

Part Seven
Through Early January, '76

~~Places to consider double-checking:~~

1. Dungeons (beware of the eyeballs)
2. Consider the statues (do not let Sirius feel them up when searching for secret passageways)
3. Be kind & flattering to the portraits (especially the very old ones for surely they must know a lot)
4. Make a basic map first
5. Keep on schedule (one floor per two weeks is most reasonable)

NOTES: day one - spoke with the portrait of a nice old man from the eighteenth century and had an excellent discussion with him about poetic form until Sirius got impatient & we started on the topic of mapmaking. He asked us if we were cartographers and, though we are amateurs of course, saying yes was very honest. He said he would look into it as I was such a fan of the sonnet.
MOST PROMISING.

day two - never disturb sleeping portraits. Let sleeping portraits snore. They are quite fantastically loud, when, as you consider it, their lungs are two dimensional.
Better luck tomorrow then.

day three - Sirius an incorrigible flirt, but young female portraits very gossipy. Three new rooms today alone!

Remus reaches up to wipe ink off his cheek with an inkier thumb and succeeds only in doubling the size of the stain. He doesn't seem to notice, distracted little motions the only change in his posture as he dedicates himself to research. Sirius rubs at the ink smear on Remus' cheekbone without looking up from the reading in front of them. In the library, time passes strangely, minutes like hours and hours themselves like minutes. Sirius stifles a yawn and finishes the last paragraph before giving a lazy nod, a wordless 'go on.' Remus turns the heavy page in a cough of dust.

Who knew the architecture of Hogwarts was wound so inseparably in its history? *And then Godric did bequeath this, and then Salazar did order that, and then Rowena did instruct such-and-such, and then Helga did desire so-on and so-forth.* Centuries of history in two days and only one map -- and that one a replica of an antique, the original floor plan obsolete before even the first stone was laid.

"Never knew that," Sirius remarks. The silence shifts around them uncomfortably at the first spoken interruption in a long while. Possibly years. Remus pauses in shorthand note taking, the scratching of his quill pausing as well. Sirius clears his throat sheepishly in the ensuing silence. "Never knew that," he repeats, pointing. He feels more than a little stupid. "Probably because it has *nothing* to do with secret passageways or hidden rooms or even well-known passageways and perfectly visible rooms. It reads like a History of Magic textbook, Moony. I want to *do* something."

"You *are* doing something," Remus replies, gnawing on the tip of his pen. "You're reading."

"Well, I want to do something besides sit here and think about stabbing myself in the head," Sirius says. "You know what I've been doing for fun? Watching that ink stain grow on your face. You have to stop chewing on that pen, every time you do the feathers go and it smears." Remus looks down at the quill and colors. "God, I've read this sentence about twelve million times."

"I only just turned the page," Remus reminds him.

"I *know* that, it's just that there's no bloody *difference* between this new sentence and the one on the last page that I read twelve million times! Look, I'm closing my eyes: I bet you a hundred Galleons it says something like 'This, too, was *another* crucial development in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built.'"

"It actually says 'a critical factor,' but that's uncanny," Remus says. After a moment, he sneezes. "Dusty."

"Bless you. Do you see what I mean? And the dust is giving me the black lung. Can we go run around the castle or something? Please? Do you want to do a hornpipe with me? I swear, lack of movement has driven me illiterate."

"But we can't possibly go at it head first," Remus reasons. "Look, we need to know what we're doing. We need to have something to work off of. We need to find our foundations before we can fling ourselves into exploration. We'll end up breaking something important or getting squished like little bugs. I mean, I don't know if you've been reading the same book I have, but this castle has the tendency to be *mean* a lot of the time, or at least moody."

"Let me tell you," Sirius grumbles, "I'd rather break a lot of important somethings and then get squished like a little bug than read one more sentence in this huge, evil book of yours. I don't even know how you lift it."

"But it really is uncanny," Remus murmurs. "That way you knew the line almost verbatim."

"Look," Sirius presses. "We need some fresh air. You remember that, don't you, Moony? Air? Wind? Sunlight? Lack of phosphorescence caused by countless hours crouched in the darkness? The occasional living, breathing creature dancing about?"

Remus heaves a sigh. "We went out for lunch, didn't we?"

"Moony. That was hours ago." Sirius scratches underneath his nose, regarding the book with such a look of disgruntled challenge that Remus turns his face away to hide the laughter that crosses over it. "Oh, come on," Sirius mutters. He flips through the thick, musty pages, letting them fall one against another in a dusty tumble. "There have to be a hundred chapters in this book."

"Seventy-five."

"Do you really expect us to read *all* of them?" Sirius' eyes are wide with horror. Remus wonders if maybe he hasn't pushed the glory of research on him too hard, too fast. Best make a joke of it, or face Sirius' wrath for weeks.

"And this is only the first book." Remus' eyes sparkle, almost wickedly. "But no, no, I won't subject you to the others. If you think 'This, too, was another critical factor in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built' is bad, you might try and murder the other books, I think. And then I would never forgive you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Moony," Sirius says haughtily. "You can't murder a book. Even I know that." He licks his lips and flashes a grin. "But you know what you *can* do with a book, what you *can* do is burn it, or throw it out a window, or draw, mm, big hairy moustaches on all the ancient illustrations, and blacken the teeth of the women and children, and--"

"Oh God, don't," Remus yelps. He eyes Sirius balefully. "It's like talking about drowning babies. You are a terrible person."

"I'm not the one imprisoning my best friend in the World of Dust for all eternity!" Sirius rolls over onto his back with a dramatic sigh, arms flopping onto the piles of unread tomes with which they have surrounded themselves. "This is unreasonable. Look, I like a good book as much as the next man. You saw me with Dumas, I didn't leave the tower for four days. These? These are not good books! These are evil, evil books, full of -- well, evil -- and on top of that, they're boring and totally irrelevant to what we're trying to do. They are! This castle's been under construction for a thousand bloody years! Be reasonable. Look, we'll compromise: twenty more minutes of this and then promise me, *promise me*, we can go out and see if the second ice age has come or not."

Remus gives him a lofty look. "You're just too lazy to do real work, aren't you? All talk and no delivery."

"I have plenty of delivery! I deliver things all the time!" Sirius rolls back onto his stomach, props his chin up on one hand, and glares, full of righteous indignation. Remus just sits there neatly before him and totally cheerful, still gnawing on that bloody pen, while scanning the lines as if they might actually contain useful information. It's *infuriating*. "I am full of delivery," Sirius presses on. "Delivery is my middle name. I deliver all kinds of things, too. And do you know what the wonderful thing about delivery is, Moony? It involves *some kind of activity* and *some kind of results*. Have *you* learned anything from this exercise in pedantic futility? Because I haven't."

"I've learned that you make me insane in small enclosed spaces," Remus says, reasonably.

"You knew that already," Sirius points out, triumphantly. "Hah!"

