

Harry's heart ached for the Slytherin. He was about to start his final year at Hogwarts; after that, he would have no more excuses left for his uncle. He wondered which friend Cassius was staying with, whether it was the secret someone he'd mentioned over Christmas. He hoped so — Cassius needed someone in his corner right now.

Susan's letter didn't surprise him — her reaction to the news that Dumbledore had been forced into stepping down as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot. It was poorly-hidden gloating, combined with fear now that the position would be held in interim by Minister Fudge. The only thing more dangerous than a political figure with a hidden agenda was a political figure with barely two brain cells to rub together.

"I've got another one for you," Remus announced, walking into the living room and tossing a letter Harry's way. He snatched it out of the air, smiling at the sight of George's handwriting. "Busy mail day?"

"The kid's getting more post than Gilderoy bloody Lockhart," Sirius grumbled, getting to his feet. "If you're here, I'd better scarper. Someone will notice I'm missing soon." He ruffled Harry's hair as he passed. "Stay out of trouble, Little Red."

"We're not calling me that," Harry insisted for the hundredth time. Sirius had declared that as an official Marauder — or soon-to-be one, once he got his animagus form — Harry deserved a proper Marauder nickname. He was testing a few out, and each was worse than the last. Remus said that James had been responsible for all of their nicknames the first time around, and there was a reason for that.

Remus took Sirius' spot on the sofa, and Harry jotted down replies to Susan and Cassius, sending their owls on their way. He thought about opening the letter from the twins, then looked at his watch; he was supposed to be down in the duelling room by now. "That'll have to wait," he murmured, tucking the letter inside his book and leaving them on the armchair. "See you, Moony!"

"Have fun, don't die," Remus called back nonchalantly, already engrossed in a book. Harry snorted.

Snape hadn't nearly killed him in at least a week now. Harry still needed the occasional Healing charm or potion by the end of his lesson, but he was getting a whole lot better. To his surprise, Snape was waiting for him in the entrance hall. "Follow me."

Instead of turning to the duelling room, Snape led him through the kitchen and out onto the back patio, continuing across the expanse of grass. "Most of your battles will not be in duelling rooms, on level ground," Snape told him, striding past the swimming pool. "They will be in corridors, or side-streets, or on grass. There will be trees and potholes and houses and puddles, things that you will trip over or have to work around. Things you may be able to use to your advantage."

Harry's eyes widened a fraction when they hit the tree line and kept going. He'd never actually been into the woods out here yet. He'd never needed to.