his sad eyes, the sight of his lips closing around the rim of the glass. He was transfixed by the movement of Sirius' throat shifting as he swallowed a sip of wine. He looked worriedly at the dinner Sirius scarcely touched.

Remus looked between them during their quiet meal, sitting back in his chair and taking thoughtful

sips of wine. After dinner, Remus volunteered to help James clear the table while Sirius chose a record.

Remus rolled up his sleeves, washing up the Muggle way out of habit. “You know I love you and Pads,” he said quietly. “But Lily is my friend too. I don’t know exactly what’s happening here, but you owe her a conversation.”

James felt a wave of shame wash over him. Remus gave his arm a reassuring pat and headed to the living room to debate music choices with Sirius. James knew he was right.

The next day, James arranged to meet Lily after work.

When she opened the door, she was dressed in a white sweater, her vivid red hair cascading loosely down her back. As James stood at the door to the flat, it felt as if he was seeing it for the first time. All his favourite features leapt out at him: the photograph of them at the Leaving Ball, the Muggle telephone near the entrance, the fresh flowers she bought at the market every Saturday, the books cluttering every available surface.

“I suppose you better come in,” Lily said softly.

James nodded, his voice caught in his throat. He had never envisioned having this conversation with her. They moved carefully through the space, as if navigating a live minefield. They settled at opposite sides of the round table where she and Joyce shared their meals.

Lily sat with her arms neatly crossed on the worn wood, studying him closely as if preparing for a cross-examination. “We’ve been at odds lately, and it’s all been about you and Sirius,” she began, her tone contemplative and oddly formal – as if she was reading from prepared remarks. “So now I want to talk about you and me. I think we should just put it all on the table.”

“Okay,” James replied, his heart already sinking.

“So here it is,” Lily said, before straightening her posture to conceal her nerves. “I want to build a future with you, James. I want to be the one who you lean on. I don’t want to feel like I’m constantly coming second to your best friend. I want our future to come first. I want us to have a life and a family. I just... I really think we could have a wonderful life together. But I need to know that you’re *in* this with me.”

Lily was someone who mapped out the future, and she spoke with such conviction that he could almost see it. They would live in a quaint village near Potter Manor – somewhere quiet and safe for their growing family. They would visit their respective families on weekends, go on holidays to Europe, host long lunches for their friends. They would support each other to excel in their careers and give everything they could to the war effort.

He could imagine himself proposing, with Lily saying yes, wrapping her arms around his neck to kiss him after he slid a ring onto her finger. They would have beautiful, intelligent children. James would insist on buying them brooms during their first trip to Diagon Alley, even though First Years were not allowed to join the Quidditch team. The Marauders would regale them with tales of their father’s misspent youth. James would strive to be even half the father that Monty had been. Together, Lily and James would build a future.

And Sirius would be there to witness it all – his best friend, the best man at his wedding, godfather to his children. Sirius would make a funny speech at the wedding that Effie planned for them. He would visit James as often as he could, maybe even stay for a weekend. Perhaps with a family of his own. As they grew older, Sirius and James would sit outside and talk about who they were when they met on the train as children. They would speak fondly of the past because talking about their regrets would break their hearts.^[3]

“We would,” James said, bowing his head, a weight settling over him. “It would be a wonderful life.”

There was a beat of silence as they both registered his tone. Lily turned away, but James could still see tears glistening in her eyes. “But it’s not what you want,” she said, her voice unsteady with emotion.

“It’s not that I don’t want it,” he replied, his heart aching as he reached across the table to take her hand. “I just, can’t imagine...”

“You just can’t imagine doing it without Sirius,” Lily said, withdrawing her hand and completing his unspoken thought. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

His throat felt constricted with emotion. “I’m so sorry, Lily,” he choked out. “I need you to know how sorry I am.”

She sighed heavily, leaning back in her chair. “You have feelings for him, don’t you?”

James stared down at his hands resting on the table. Even the memory of Sirius smiling at him that morning was enough to make his heart clench. “Yeah,” he admitted, saying it out loud for the first time. “I do.”

Lily let out a humourless laugh. “How many times did I ask you if there was something there? Whenever I brought it up, you just brushed it off or shut down.”

It felt as if rocks were lodged in his throat. “I didn’t understand what I was feeling – and I didn’t want to lie to you. I just needed time to figure things out.”

“You’ve been lying to me about your feelings for weeks, James,” Lily retorted sharply. “The fact you’ve also been lying to yourself doesn’t make me feel better about that. Just tell me: how long have you felt this way?”

James considered his words, before deciding that honesty was best approach. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I never really thought about it until you told me I was jealous at the Samhain Ball.”

“Well,” Lily replied coolly, her voice no longer tearful. “I suppose I was onto something, then. Happy I could help.”

She always withdrew when angry. James found himself wondering what he would do with that knowledge once he left her apartment. Hundreds of facts about Lily swirled in his mind, soon to be devoid of an outlet.

“I really care about you, Lily,” James said, the tightness in his voice returning. “I know you probably hate me, but I hope we can be friends one day.”

“Well,” she said, bitterness lacing her words. “I know how close you are to your friends so that means a lot.”

James flinched as if struck. “I suppose I deserve that.”