"I did indeed," Remus replies. "I just didn't know how much. But now, I think I can actually derive a formula." He bends over a fresh scrap of parchment, quill waving madly in the air to the little thin scratching sounds of writing, before he lifts his creation proudly in the air. "Do you see? With this equation -- I call it The Close Proximity Factor -- I could even graph my level of insanity as per time spent alone with you as well as size of the small enclosed space in which the time is spent."

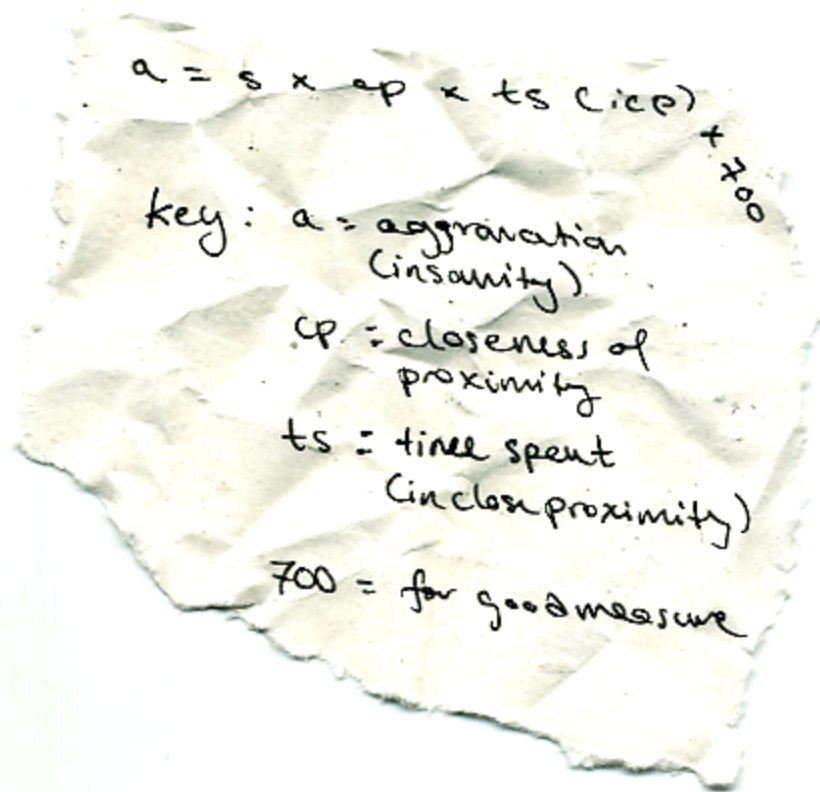
"How d'you like that. *You're* the one who forces me into your 'small enclosed space' and then I'm the one who suffers from it." Sirius leans forward, snatching the equation from Remus' hands. "Here, let me see that."

"It's hardly relevant to the work at hand." Remus tries to grab it back, but Sirius holds it just out of reaching, scanning the neat, slanting handwriting for any mistakes. Naturally, there are none.

"You're the one who wrote it." Sirius frowns. "What's that for?"

"The S is for Sirius, naturally, while the little a stands for aggravation, also referred to as insanity."

"You know, this is clever, for something on the spot." Sirius turns the paper around in a slow circle, following the formula's progression. "So if I plugged in 'library' and 'a zillion hours,' would we end up with your head exploding?"



"Can't you just let it go? You're like a puppy with an old steak." Remus manages to wrest the parchment back and sticks it, wet ink and all, deep in his pocket. "It was a throwaway gag. It wasn't even arithmetically sound."

"I am," says Sirius gravely. "Very like. Which I suppose makes you an old steak. The point is, according to your own theory, we've got to get out of here, and do that right speedily, before the aggravation hits and you explode. Bam! All over the books. Think of the books, Remus."

"No -- no, not necessarily. The t, right there -- that stands for talking. If you close your mouth, you notice, the aggravation declines almost to zero."

"That's like saying 'if the sun sets in the east.'" Sirius settles his shoulder-blades against the piles of books. "Try to be reasonable."

"I'm not listening to you anymore." Remus taps the quill against his teeth and turns back to the book. Sirius fidgets in the following silence, watching Remus' fingers toy with the part of his hair. Steeling himself to leave, Sirius prepares himself for every bit of guilt Remus will throw his way.

"Look, Moony, I think I'm going to--"

"Look, it's Rowena Ravenclaw naked!"

"Where?" Sirius yelps, flipping himself up with great alacrity. "In there? There's a picture of *that* in *there*?"

"Oh yes, right here -- look at that, 'and then Rowena did touch Helga Moste Tenderly in a place where No Manne had ever Beene.' You'd better come over and see it straightaway." Sirius collapses in front of the book, whereupon Remus slams one leg over both of Sirius's, effectively trapping him.

"Noooo," Sirius mewls, wilting. "You lied to me! Lying werewolf. I should have known your kind was no good!"

"I am a dirty, filthy, tricky liar, like my ancestors before me. It is in my blood. In my nature. I cannot help it. I am only doing as my kind does and besides, would not have been able to last nearly so long in present company if I were not so dirty, so filthy, or even half so tricky." The strong muscles in Remus' legs hold firm. Soon enough, Sirius stills, all resistance clearly futile. He folds his arms over his chest and scowls, blaming the book with all his might and retribution. "If we give it a good go," Remus attempts to placate, "we can be done with the researching bit by morning. And then, promptly forgetting everything we've learned, we can go and break as many bones as we like. What d'you say?"

"You're going to force more of these books on me later, aren't you?" Sirius' eyes narrow. Remus gives him an unreadable smile, quirky at the corners of his mouth, and thoroughly evil. Should Dumbledore ever retire as Headmaster of Hogwarts, Sirius thinks, they should consider Remus for the position. He certainly has that twitchy, unfathomable smile. And, of course, the *evil*.

"This, too, was another critical factor in the ultimate building of the school that many had thought would never be built.' Let's continue on from there, shall we?"

Heaving a great groan of unfettered pain, Sirius leans forward. "There had better some mention of places where No Manne Has Ever Beene or I'm going to defile some ancient books and you can't stop me."

"This, too, was another critical factor in the ultimate building of the school that many had

thought would never be built," Remus repeats. He pats Sirius' left foot.

They dedicate themselves again to work.

"...and then," Remus stifles an immense yawn, "then, they talk about the type of wood that they're going to use for twenty-six pages, after which Slytherin has this brilliant idea to build it in *stone*, so it won't *burn down*, and then they talk about what a genius he is for six pages and a half, and then Gryffindor has another feast at his castle to celebrate what a genius he is, and then there are a few ballads which are quite good but all the same when you get right down to it, and they talk about Rowena's dress for twelve pages here, and then there is a brief break to discuss the type of pie they made, and then it's back to the dress again. Apparently it was very shocking she didn't want ruffles. Or did want ruffles. I'm not entirely sure because they mentioned ruffles at the very beginning of it all, but then spent three pages on the shocking aspect. How's yours?"

"So tired," Sirius whimpers, prone, from the floor. There is a book slung over his face. His hands are thrown out to the side, and his feet are flopped exhaustedly in opposite directions. "So very, very tired. Eh? What's that? Oh. This one's mostly genealogy. Hufflepuff's great great grandson is staring at me right now. Hello there, old chap. Lovely whiskers. Looks like he's got Peter killed and stapled under his nose."

"I think," Remus says, with some difficulty, "it might be time to -- er -- adjourn, for now, and return to this extremely important task in the morning."

"It *is* morning," Sirius says, pathetically. "I can't feel my legs!" Remus nudges Sirius' foot with an experimental toe. "Ungh," Sirius moans.

"Oh dear," Remus says. "I've actually killed you, haven't I?"

"You're more dangerous than the puddings," Sirius accuses. He slides the book off his nose and lets it rest against his chest at one end and his chin at the other. "At least the puddings filled me with temporary joy. Ugh. If the senseless names and dates cluttering my head to bursting don't kill me, the dust will definitely destroy me from the inside." He flings one palm to his forehead. "Alas for Sirius of the Great Heart and Very Great Manhood, whose spirit slipped off into the house of Hades in a library, when he was bored to death by legions of dead men with horrible whiskers. Tragic."

"I had a very interesting chapter a few hours ago," Remus points out, "the one about the Chamber of Secrets, which I shouldn't have been reading. It wasn't very informative *anyway*, besides saying at *least* twenty times that it was a very secret chamber made with very malicious intent, but I doubt we can put that on the map as no one's been able to open it for years. And no one knows where it is. And it's not necessary to the map at *all*. But it *was* interesting, though."

"I wish there were just a book," Sirius says, "a book that actually had maps. A lot of maps. Hundreds of maps. I would prefer maps to these endless, endless faces."

"But there was one--"

"*Useful* maps," Sirius amends. "Ones of *use*."

Remus yawns, hearing his jaw creak. "I'm sorry," he says. "This has been dull. Only -- only think of what we could have missed!"

Sirius doesn't appear impressed. "I know we missed the bit about Helga and Rowena journeying into the Land of No Man. But I do know more than I ever thought possible about Salazar Slytherin's distant cousins and get the impression he might have been a little inbred and a little unhinged. They all looked alike, you know. That can't be healthy."

"Which might explain the moving staircases." Remus grins half-heartedly.

"And the fifty-seven uncharted secret passageways."

"And then twenty-two *known* hidden chambers, Chamber of Secrets which we're not supposed to know about and whatever others that have eaten brave exploring souls alive so they may never tell the tale notwithstanding." Sirius heaves himself up, book clattering uselessly to the floor. "They've made it bloody difficult. We know what we're dealing with, and it's the warped mind of an inbred pureblood who seemed to enjoy running around insulting people, if I've got the right impression of him."

"Like...oh, wait, *you*?" Remus inquires, tiredly.

"Shove off."

"Bugger," Remus says, out of nowhere, and lets his head fall to the desk.

"It's all right," Sirius says consolingly, popping his neck. "You did your damndest. It's just that your old friends the books have at last betrayed you, as I always said they would. D'you know, I think my spine's actually gone sideways?"

"They didn't betray me, I just didn't read the right ones." Remus drags his hands through his hair and buries his face deeper into his arms. "This library is full of books, and what if they're all like this? All we'd need is one good one, one really helpful one--"

"--With maps--"

"--With maps, right. Why is that so difficult?"

"The world is against you, Moony," Sirius says mournfully, and pats Remus' leg. "Forever

you must struggle against an uncaring society, where even the libraries plot your downfall. It is a cruel existence you bear so cheerfully. One day they shall make you a martyr."

"You don't bear an existence," Remus says, "that's grammatical nonsense."

"Ah, that's the Moony we know and love. What a relief. At least, in my pain, I have you to correct me." Sirius shifts, gingerly. "I don't think I can move. Honestly. I am paralyzed. Would you mind too much if I went to sleep right here?"

"On my leg?" Remus isn't sure he *would* mind, too tired to move, too tired for much besides immediate pain or fire in the Restricted Section to matter. His joints ache, and if the immense weight of Sirius's head would just put his extremities to sleep, he would gladly bear the pain in the morning, or the amputation of both legs. "You smell of dog, you know."

"Well, you smell of book, and it's not dogs that have kept us in here dying all day," Sirius points out. "I think I have more to forgive when it comes to odor." He yawns hugely and digs his nose into Remus's thigh.

"Your nose is pointy." Remus snorts, but it lacks its usual energy. He stretches out boneless against the chair, head back, eyelids so heavy that it's actually painful to keep them open. He feels them, sagging downwards, and then jerking him back awake, and then downwards again. "I'm just -- going to -- put this down for a few moments, and just -- come back when we..."

"Finish," Sirius finishes. He's asleep before the word forms properly, drooping with a puff of heavy breath onto his lips, and fading into the dust.



"I think I've lost my camera." Remus settles himself back against the roof, trying not to think about how very high up he is. The air is chill with nighttime and expectant snow, not yet fallen. He searches the cloudy sky for some sign of the stars -- here and there, the occasional bright flicker peeking through -- and the moon, rimmed with the next day's snowfall. Somewhere in the distance, the fireworks are about to start. He can almost smell the sulfur on the air. "It wasn't even *my* camera, it was my *dad's* camera. I don't know what to do. It had a fresh roll of film in it and everything. I think he'll murder me."

Sirius passes him a mug of hot chocolate, steaming warmth into the cold, heavy air. "It's almost midnight," he says. "Worry about it next year."

"Ha, ha." Remus sighs. "It was old and on its way out, I know, but it still *worked*, d'you see, and I could've sworn I left it on my desk -- but when we came back from supper it was gone. Perhaps I'll ask the house elves if they've seen it."

"Remus," Sirius says, "if the house elves have seen your camera they've probably put it in a stew or in the wash or out a window. Or maybe they've built a little shrine to it in a dark corner of the kitchen and if you ever find it again it will smell of pies and onions."

"You've had bad experiences." Remus closes his eyes to breathe in the rich sweet warmth of the cocoa. "Most house elves are perfectly nice and frighteningly competent."

"Frightening, I'll grant you. No, I'm being unfair. I like the ones in the kitchen; they gave me all that pudding." Sirius grins in the dark, sideways flash of white teeth. "They give me the willies, though. All that good-natured servitude. I fear that someday they will revolt."

"Are you excited for new year?" Remus taps his shoes against the edge of the tower, trying to hit on a topic that will not make him think of falling to his death. "It's nearly our last year at Hogwarts. *That's* something to give you the willies."

"Eh, it's fine for you, you'll just go be a librarian," Sirius says airily, waving a hand. "Or one of those blokes who lurks in the back rooms at Flourish and Blotts and then gets angry whenever a customer appears and they have to exchange goods for money. You'll have to work very hard to look like you hate people without even knowing them. That will be the one obstacle you must surmount."