“Have you told Sirius how you feel yet?” she asked, her stare hard. “One of your classic James Potter public love declarations?”

“I haven’t really thought about it,” James replied stiffly. “I wanted to talk to you first. It just didn’t seem fair to be with you when I feel...like this...about someone else.”

Talking to Lily was the right thing to do; James cared about her too much to keep treating her the way he had been. He had scarcely dared to allow himself to consider whether Sirius reciprocated his feelings. All he knew was that he had never felt the madness and desperation he felt for Sirius with anyone else. Lily deserved someone who was mad and desperate for her.

Lily snorted, uncharacteristically harsh. “You mean you wanted a clear conscience before you tried to shag him?”

Despite his guilt, James felt a thrill of anger at her dismissive tone. “It’s not like that.”

“You really expect me to believe that it’s all been chaste pining?” Lily retorted.

“Nothing’s happened between us,” he said firmly, before reconsidering his words as he recalled the way Sirius had leaned in towards him the previous morning. “I mean not really.”

“Not really?” Lily said sarcastically. “Well thank you for that, James.”

A heavy silence settled between them. He realised their conversation was nearing its end. Soon, he would stand up and walk out of the apartment, probably for the last time. Oddly, James felt guilty about not saying goodbye to Joyce, despite her never having liked him. Judging by Lily’s expression, she would soon be in good company with that opinion.

“I think I should go,” James said at last, standing up to leave.

“Of course,” Lily said, not looking at him. “You’ve got a party to plan.”

James did not know how to respond to that. For a moment he paused, examining her stony countenance as she continued to stare at an invisible spot in the middle distance. “I really am sorry,” he

said quietly.

When she did not respond, James showed himself out.

Sirius woke up on his twenty-first birthday thinking of his father. It was an unexpected memory – not exactly happy, but a stark contrast to the cruelty that had defined most of their interactions.

He was twelve, creeping through Grimmauld Place just before midnight. His mother had confiscated a record he carelessly left out, and he had snuck out of bed to retrieve it, planning to send it to James for safekeeping. But when he reached the study, he found his father still seated in his leather chair, the light spilling into the hallway.

What shocked Sirius was that Orion was listening to music with his eyes closed. From the shadows, he heard the haunting rise and fall of violins, an aching crescendo that resonated deep within him. It was Barber's "[Adagio for Strings](https://open.spotify.com/track/1CSaCKPIp2yCIDL3t7Fyau?si=1db4a6af419f4f9b) (https://open.spotify.com/track/1CSaCKPIp2yCIDL3t7Fyau?si=1db4a6af419f4f9b)." Muggle music. Yet Orion seemed completely transported, fingers moving in the air as if conducting an unseen orchestra. Sirius had not known he even had a record player.

When the song ended, Sirius hurried back to his room, staring at the dark ceiling for hours. It had never occurred to him that his father could appreciate music. The unexpected similarity left him unsettled. What other parts of his parents might be lurking inside of him waiting to pounce?

Sirius was not in the mood for the party his friends had planned. Sadly, it would also mark the last night of Remus staying with them; he had found another lodging close to his Muggle job. Despite Sirius and James insisting he was welcome to stay for as long as he liked, Remus was far too proud to accept their hospitality indefinitely.

"Let's make it a farewell party instead," Sirius had suggested when Remus announced his departure.

"No way," James shot back. "I already bought you a birthday crown and Moony won't wear it."

"Absolutely not," Remus had confirmed.

"We all know Prongs will end up wearing it," Sirius replied with a fond glance at his best friend. James did not deny this self-evident fact.

Sirius had no desire to celebrate his birthday at all, but he knew he needed to try; he could tell that James was worried about him. All week, he had hovered on the brink of saying something, his lips parting as if to speak, only to pull back each time. It was maddening.

James was clearly bracing for a typical Sirius Black meltdown. Perhaps he had reason to. For a fleeting moment at Potter Manor, Sirius had actually considered kissing James. Momentary madness, surely; Godric knew what he might have done if Monty had not knocked just in time.

Yet James was trying to act normally. On the morning of his birthday, James knocked on Sirius's door at an ungodly hour, wearing pyjamas and a gaudy party hat. As was their tradition, James held a single cupcake and – mercifully – a steaming cup of black coffee. The flickering candle on the cupcake cast a warm glow on his face, a small comfort against the cold November morning. He looked so ridiculous and adorable that Sirius wanted to consume him along with his breakfast.

The ritual had started in First Year, when Sirius informed James that he had no interest in his birthday or having a big cake with all his friends. On the morning of his twelfth birthday, James had appeared at the foot of his bed, proudly brandishing a cupcake. "A little cake with one of your friends," he had said, delighted at finding a loophole.

James placed the birthday treats on the bedside table. Then, with a slightly guilty look, he produced a silver ring from his pocket and put it on the wooden surface next to the coffee. Sirius stared at it blankly.

"I stole this while you were gone," James admitted. "I've been carrying it around."

Sirius picked up the ring to examine it. "I've never seen this before in my life."

Confusion washed across James' features. "But I found it at..."

When James trailed off, Sirius knew that he had found the ring at Nicholas' apartment. The topic of Nicholas Gaunt had become entirely taboo between them. It had been Remus who had mentioned their