"I thought you always said I was going to be a professor." Remus purses his lips, waiting for the cocoa to cool so he doesn't burn his tongue. In the meantime, it warms his mittened hands. The steam rising from it eases the nip of winter wind at his nose. Cocoa. Hot chocolate. Whoever invented the mug full of cocoa with its bubble of cream in the center should be honored for all eternity.

"You'll be a professor after they fire you for reading the books instead of seeing to customers," Sirius continues, logically. "And all your students will love you but will know never to interrupt you for help during tea time because you like your privacy. And your scones."

"Not the blueberry ones." Remus ventures a small sip, and sighs in pleasure. "What about you?"

"I like the ones with cranberries, personally."

"I didn't mean the scones." Remus angles a sideways glance at Sirius beside him, pointedly not looking down. Sirius grins.

"I know. Well, I don't know. Something fantastic, I'll wager. Maybe I'll go around breaking curses. Or work for the Ministry in the field, solving crimes, fighting the good fight, looking dashing all the while. Me and my trusty steed. Motorbike, anyways. We're working in the future, you know. Very cutting edge."

"My," Remus agrees, "how the times have changed. That's very practical of you."

"You'll be the practical one," Sirius says. He chafes his hands together to warm his fingers, icy even in his gloves. "Leave the total lack of practicality to me, and we'll even one another out."

"You can't work in my bookshop," Remus objects. "You'll frighten the children."

"Children aren't allowed in your bookshop, anyway. They leave smudges."

"It doesn't matter. You'll frighten the adults."

"It's a fair cop, I suppose," Sirius says heavily, and sighs. "I'll be security, then, and when you get in undesirable customers I'll leap out from behind a shelf and hit them with my bat."

"You'd spend the whole time hitting yourself and probably sneaking puddings. It would be amusing, but I wouldn't pay you to do it." Remus threads his fingers through the handle of the mug, staring out over the forest. It seems less real from up above. His stomach twinges. He hates being high up.

"Two minutes," Sirius says.

"Do you think we'll see any fireworks from here?"

"Don't know," Sirius admits.

"I wish I knew where my camera was," Remus says. "I'd take a picture. Even if it would be all dark." He takes a deep swallow of his cocoa, feeling it warm him from the center. "Mm."

"Who knows," Sirius points out. "That cocoa could have your camera melted down into it."

"My cocoa doesn't taste like camera."

"Neither does mine. Although how would one know? One minute," Sirius says. He fiddles with his pocket watch, something he's always had instead of a wristwatch. Remus has never asked him about it. It glimmers in the coming midnight, looking sleek against Sirius' clumsy gloved fingers.

"Where'd you get that?" Remus asks now, over the rim of his mug.

"My dad's," Sirius says. He shifts uncomfortably. "It's timed to the exact second. Magic. Never have to wind it up again, or anything. Thirty seconds."

"I'm not going to count down with you, I think it's silly."

"Twenty."

"Besides, you're supposed to count down from ten. Isn't that the tradition?" Remus finds a

handy ledge and sets his cup down, sensing from Sirius' jittery energy that, even if he cannot save himself, he can at least save his cocoa.

"Ten."

"Oh, bother." Remus curls in on himself. "Nine."

"Eight. And you're going to get snogged wildly in celebration, so mind you don't fall off the roof."

"Five. I don't want to!"

"Too bad. Four."

"I'll bite your tongue off if you do. Two. One."

"Happy New Year!" Sirius yells, throwing all his limbs up like a human firework himself, and then he grabs Remus's whole face with one hand, so his cheeks are squashed together, and shoves his tongue more or less into Remus's nose, making repulsive "Aaaahlggh" sounds.

"Rape!" Remus screeches, and shoves his hand into Sirius's forehead.

"SHOULD OOOOOOLD ACQUAINTANCE BEEEEEE FORGOT," Sirius howls in an atrocious Scots accent, licking Remus's palm. "AND NEEEEEVER BROUGHT TO MIND!"

"You disgust me," Remus says with great dignity, wiping his face meticulously with his sleeve. "And you're off key."

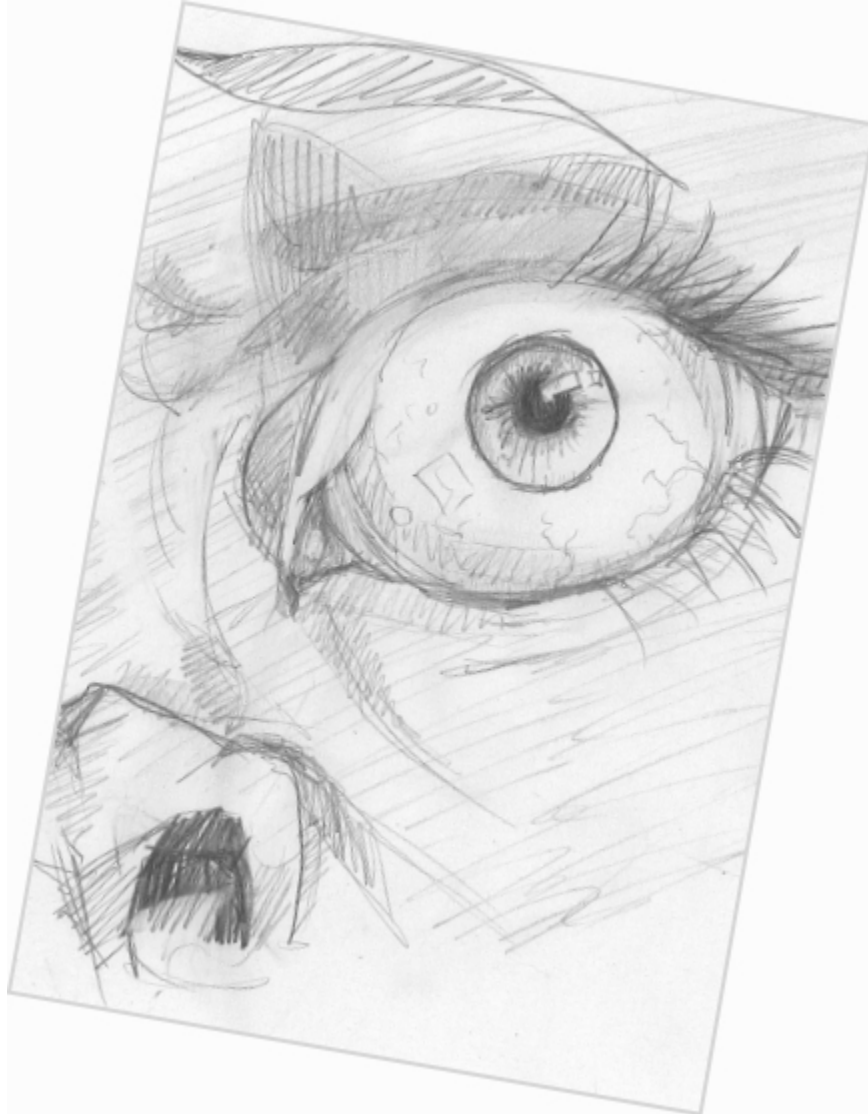
"And a Happy New Year to you too," Sirius says. "Look. Are those fireworks I espy in the distance?"

"I'm still trying to get your saliva out of my eyes." Remus gives his face one last desperate scrub, feeling oddly sticky, and then leans forward as much as his sense of self-preservation will allow. "I don't know," he says finally. "The clouds are a funny color."

"Huzzah!" Sirius shouts, standing and giving a great cheer. Something deep in the forest yowls in return, and a flock of brave birds rise from the treetops, trying to escape the madness surrounding them. Remus doesn't blame them, but has no wings with which to follow. Instead, he reaches out for Sirius' sleeve, trying to no avail to get him to sit down. "Another year to conquer! *Weee'll taaaaaak' a cup o' kiiiiindness yet, for the saaaaake of Auld Lang Syne.*"

"If you don't fall and break your head open first," Remus grumbles.

"Ah, Moony," Sirius says, patting him on the back, "isn't that just like you."





A most failed experiment. We begin with our heroes bathed in darkness and fallen into shadow.

"Ow. Bugging -- ow. *Aaaah*. Moony? Fuck! Moony? I can't find my wand?"

"Er. I think I know where it is."

"Where?! Help! My arm's in something -- yecch. Moony, turn on a fucking light, help a man out--"

"I can't. I can't find my wand. And. Uhm. The reason I know where yours is, is because I think I have broken it. Very intimately."

"WHAT?! -- *oh*. Oh. Oh God. I want you to remove it, please, with utmost caution and, oh, *God*."

"Just a minute. Just a minute. I think I've -- ow! -- got it."

"Oh, *God*. Just, uh, see can you use it. Oh Christ."

"Lumos. *Lumos*. ... Please Lumos? ... Well. I guess that answers that question."

"Well, hell and damnation. You're buying me another, assuming we make it out of here alive. Very well, we'll just, er, stand about in the dark. Or lie about, in my case. Christ. Are you, er, all right?"

"It wasn't that intimate, Sirius, you can stop making those noises. Yes. Yes, I'm all right. Sort of crunched against something, but I can feel all parts of my body which I think, I think, is a good sign."

"Yes! Yes. Good. All right. What do you mean, noises? I wasn't -- well, you were very vague. Shit. This is one for the Map, anyway!"

"Yes. Note to map: do not fall down dark tunnel into darker pit. Do not land on and thus ruin Mssr. Padfoot's wand. *Do* watch your footing. *Do* consider all possibilities before entering uncharted secret passageway. *Do* use lumos spell before breaking one wand and losing the other. Et cetera. Does that sound good?"

"You're using sarcasm as a weapon and I'm already injured. Unfair tactics. I wish I could see you, because I'd punch you one."

"Look at us. We're trapped like rats and turning on one another already."

"Way of the world, mate. Don't worry, if we're in here long enough, I think we know who's eating who...dirty werewolf. Oh, God, I'm in something squirmy."

"No, no, that's my hand. That's you? Well. *You're* at a funny angle."

"Oh thank God. And stop that! My honour's definitely being impugned."

"... Oh. Perhaps you aren't at as funny an angle as I thought. Uhm. Sorry, about that."

"Eh. It's not like I ever had any honour anyway. That your foot?"

"Uhm. There. I'm wiggling my toes. Are my toes wiggling on you?"

"Oops -- hello Moonytoes! Yes! Hahahaha. All right, you can -- haha -- you can stop now."

"What, the wiggling? Oh, right, that. Sorry again."

"You are using every excuse in the book, aren't you. Well, don't worry. My body is utterly irresistible, I understand. I'm going to grab your leg now, so don't panic."

"Agh! -- right. Right. Not panicking. Though, you know, the general rule of thumb is, you're supposed to tell me not to panic *before* you do things that make me panic. For next time, you see."

"Thank you *very* much, Professor Lupin, I'll keep that in mind -- oof. All right! There we are. That's you. Much better. Hallo."

"Is that your hand? Yes. That's your hand. And -- hullo, that's my hand too. This is an excellent plan. Establishing where we are, physically. Though part of me, I think, is through this wall. Would you mind giving a bit of a -- a bit of a pull?"

"Oh -- righto -- let me just get *ow bloody fuck bugger shit* very low roof. Aaaah. Fuck. All right. Shall I pull this way? Like this? Or is that going to drive you deeper? *Ow*."

"No, I think just -- well -- here's my other hand, that's free now -- and there's yours -- right -- let's try and lever me out? It's all or nothing, I believe, and I'm not really sure what the odds are, so let's do this before I terrify myself with the statistics. Ready? One -- two -- three -- pull."

"HEAVE!"

"NGHAUGH!"

"OH GOD. Oh God, what did I do? Are you alive? Did I take your arms off? Christ, man, say something!"

"You were right. Ungh. Low ceiling."

"Oh God, Moony, don't. I thought you had died. Is that you? I'm putting you under my arm so you can't get in trouble."

"Well, the good news is, I've got all my limbs about me. And some of yours. No, no, I'm not laughing because it's funny. I think I'm laughing because I'm hysterical. I'm not entirely sure."

"Ha ha bloody ha, we're trapped here forever! I, for one, find that terribly amusing. You are insane."

"No, I'm calm. I swear, I'm calm. I'm just -- is *that* your hand? It's moving, Sirius. Please God say it's your hand."

"Er, Moony, I want you to stay very calm, but my hand's over here, mate."

"That's right. And your hand doesn't have teeth, either."

"No. No, it does not. But we're not panicking, are we."

"If I panicked, I'd drive an elbow through your stomach and then I'd be all alone down here with this thing that has teeth nibbling my other elbow and my first elbow covered in your intestines, which is really a much less appealing situation than the one at hand, if you'll believe it. My, that was a long sentence."

"Don't move. Keep breathing. I'm going dog."

"That does feel odd. You changing, up against me. Hullo, Padfoot."

Something snuffles, reassuringly. At least, it could be snuffling, and it could be reassuring. It could also be something large and fanged, slaverling in the dark. It's unclear.

"Padfoot? That's you. That's you, I can smell you. If you're going to eat whatever is trying to eat my elbow please do so without also eating my elbow. And you're drooling. Thank you."

A light nip, evidently meant to indicate that this drool is the drool of love, and then a sharp yank at the sleeve and some rather too enthusiastic growling.

"That's good. That's better. I'll try not to think about what you're doing or how much enjoyment you may or may not be getting from it. I'll just keep talking. Do you know, I think I can actually smell fresh air, which is reassuring. I've read about escapes from tunnels like these, they're perfectly plausible. Perhaps we won't have to eat one another after all."

One last noise, like a very self-satisfied lawnmower.

"Aah, that was disgusting. Moony, can you feel my togs? They should be down round your feet. For once in my life I really don't want to be naked right now."

"I've got them. I've got your clothes with my toes. That isn't helpful. Here, let me."

"R-right--thanks--"

"I'll burn my hands later. Sorry. Sorry. Oh God sorry."

"There are few in this world who've had this privilege, you know. Various of my governess until I was five, James Potter, and yourself. I should lock it away in my heart of hearts if I were you. DON'T Jesus be careful."

"James Potter? Really? I've joined the ranks of James Potter, if only for one shining

moment in the dark with my hand accidentally down your pants? ... We must never tell anyone of these events. Ever."

"I was drunk and naked in the Great Hall. Someone had to help me. And don't be such a prude; *I'm* telling everyone. I'll be the envy of the whole school. You don't have to button it, I can get that, you know."

"Go ahead, button your trousers. I'm going to find my wand."

"Don't let go of me. I don't fancy eating any more of those...urgh."

"Urgh? AHA! No, no, that's not my -- I have no idea what *that* -- there we go. *There* we go."

"Is that it? IS THAT IT? Turn it on. I want to know if I've gone blind."

"*Lumos*. Ah. Hallo, Sirius."

"Oh thank God. Hallo, most wonderful sight in all the world, tree root, love of my life -- oh, and hello to you, too. You *are* a mess. Look at your hair. Honestly."

"There's dog drool in it. That's why. Should I leave you and the tree root alone to your carnal, underground pleasures?"

"Don't be silly. *I* only drooled on your trousers. Maybe it was the...eurgh."

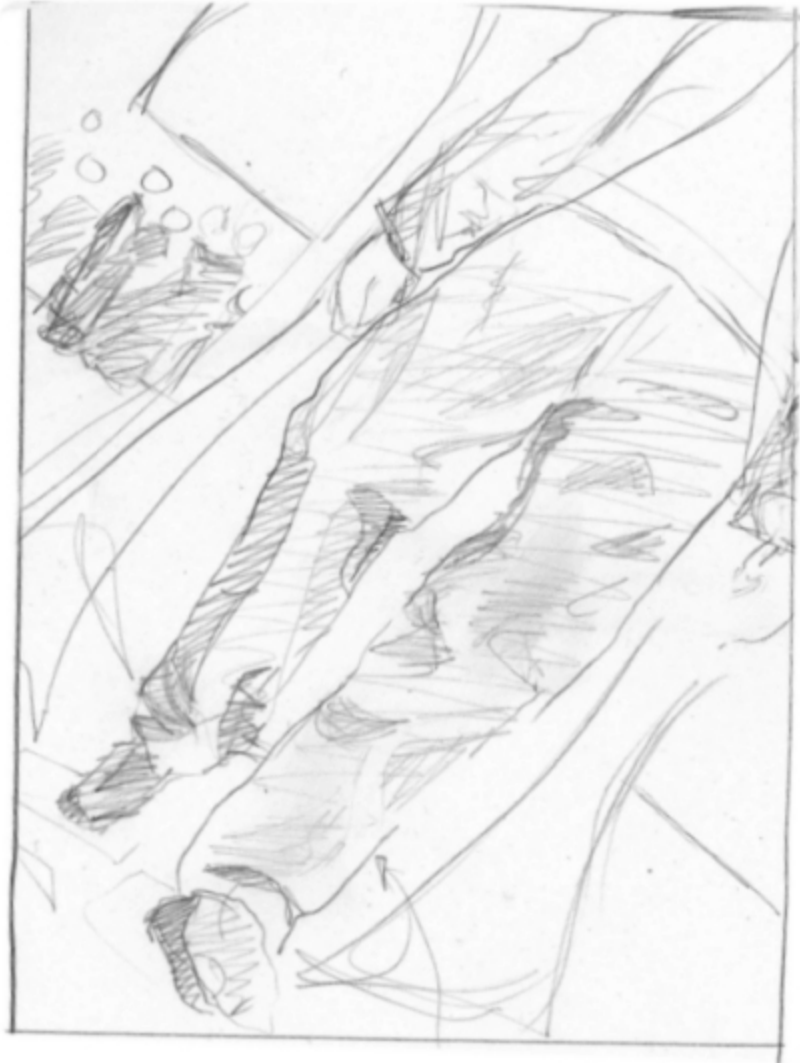
"Right. We have effectively discovered this secret passageway leads to...a hole. Very useful when one needs to carry out their tryst with their beloved tree root, but for now I want a bath. A long bath. Shall we?"

"We went through all that for a hole? It's got to go somewh...oh, no, maybe not anymore. Well, this is a stick in the eye. At least I got your hand down my pants. I am a lucky man and no mistake. D'you need a boost up?"

"Treasure the moment, Sirius. Yes, I do, thank you."

"On three, all right? One--two--up!-- Get that root, are you blind?! Ow! Your foot's in my eye! --Don't forget you're buying me a new wand, you mad blind bastard."

And so ended the exploration of Secret Passageway Number Eighteen in the notes of one Remus J. Lupin, who spent days afterwards washing an uncanny amount of dirt from his left ear, whilst Sirius Black battled a Great Indigestion.



"You look very oddly." Lionel Lovegood has eyes no one has ever caught blinking. Sirius has always thought he must spend a lot of time in private, blinking like it's a sin. Now, eyes focused calmly on Sirius and Remus across the table, hands folded before him, a pen behind one ear and a clove of garlic hanging around his neck, Lionel Lovegood is still not blinking. Remus swallows. "For example Remus, you have dirt on your nose, and I know from careful surveillance you are the least dirty of your friends."

"Er," Remus says. "Didn't realize. Thank you, Lionel. I think." He rubs at the side of his nose with his napkin.

"And you, Sirius," Lionel continues, tilting his head to the side rather like an owl, "you look as if you are in the midst of some intestinal distress."

Sirius burps. "Not at all. Why do you think that?"

"Because in the past five minutes you have burped eight times. I have been *watching you*," Lionel explains. He whips out a notepad from his back pocket, tugs the pencil down from his ear, and flips open to an empty page. "I have come to the conclusion that you have just escaped the clutches of certain death. How did it feel? Did your entire lives flash before your eyes? Were there any distinguishable *smells*, do you know, or eyes, or the comforting scent of your mother's bosom?"

"Look, Lionel," Sirius says, "I'm trying to eat my lunch."

"Of course. Your sandwiches look delicious. Were there any sounds of merit? Howls? Cackles? Yawns?" Lionel has his pencil at the ready, and his eyes deep in their sockets are bugging out eagerly. He looks rather like a fish.

"Oh, yes," Sirius says. "All three. At once. Most terrifying. And there were eyes. Lots of them. Everywhere. Eyes of God, eyes of retribution, eyes of Merlin, eyes of my Great Aunt Fanny. Talk to you later, Lionel!"

"Most helpful. Yes, most helpful. This reporter is pleased." Lionel stands, tucking his pen behind his ear once more, smudging graphite over his temple. "By the by," he adds, "the first issue of Hogwarts Monthly Inquirer: What's Happening Tomorrow! is out. You're featured very prominently, Sirius. Here's a copy -- on the house." He sets a loose flyer down between their lunches, salutes, and walks away in a wobbly line between tables, muttering, "Eyes of Your Great Aunt Fanny. Fascinating. Oh, fascinating."

"Oh God," Sirius says, holding up the flyer.

"It isn't," Remus says.

"Oh," Sirius groans. "Oh, it is."

EXTRA! EXTRA!



HOGWARTS: 1 week before Christmas

Love was in the air all of December as the mistletoe games began again in Hogwarts. Officials say one girl was hospitalized, refusing to kiss a Sixth Year Gryffindor Male whose name shall remain herein nameless. This reporter has also learned shocking details relating to the Most Famous Mistletoe Kiss Ever, as watched over even by the Headmaster himself. Sources say Sirius Black, Sixth Year Gryffindor, and Severus Snape, Sixth Year Slytherin, could not contain themselves as they shared a passionate embrace, officials say. Whether or not this will bring the two houses both alike in dignity is hard to say. The mistletoe has announced it is very pleased with the proceedings. "I just don't know," said Ted Tonks, a young man who bore witness to the entire spectacle. "I just don't know."

Neither do we, Ted Tonks. Neither do we.

"Doesn't the man ever leave his room?" Sirius hisses, breath hot against the back of Remus' neck. Remus squirms in response, nudging him back just slightly with his shoulder. "I mean you'd think he'd emerge once in a while -- but it's been *hours*. What d'you suppose he does up there?"

"Perhaps he reads," Remus whispers. "Perhaps he takes naps. Perhaps he plans the demise of children who dare sneak into his room. I'm doing this because you thought it would be necessary, I'm about to throw up, please be quiet."

"Right," Sirius murmurs, chastened. "Right, sorry."

Silence again descends. Through the slight film of distortion James' invisibility cloak -- "borrowed in the name of service" -- Remus watches the corridor, fingers crossed. It was a foolish idea in the first place, to test out the tagging system with only a makeshift map and the barest understanding of how to track more than one human being at once. It still *is* a foolish idea, only it's being put into practice nonetheless. Sirius, drumming his fingers on Remus' spine, is hardly helping. Dumbledore, spending hours in his room with no sign of giving them an in, is also hardly helping. Remus' imagination, nervously coming up with various scenarios of expulsion, loss of Prefect's Badge, and General Disgrace, is only the icing on the cake. He rubs his left eye wearily, then tenses. The floor beneath them begins to vibrate.

"Look. A staircase," Sirius whispers.

"I can see that," Remus whispers back.

"Look. A Dumbledore."

"I can see that, too."

"Periwinkle Potion," Dumbledore says to the staircase, turning to face it. The steps groan, revolve around one another, and spiral upwards.

"Interesting," Remus breathes.

"Look, you're a natural at this," Sirius whispers. Remus doesn't have to see him to see his devious, crinkly little smile. "The prefect is only the thin veneer that hides the beast within. You're really enjoying yourself. I can tell."

"*Move!*" Remus hisses suddenly, and slams them both back against the wall. Sirius expels a hard, shocked little *oof!* against the top of Remus's spine as Remus's shoulders smash against his chest. Dumbledore brushes by them, hardly a foot away, whistling something that sounds suspiciously like "Jingle Bells" even though Christmas is over. Sirius's hand

hovers over Remus's hip, frozen.

They wait in silence, not even breathing, quivering slightly against each other, until Dumbledore's footsteps echo away down the far staircase and the piercing whistle fades off. Remus lets out a long, shaking breath. The two of them concentrate on breathing for a while, their lungs demanding to be paid in full for lost air time.

"Whee!" Sirius says happily, if not a little breathlessly, and pokes Remus in the back. "Onwards and upwards, Prefect!"

"He knows," Remus groans. "I can tell he knows! He's got spies everywhere!"

"We're *invisible*," Sirius says, the soul of logic. "They can't see us! Once more into the breach -- or the office, I suppose. Come on."

They scurry quietly out into the hallway, looking both ways before Sirius murmurs a hushed 'Periwinkle Potion.' Remus is sure the moaning and creaking of the staircase arranging itself will alert the entire castle to their illicit actions, but as the final step heaves into place there is silence up and down the long corridors. "C'mon," Sirius whoops, as quietly as possible, and nearly drags Remus up the winding staircase. "No time to look at the books," Sirius warns, "just get something that looks well used and get out."

"But he has so many books," Remus begins.

"Spies everywhere," Sirius reminds him.

"Point taken."

They shrug off the cloak, leaving it in a lump beside the desk, and look for a hair -- a nail clipping -- an eyelash -- anything as integral a part of the body as possible. Nothing. "Not even a tassel from his robes or anything," Sirius mourns, flinging himself into Dumbledore's great desk chair. It squeaks, leathery and froglike.

"Get up, get up!" Remus urges. "He'll know someone's been sitting in his chair!"

"Perhaps a quill?" Sirius stands obligingly, but lingers behind the desk. "His inkwell? Er, a paperweight?"

"Something that's light," Remus says. "It's got to be something that's light, and something that smells of him. That's what the spell says."

Sirius sniffs the feather experimentally. "The quill smells of ink," he announces. "Damn."

Remus casts about for a solution, actually *feeling* his time running out. He looks around the room again, and a second time, then cautiously lifts up the draped cloth next to him -- only to find himself face-to-face with a very puzzled-looking phoenix.

"Graa?" it says.

"Agh!" Remus yelps, dropping the cloth immediately and leaping backward to stumble over the desk. The paperweight lodges somewhere in his lumbar region, and croaks.

"Oh, that's Fawkes," Sirius says, not even looking up from his busy search of the carpet. "I might have told you. He's Dumbledore's."

Remus gives Sirius a look. Sirius has been in this office enough to know well as he knows the back of his hand. He's probably sat in that chair, right there, looking innocent and wronged, more times than Remus has eaten toast for breakfast. And yet he never thought to warn Remus about the phoenix behind curtain number one. "I guessed that," Remus says. He presses a hand to his chest, trying to make his heart beat at a normal pace again. *Spies! Avian spies!* "Thanks for all your help, by the way. I think this paperweight and I are one eternally because of--"

"Aha!" floats Sirius' muffled voice from beneath the cavernous desk. Moments later, Sirius crawls out backwards, face flushed with triumph and clutching something purple in one hand.

"Sirius, what have you done," Remus says dubiously.

"Sock," Sirius says, as if it is very obvious. "I've got us a sock. Am I a genius? It's a bit damp, but it'll do."

"I don't want to think about it," Remus says. "But it's perfect."



"So what's the plan this time?" Sirius is carrying the sock with two fingers before them, like a dead rat. It smells very much like foot. Why they couldn't have found an eyelash is no doubt some cosmic joke they'll one day understand without any bitterness. Remus, gritting back a twitch in his left eye, is setting down a nice bowl of cream from the kitchen.

"Let's just hope Mrs. Norris likes milk just as much as she likes James' shin," Remus says. "The plan hinges on that."

"You could try putting some blood in the cream," Sirius offers helpfully. "She'll definitely like it then."

"Fine, but I'm not donating any of *my* blood, so you should feel free." Remus steps back

twice, tugging Sirius with him. He ventures a cautious glance up and down the hallway, and rubs his hands together. "Right. Shall we?"

"I consider it a privilege," Sirius says. Awkwardly beneath the cloak, he effects a little bow. Then, he puts both hands to his mouth and roars "MY GOODNESS, WHAT FUN IT IS TO BE OUT OF BED IN THE THIRD-FLOOR EAST CORRIDOR! I'M CERTAINLY VERY GLAD THAT NO ONE WILL EVER CATCH US!"

"Berk," Remus hisses. He tugs the cloak tighter over both of them, so that Sirius's sharp nose is jammed into his ear. "A stupid question to ask, I'm sure, but whatever happened to subtlety?"

"I don't think she likes cream," Sirius says. His bark of a laugh gusts into Remus's hair. "But I've now made us an irresistible target."

"It'll never work -- you'll have Filch down here and he'll--"

"Shh! Is that the glow of feline skullduggery I see at that end of the hall?" Remus cranes his neck around Sirius' head to see. Against all odds, a yellow sheen glints in the shadows. Cat eyes. Malevolent, hateful, malicious cat eyes, the sort about which fully grown men have nightmares. Remus shudders involuntarily.

"God," he mutters, "I loathe cats."

"Don't see why. Serviceable animals. Fun to chase. Good memories. Promise you won't sneeze?"

"I make no such promises. Move away from the cream, can't have her smelling us first." They walk backwards in unison, ducking into a side corridor, and peer around the wall to watch Mrs. Norris wend her alert way towards the milk. She pauses a few centimeters before it, sniffs its surface lightly, and looks around, before darting her tongue out against it. She pauses again. She waits. Remus and Sirius wait. Time drags by. Remus wonders if he shouldn't have offered some wounded, small, struggling animal instead of a harmless distraction such as milk, clearly not Mrs. Norris' style. At last, when it seems as if all hope is lost, the patch-furred cat meows contentedly and sets to her unexpected meal. Remus looks over his shoulder. Sirius nods.

They dart out into the light, shoes in their hands, socks muffling the sound of their footfalls. Pausing to catch their breaths at the other end of the hall, Remus looks back at Mrs. Norris' curled tail and vulnerable back. Still drinking. Remus feels triumphant.

"We're not in the clear yet," he whispers, for his own sake more than Sirius'.

"Filch wants to feed me to a troll," Sirius murmurs. "He went on about it in great detail not two weeks ago. Unpleasant. Goes on for hours. Let's not get caught, eh?" Remus nods in grim agreement. He produces his wand from the sleeve of his sweater, undoing the

complicated locking spell on thick wooden door into Filch's chambers. The hinges are treated with a pat of butter from that night's dinner, home remedies sometimes more useful than any magic, before Remus eases the door open with his hip and hands. They slip in together, silent and unnoticed.

Remus has never been so illegal so much in one day. It's getting to his head.

"Quick," Remus says.

"Quicker," Sirius agrees.

They set to with rather more alacrity than they had in Dumbledore's office, looking over their shoulders too often to be useful. While his office was clearly forbidden territory, Dumbledore at least represents friendly -- or, rather, not overtly hostile -- ground. Knowing they've entered the Lair of the Filch, their steps are frightened into silence, yet every one they take rattles the rusting chains in the ceiling.

"Kinky lad, our Filch," Sirius says, thumbing through an extremely thick file. "My goodness, did I do that?"

"Stop wasting time," Remus reprimands, yanking the file out of his hands, though not before sneaking a quick glimpse. "And yes, you did, I remember it. There's still stains on the wall."

"Mm," Sirius says blissfully. "Surely one of my finest hours. Too bad others have eclipsed it. Do you want to see yours?" He holds up another sheaf, waggling his eyebrows invitingly.

"No." Remus dives under the desk, searching the hard, slimy stone and trying not to breathe through his nose.

"Huh, that's funny, there's only one sheet in here," comes Sirius's voice, amused and low.

Remus stops, struggles with his conscience for a moment, and then finally resigns himself. "Well? What does it say?"

"Well, it's very poor spelling -- he needs an editor like you, you should offer your services -- as far as I can make out it says 'KEEPS BAD COMPANY. WILL BE CAUGHT SOMEDAY. MRS. NORRIS IS WATCHING HIM.'" Papers rustle noisily as he tosses the file back into the cabinet. "Moony, do you think I'm bad company?" He sounds injured.

"Horrible," Remus grunts. "Look at me, down on my hands and knees in Filch's office, without permission, looking for personal items. Would I ever have thought of that on my own?" Giving up the search in this particular area, he adds, "Dreadful company. Painfully bad, even. And you can't make dinner conversation to save your life. What's this?" Scooting back onto his elbows to get a better look, he accidentally smashes his head into

the bottom of the desk with. A resounding thunk echoes throughout the room. A few bottles of murky liquid threaten to fall off a rickety shelf.

"*Wow*," Sirius says. "Now *that* was a sound. Are you all right?" Remus merely groans. "Look -- look, I've found a hair, a nice long one -- will that make you feel better?"

"Books," Remus mumbles. "Next time, all I want are the books."

Page One of the Fifty-Two Pages on File for Black, Sirius.

STUDENT'S NAME: SIRIUS BLACK

NOTES: UPON FIRST SEEING MR. BLACK I NEW
~~THAT~~ ~~THAT~~ IMMEDIATELY HE WAS TO
BE MORE TROUBLE THAN ANY OF
HIS ~~PREDE~~ ~~PREDECI~~ FELLOW TROUBLE
MAKERS. O HOW RIGHT I WAS.

1ST OFFENCE: EIGHTEEN DUNG BOMBS ~~CONF~~
TAKEN OFF HIS PERSON.
DETENTION SERVED.
JUSTICE DONE. I HAVE ALL
EYES ON HIM.!!!

2ND OFFENCE: TWENTY DUNG BOMBS.
MRS. NORRIS MOST CLEVER.

STUDENT'S NAME: REMUS J. LUPIN

NOTES: KEEPS BAD COMP^A~~ANY~~.

WILL BE ~~TO~~ CAUGHT

SOMEDAY!! MRS. NORRIS

IS WATCHING HIM.